

## MEN IN BLUE CAFTANS • 1

**G**AMLIEL BASNOUN HURRIED THROUGH the moonlit streets of Smyrna, his elongated shadow rippling across the shuttered stalls of the marketplace. He turned into the narrow, twisting streets of the Jewish quarter and presently stopped beside a white stone house nestled in a cluster of fig trees. Only the gentle rustle of the tiny leaves disturbed the silence of the night.

Gamliel ran his fingers through his flowing orange beard and gazed at the upper story, his eyes lingering on the darkened windows of the corner room. He approached the house stealthily and tried the door. It was locked. For a moment, he stood there undecided, then grumbling softly to himself, he went around to the side of the house.

A drainpipe ran from the red-tiled roof right past the window of the corner room. He tugged at the drainpipe with both hands. It didn't budge from the closely spaced oaken brackets that fastened it to the wall.

Using the brackets as hand and footholds, Gamliel nimbly clambered up the drainpipe. He clung to the drainpipe with his right arm and tapped lightly on the windowpane with his left hand. Silence. He tapped again. Still no response. He pushed at the window. It swung inward, and he climbed into the room.

Shadowy shapes appeared in the gloom as his eyes became

accustomed to the darkness. Along one wall stood a washstand and a chest of drawers, along the other wall was a narrow bed. A young man lay on the bed, curled under a blanket against the chill of the Turkish night.

Step by silent step, Gamliel edged toward the bed, the sound of the young man's steady breathing growing louder as he drew closer. Suddenly, one of the floorboards squealed painfully under Gamliel's weight, and the young man sat bolt upright in his bed. His eyes widened at the sight of the dark figure looming over him, and he opened his mouth to scream. But Gamliel was faster. He sprang forward and clamped his hand over the young man's mouth. The young man struggled fiercely.

"Stop it, Yechiel!" hissed Gamliel into the young man's ear. "You will wake up the entire house. It is only me. Gamliel Basnoun."

Slowly, Gamliel removed his hand from Yechiel's mouth and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Gamliel, you frightened me!" whispered Yechiel. "What's going on? What are you doing here in my room in the middle of the night?"

"I didn't mean to frighten you, Yechiel. You asked me to call you the next time we meet with the master. Well, I've come to call you. It is tonight. Get dressed quickly if you wish to come. Would you rather I had let you sleep?"

Yechiel tumbled out of bed and washed his hands.

"No, I'm glad you came to get me," he said. "I'm very eager to meet Shabbesai Tzvi. But why couldn't you tell me earlier? Why was it necessary to climb through my window and scare me half to death?"

"I didn't know myself until just two hours ago. I'm sure you know that the master has been in seclusion for weeks. I myself spoke with him only once or twice during all this time, and I could see he was exhausted by his struggles with

the demonic forces of darkness. But tonight, thank Heaven, the master broke through, and a new period of illumination has begun.”

“Thank Heaven.”

“When I received the message to come to his house, I ran. The master was radiant. He told me to call the others immediately and tell them to wear the blue canvas caftans. Just as I was returning, I remembered you had asked me to call you the next time, and I came to get you. The door was locked, so I came in through the window. You’re still interested, aren’t you?”

“Yes, of course I am.”

“All right, let’s go. Consider yourself fortunate. One never knows when the next opportunity will be. Sometimes these periods of illumination last for only a day.”

“I understand, Gamliel. Do you have a caftan for me?”

“Yes, I do. We’ll get it on the way. Come quickly. We must hurry.”

“Would you mind if we leave through the door?” asked Yechiel with a wry smile. “I assure you the landlord will not try to stop us. My rent is fully paid.”

“If you insist, I will not object.”

Walking briskly, the two men left the Jewish quarter, stopping only to retrieve the caftans from Gamliel’s room. They crossed broad Golden Street, the main thoroughfare of the city, and turned west, passing the ancient Greek ruins atop Deirmen Hill as they headed for the sea.

Soon they were alongside the wharves of the natural harbor. The pale winter moon sprinkled silver lights on the British merchant vessels, Venetian brigantines and Dutch schooners riding at anchor among swarms of coastal fishing craft. Mountainous headlands jutted out on both sides of the harbor, like burly arms against the angry roar of the sea, but they could not prevent the blasts of cold air from the distant Russian steppes from howling through the open channel.

Gamliel and Yechiel pulled their caftans more tightly about them and turned south along the coastline. As they left the city behind, other men wearing blue canvas caftans began to materialize out of the darkness. The growing group walked together in silence. By the time they stopped on a low hilltop within view of the gulf, there were twenty men in the group.

