

Chapter 17

Simon awoke light-headed and confused. His knees were swollen and painful. His legs burned.

Hannah called the doctor, an elderly man, who smeared the same white paste Dr. Yaakov had used—in the future.

By midday Simon's room was spinning. Padi brought herbal tea, but it made him retch. He lay on his pallet in the little guest room, watching the geckos. Pain fired into his temple like a red-hot arrow. Even the dim light hurt his eyes. A gray blankness overtook him and he tossed in the darkness.

He became conscious of a rustle in the room. A damp cloth cooled his forehead.

"I think the fever has broken, Mama." An unknown girl's voice.

He smiled and opened his eyes. "Shalom." His nurse was stunningly beautiful. *An angel?*

"I am Rachel, Miriam's sister." She refreshed the cloth and returned it to his head. "You have been in our prayers for four days. Praise God he is faithful to

answer.”

Hannah stood silhouetted in the doorway. “He is always faithful.”

Rachel held a cup to his mouth, and he drank. Sweet wine.

“Why are you so kind?” Simon whispered before dozing off again.

He awoke hungry. The evening light from the door slanted across the room. His knees were stiff and wouldn't bend. *What if I become crippled in history?* Fear hovered at the edge of his mind, but he pushed it away. Life was already out of control.

Rachel brought rotis, grapes, and dried fruit. “The news from the palace is good. The Pharaoh's envoy has accepted the king's terms. There will be a wedding in a few months' time. His daughter is called Karomama—such a strange name.” She laughed. “Mama is planning her dress, and there will be a great feast to celebrate the engagement. You must be better by then.”

“I understand you're to be married too.”

The girl blushed. “Who spoke of it?”

“Your sister Miriam, I think.”

“My sister is not known for her tact. But then I am

sixteen. It is the age."

"Who's the lucky man?"

A shadow crossed her face. She looked down. "He will be of father's choosing. Grandfather Zadok is the high priest. We may only marry within the priestly families."

She rose to leave. "And now you are better, I may not serve you further. Padi will attend you."

Simon emerged the next day, weak as a blade of grass, to enjoy the shade in the courtyard. Swallows swooped under the rafters to their cheeping young. The air carried mingled scents of horses, lily blossom, and freshly baked bread. But his legs stuck out like two poles.

Padi opened the gate to six guards who snapped to attention. King Solomon crossed the court. "Shimon, I heard you were ill. Was it your fall?"

Simon tried to stand, but his knees were locked. "Forgive me, my lord. I am better, but weak."

Solomon sat on the bench beside him. "I am ashamed I put you in danger. It was thoughtless. I was eager to show you Saleh. You ride well—another might have fallen. Then I fear to think what might have happened."

"How long will they want to kill me?"

"Who knows? The Law says until the death of the high priest. In former times they would never rest." He shook his head. "Revenge is pure foolishness. It enslaves the avenger to his victim, and when he is avenged, he becomes a victim himself."

"Can't you stop them? You are the king."

"Ahimaaz is investigating, but we can prove nothing yet." Solomon's eyes were opaque.

Why is he protecting his brothers? Helplessness flooded Simon. With his disabled knees he was a sitting target.

"You need not fear, Shimon, the Lord will care for you." Solomon seemed remarkably relaxed in the face of so many threats.

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

The king smiled. "He shows us."

Simon's eyes fell on the mules. "I loved my horse. When it died, I decided if God was real he couldn't be good, or he wouldn't have allowed it. Later, I found it easier to believe that God is an invention of man, to fulfill our need for belonging, purpose and love."

"Rather, might it not be that man is the invention of God, for the same reasons?"

"How can God have needs?"

Solomon smiled. "Does love not need a beloved?"

"And suffering? And evil? And death?"

"Are our fault, not his." The king stood.

"Thank you for coming. I'm not sure I agree, but you've been very kind."

"Get well soon, my friend. Shalom." Solomon waved as he left.

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Each day Simon's strength improved, although his knees remained locked and swollen. Fear knotted his insides, and he felt more trapped than ever. He expected Solomon's brothers to burst in at any moment.

One evening, Padi opened the gate to Ahimaaz and another, in a blue robe and white turban.

Ahimaaz smiled. "Shimon. Meet my father, Zadok, the high priest. You saw him at the session."