The hilltop was completely bare except for the stump of a large oak tree. It was cold, and the men pulled the hoods of their caftans far over their heads. They clustered together in small groups, indistinguishable from one another, and spoke in low tones as they awaited the arrival of the master. Gamliel and Yechiel stood off to one side, mesmerized by the sea.

“Where is Shabbesai?” asked Yechiel. “Why isn’t he here yet?”

“Keep your voice down,” growled Gamliel. “When you’re among us, you’re to refer to him as the master. You must never address him or speak of him by name. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do,” said Yechiel, shaken. “I meant no disrespect. I will be more careful in the future.”

“I know you meant no disrespect, my young friend. Believe me, although the master is but three years older than you, once you meet him you will find it most natural to address him that way. I’m older than he is, and I accept him as my master. You will, too.” He paused. “That is, of course, if you’re fortunate enough to be found worthy. Listen carefully to the master’s words, Yechiel. Be prepared to be tested when I introduce you to him afterward.”

“Are you sure he will not mind my coming?”

“Why should he mind? You come as a friend interested in learning. Not as an enemy or a spy. Is that not so?”

“Certainly, certainly. You know I can be trusted, Gamliel.” Yechiel looked anxiously back toward Smyrna. “I wish he would arrive already.”

“But he has already arrived, my dear Yechiel. He was here before all of us.”

“What are you talking about? Where is he?”

“There!” said Gamliel, pointing toward the sea.

In the distance, beyond a huge boulder that jutted into the gulf, Yechiel could just barely make out the head of a man bobbing in and out of the swirling waters. He watched in amazement as the man immersed himself repeatedly in the frigid waters. After immersing more than a dozen times, the man turned and headed back to shore behind the rocky curtain of the boulder at the water’s edge.

Several minutes later, the man emerged fully clothed from behind the boulder and walked toward the hilltop. Even from afar, Yechiel could recognize the familiar regal bearing from the times he had watched Shabbesai Tzvi walk the streets of Smyrna.

From the first moment he had seen Shabbesai Tzvi, Yechiel had known there was something extraordinary about the man. He seemed completely oblivious to the world about him, his soul aflame with a holy fire that smoldered from his eyes. But then, from time to time, the fire would subside and become extinguished, and Shabbesai Tzvi would remain cloistered in his father’s house.

Not long before, Shabbesai Tzvi had submitted to his father’s will and married Rachel, the daughter of Aharon, a prominent Smyrna merchant, but the marriage had ended in immediate divorce. Shabbesai Tzvi was simply too holy to live an ordinary life together with an ordinary wife, people said. Someday, Heaven would send him a wife of equal holiness. Only then would he marry again.

Yechiel listened to all the stories of Shabbesai Tzvi’s extraordinary powers and the purity of his ways, of the days spent in fervent prayer and fasting. It was whispered in the streets of the Jewish quarter of Smyrna that Shabbesai Tzvi

was destined to be Mashiach, that he would one day bring an end to the long and bitter exile of the Jewish people. Unfortunately, however, Rav Yosef Escapa, the aged rabbi of Smyrna, had frowned on this kind of talk about his young student, and out of respect for the elderly sage, Shabbesai Tzvi had refused to acknowledge it in public. But he had not denied it either.

Yechiel had often wanted to approach this holy man, but he had not dared. Then one day, he met Gamliel Basnoun, an emissary from the holy city of Yerushalayim who frequently spent long periods of time in Turkey soliciting funds for the poor people in the Holy Land. Gamliel befriended Yechiel and inadvertently revealed to him during one of their conversations that he belonged to a group of young men to whom Shabbesai Tzvi taught Kabbalah in secret. Yechiel pleaded to join this group, and Gamliel kept putting him off with various excuses. Yechiel suspected his sincerity was being tested, and he persisted in his pleas. Finally, Gamliel consented to allow Yechiel to accompany him the next time, but the next time was long in coming. And now, at last, it was here, right on this windswept hilltop in the middle of the night. Yechiel was consumed with excitement.

The men formed a semicircle around the crown of the hill. Their faces, concealed in the dark folds of their hoods, faced the sea, the direction from which their master was approaching. Not a sound was uttered as the tall lean figure of Shabbesai Tzvi appeared on the moonlit hilltop and stopped beside the stump of the oak tree. He wore a long robe of shimmering white satin, with broad purple sleeves, a purple collar and hem and a headdress of gold-braided white silk. Glistening beads of seawater clung to his auburn beard. He shone with such spectral joy and exhilaration that the young men dared not look him directly in the face. Eyes downcast, they stood in respectful silence awaiting his command.

Shabbesai Tzvi's gaze swept slowly across the bowed heads. He murmured something inaudible and smiled.

"Welcome, my dear children," he said aloud, his voice soft and melodious. "May the blessings of Heaven forever be upon your heads for having the vision and wisdom to seek truth."

He sat on the oak stump and extended his arms to the young men.

"Come, my beloved children," he cried out. "Come gather around me, and I will tell you the secrets of the universe."

The men rushed forward. After a brief scramble, everyone was seated on the ground, crowded together at the feet of their master. Gamliel and Yechiel sat together inconspicuously in the third row, almost totally obscured by the men in the first two rows. Yechiel stared in fascination as Shabbesai Tzvi closed his eyes and threw back his head. A look of ecstasy settled on Shabbesai Tzvi's pale features, and he began to speak.

"For the past few weeks, I have struggled with the forces of darkness from the moment I awoke until sleep overcame my exhausted eyes. As long as this fierce battle raged, there was no joy in my life; despair lurked in the shadows. The Almighty had concealed His face from me, and the battle had drawn me into the abyss. Oh, the anguish of the concealment of the face!

"But tonight, at last, my prayers were answered. The veil was withdrawn, and once again, the Almighty let the radiance of His divine Countenance shine upon me. Finally, I was able to use the power of the Kabbalah to break out of the shackles of the physical world. My soul soared up to the third heaven where the angels whispered wondrous secrets in my ears, secrets that let me see from one end of the world to the other. I was invincible; victory was mine. At least for tonight, the forces of darkness were forced to withdraw."

He paused. No one said a word.

“The time has not yet come for me to reveal these secrets to you, but I can tell you what they helped me see. At first, I looked out upon—”

Shabbesai Tzvi’s body suddenly tensed, and he stopped speaking. The euphoria slowly drained from his face, replaced by frustration and puzzlement. His hands began to shake. A cry escaped his lips, and he jumped to his feet.

“I cannot go on!” he cried. “I am being held back. I sense that there is someone among us who must not hear what I say. But why? Why?”

Shabbesai Tzvi buried his face in his hands, his body trembling uncontrollably. The young men sat frozen in bafflement, hardly daring to breathe. Slowly, the trembling subsided, and Shabbesai Tzvi lifted his face.

“There’s a stranger among us,” he said in an eerily calm voice. “That’s why I was unable to continue. Throw back your hoods, and we will uncover the intruder.”

“Master! Forgive me!” cried Gamliel Basnoun. He pushed his way through the first two rows and fell at the feet of Shabbesai Tzvi. “I’m to blame. There was a young man from far away who kept beseeching me to come join us, and I brought him along. Master, I only—”

“Enough, Gamliel!” snapped Shabbesai Tzvi. “Rise to your feet. I shall speak with you later, after the rest have departed. Right now, let the young man speak for himself.”

“Yes, master,” said Gamliel humbly. He bowed and returned to his place.

Slowly, Yechiel stood up on shaky legs, his hood thrown back to reveal his terrified features. The others had moved aside and now stood watching intently.

“Come here, young man,” said Shabbesai Tzvi.

Yechiel stepped forward. He flinched beneath Shabbesai Tzvi’s fiery eyes and hung his head.



“What is your name, young man?” asked Shabbesai Tzvi in a softer voice.

“Yechiel Tomashov,” was the barely audible reply.

“How old are you?”

“I am 22 years old.”

“From where are you?”

“From Warsaw in Poland.”

“You are far from home, my son. What brings someone as young as you to Turkey?”

“My father sent me here to work in Elazar Ashkenazi’s bank for two years.”

“Are there no banks in Poland?”

“Of course there are. My father himself is a banker. But he’s interested in establishing banking contacts in the East, and he felt I would be very valuable to him if I had some experience working in a bank in Smyrna.”

“I see. That explains what you’re doing in Smyrna. Perhaps you could explain what you’re doing here among us here at this very moment? Did your father think this would also be a valuable experience?”

Yechiel Tomashov’s face turned a deep red.

“My father knows nothing of this,” he said.

“Do you know why everyone is wearing a blue canvas caftan?”

Yechiel shook his head.

“I’ll tell you why. Blue is the color of the sky and a symbol of the heavens. The rough canvas is to remind us of the insignificance of material things. And they’re all identical to show that everyone here is united in the quest for truth. Do you understand?”

Yechiel nodded.

“The purpose is not to enable strangers to come among us undetected,” Shabbesai Tzvi concluded sharply. “What do you have to say for yourself, young man?”

“I have nothing to say, except that I meant no harm. I’ve admired the master from afar, and I’ve longed to hear the words of his wisdom. I have nothing more to say in my defense.”