Simon stood awkwardly and bowed. "And, sir, I also saw you on the hill at Gibeon." They'd shouted at him in the dream. He shouldn't have been there. He wished he'd kept his mouth shut.

Zadok was tall, with a long, white beard and deep creases beside his nose. He looked Simon over,

frowning.

"Father, Shimon has already helped Israel and our king," Ahimaaz said.

The old man's eyes softened. "You are not Egyptian. From where do you come?"

"From across many seas, sir."

Zadok nodded. "The Law says, 'The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt.' Whom the Lord honors, we welcome."

Ahimaaz pointed at Simon's knees. "Shimon, father has come to anoint you and pray for your healing."

Simon wasn't sure he wanted to submit to any religious ritual, but he couldn't refuse their kindness.

The high priest produced a small vial and poured a little oil onto his finger. It smelled of incense and lemons. He raised his hand. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace." He touched Simon's forehead with the oil.

Power hit him like a bolt of lightning. Simon staggered back and slumped onto the bench. *What on earth was that?*

Zadok was praying. "Lord Almighty, this man has served you and your people. If he has found favor in your eyes, please heal him." He bowed towards Simon, still sitting stunned on the seat, and left.

After a few moments, Simon went to stand. His knees bent. They were pain free, without a hint of swelling or stiffness. In disbelief, he squatted several times. "Simon, the scientist," he said aloud, "you have some thinking to do."

Since he'd lost Buttons, he'd wanted no truck with a God who'd allowed his best friend to die. He preferred Marx's mantra, "Religion is the opiate of the masses."

When he'd asked Solomon how he could believe in God, he'd laughed! "How could you not?" The words swirled around Simon's mind. Could he accept that something beyond his experience might be true? To dismiss the unlikely as impossible was unscientific. On the other hand, he couldn't exactly set up a controlled experiment.

"Let's go over the facts," he said. "One. I was hit by what felt like electricity. Two. I became weak and fell. Three. My knees are better. Now for the theories. One. Static. No, because my knees were healed. Electricity

alone would not heal them. Two. They would have been healed, anyway. No, they hadn't been healed for two weeks. For them to become completely well at that moment is very unlikely. Probability less than 0.01 percent."

Simon scratched his head. "Theory three. Occult power." If he believed that, he already accepted a spiritual reality. In which case there was no reason to dismiss God. "Theory four. It was God." He shook his head. He wasn't getting the answers he wanted. "And that's also unscientific, Simon."

Do these people who lived three thousand years ago know something I don't? Simon had always believed the world evolved from primitive to civilized, from ignorance to knowledge. The increase in man's knowledge over the last centuries was undeniable, but had that always been the case? Had it created in him a false mindset?

Could it be that knowledge from earlier civilizations had disappeared? In fact, wasn't he doing just that—searching for tribal medicines before the knowledge was lost to science?

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The next morning Simon was still chewing it over. These Israelites' claim to know God rankled. He shook

his head. No, he'd need more evidence than a bolt of electricity.

Ahimaaz greeted him. "Shalom, Shimon, how are you today?"

"My knees are better."

"Praise God in the highest! That is excellent news." His smile became wistful. "I wish he had healed my feet."

"Why, what happened?"

"I ran as a messenger for King David. I was fast too." Ahimaaz paused at the memories. "Many years of running took their toll. Now my feet get painful. That is why I am what I am."

"What do you mean?"

Ahimaaz sat beside Simon. "As you know, my father is the high priest. I should have inherited the priesthood, but no one crippled may become high priest."

"Really? That seems very unfair."

He shrugged. "It is the Law of the Lord. Who are we to question his purposes? So my son Azariah is training to be high priest in my place. I am content. It is a great responsibility."

Padi brought a bowl of water for Simon to wash.

"I hope you don't mind my asking, but that thing that hit me yesterday." Simon splashed water on his face. "Does that always happen?"

"No. We cannot predict the Lord. His ways are higher than ours."

Once again, Simon felt out of his depth and shook the water from his beard.

Ahimaaz faced him. "Now that you are better it would be wise to avoid the danger here. The king has asked me to travel north to Megiddo and Hazor. We may need to fortify those towns, and he wants a report. Would you join me? It would be a pleasure to have your company."