Gamliel Basnoun stepped forward, his arms outstretched in supplication.

“Master, permit me to speak in his defense,” he said. “It was I who suggested—”

“Be silent!” Shabbesai Tzvi’s eyes flashed fire. “Do you think for one moment that I do not already know everything you have to tell me? I will speak with you later.”

“Yes, master. Forgive me.”

Gamliel bowed his head and shrank back into the crowd. Shabbesai Tzvi turned back to Yechiel Tomashov, and the anger in his eyes subsided.

“I’m pleased to see you have the courage to admit your error, my son,” said Shabbesai Tzvi. “It speaks well for you. But we cannot permit anyone to attend these meetings just to satisfy his curiosity.”

Yechiel squared his shoulders and took a deep breath.

“It was not curiosity that brought me here,” he said. “It was the thirst of my mind and the hunger of my soul.”

Shabbesai Tzvi stared intently into Yechiel’s eyes for several long moments. Finally, a small smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

“Well spoken, young man. Well spoken. I’ve looked into your heart, and I’ve seen your sincerity. Do you still wish to join our group?”

“Oh, yes! Yes!” exclaimed Yechiel, unable to contain his excitement.

“Very well, then. I’ll tell you what you must do. You must lock yourself in your room for three days and three nights. Not one morsel of food or one drop of water is to pass through your lips during the daylight hours and even in

the night you're not to eat more than a crust of bread. You must spend half the time praying and half the time studying the laws of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On the fourth morning, you're to go down to the sea and immerse yourself seven times. Then you're to come directly to my home. Do not speak to anyone along the way. Absolutely no one. Even if someone greets you, you must not respond. Not even one word. Not even a nod of your head. Will you do exactly as I say?"

Yechiel gulped.

"Yes, master. I will."

"Good. I shall be waiting for you. Go in peace, my son. May the angels of light accompany you on your journey."

Yechiel Tomashov turned and hastened toward Smyrna. Soon, he was among the oak trees of the coastal plain, and the clearing atop the hill was no longer visible. The blue canvas caftan he had borrowed from Gamliel Basnoun scraped at his skin, reminding him of his shame. Without slowing his step, he wriggled out of his caftan, rolled it up and tucked it under his arm.

The night was still black, but fishermen were already stirring on the wharves. Yechiel stopped to watch them for a few minutes. Then, on sudden impulse, he climbed up to the ruins of the ancient Ionian temple that dominated the summit of Deirmen Hill. The temple had been built by Greek colonists over two thousand years earlier and was already in ruins when the First Beis Hamikdash was built in Yerushalayim. Yechiel sat on a fallen marble column and looked back to the hilltop from which he had just come. It was far away, but he could still see the tiny animated white form of Shabbesai Tzvi surrounded by the pale blue forms of the others.

What an ancient and mysterious city this Smyrna was, he thought. This small valley, hemmed in on three sides by the Anatolian mountains and on the fourth by the sea, had seen

entire civilizations come and go many centuries before the first barbarians had settled in Warsaw. Ancient armies had clashed on this very coastal plain; ancient blood had been spilled into its rivers and swept into the churning sea. Greeks, Persians, Romans, Mongols, Jews and Turks had lived and died in this valley. How appropriate it was, thought Yechiel, that a great visionary such as Shabbesai Tzvi should emerge from this time-blackened cauldron. And how logical it would be for Mashiach to be born in a place such as Smyrna, which lay at the center of the Turkish Empire and, indeed, at the center of the world.

On the distant hilltop, the white-clad figure of Shabbesai Tzvi was pacing rapidly back and forth, gesticulating wildly with his hands. Yechiel yearned to hear the mystical secrets being revealed to those other young men at this very moment, secrets he might have been hearing himself had he not been discovered. But upon reflection, Yechiel realized it had been presumptuous to expect to come like a thief in the night with no permission and learn the secrets of the universe. Shabbesai Tzvi had been right, of course. Gamliel should have known better.

As Yechiel sat among the fallen marble pillars on Deirmen Hill, soft misty light began to filter into the valley through the mountains in the west. The meeting on the distant hilltop came to an end, and the blue-clad figures began to stream back toward the city.

Only one blue-clad figure remained standing in the center of the clearing along with Shabbesai Tzvi. That was undoubtedly Gamliel, thought Yechiel, facing Shabbesai Tzvi's angry reprimand for daring to bring an uninvited guest. Drowsiness began to overcome him, and he struggled to his feet. He owed Gamliel an apology and a debt of gratitude, he thought guiltily as he stumbled down the east slope of Deirmen Hill and headed to his room to sleep.