"Thank you, sir, that would be great. Your kindness—"

"It is nothing. You do not realize how much you have already helped us. And please, call me Ahim."

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They left at dawn aboard the two mules, with a laden donkey, and three servants on foot. The road north wound through wooded hills. Simon kept looking behind to see if they were followed. By mid-morning, they passed a rounded hill on their left, a black tent on its crest.

Simon had a flash of recognition. "Is that Gibeon?" Today it appeared deserted.

Ahimaaz nodded. "My father was training my son Azariah there. Now that my father serves before the Ark in place of Abiathar, they have moved to the palace."

"What is the tent?"

"That is the *Ohel-Mo'ed*, the tent of meeting. It is very old and very sacred."

"What's it for?"

Ahimaaz frowned. "You know so much, but so little? Moses built it when our forefathers wandered the desert. It is where our people met with the Lord."

"Is that why Solomon was sacrificing there?" The stench of burning flesh returned to him. The blood. Simon swallowed hard. Why would any god require that?

"That is why."

"Then what's the tent in the palace?"

"For the Ark of the Covenant. It is made of gold and truly glorious! It contains the stone tablets upon which is the Law, written by the hand of God."

Simon was still puzzled. "Why is it there and not in the tabernacle?"

They were approaching another village. Ahimaaz steered the party towards its gates.

"Many years ago the Philistines captured the Ark, but it caused their god, Dagon, to fall from his stand. Tumors broke out, and many died. They were so afraid, they returned it!" Ahimaaz laughed. "King David made a safer place in the palace. I was a young boy when they brought it there, but I remember the music and dancing. We saw it with our own eyes and we lived."

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One hour to the east, Jonathan, son of Abiathar, bowed before his father. He had tucked his tunic into his belt and was breathing hard. "I have news."

In the small courtyard of his home in Anathoth, Abiathar sat with Shephatiah and Ithream, drinking from earthenware cups. "Jonathan, my son, you are a faithful messenger."

"I have seen the tall foreigner with the brown hair. He is with Ahimaaz, son of Zadok."

"The maggot!" Shephatiah thumped his cup, splashing its contents. "Where are they?"

"They were entering Ramah. They ride on mules.

With baggage and servants.”

“Where are they going?”

Jonathan tugged his tunic from his belt. “I paid a boy to ask. They are bound for Megiddo and Hazor.”

Ithream's eyes gleamed. “We have him at last.”

Abiathar was sweating. “More wine!” He eyed his son. “Did you not fail last time?”

“We will not fail again.”

A slave emerged with a jar and refilled their cups.

“Jonathan, take our best men.” The priest fished in his tunic and tossed him a pouch of silver. “Follow them closely. Attack before Dotan. If not, on the north road to Hazor, where it enters the forest of Lebanon. Do not delay.”

Ithream stood. “I will go with them.”

Shephatiah waved him down. “Don't be a fool, Ithream. Would you be killed?”

“If not one way,” Ithream smiled, “then another.”

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Simon and Ahimaaz spent the night with friends, and the next day fell in with a large party of merchants, also heading to Megiddo. Simon was still nervous of being seen, but in the crowd he began to relax and

enjoy the journey.

On the second morning, the donkey lifted a swollen foot.

"This is not good." Ahimaaz shared its load with the mules and the servants, who grumbled.

The lame donkey slowed their progress, and the merchants left them behind. Simon's anxiety returned. He was greatly relieved when they saw Megiddo in the distance.

The town perched high on the south side of the Jezreel Valley. Ahimaaz pointed from its meager walls. Carts and porters dotted the valley like ants. Smudges of dust rose from threshing floors, drifting on the wind. "This is a strategic place. It's also on the main highway to Damascus. We must build a fortress here."

In the morning, Simon glimpsed a thin man in the market place. Could Jonathan have followed them? Surely not.

Their donkey was still favoring its foreleg. Ahimaaz sucked his teeth. "Perhaps we can borrow one."

Simon bent and lifted the foot. "A poultice of willow bark and frankincense may help."

The servants soon found both, and Simon prepared the dressing and wrapped the foot. He hadn't expected

to be the team vet, but the next day the swelling had gone.

Ahimaaz looked surprised. "How did you learn this?"

"It's what I studied. Many plants have evolved useful medical properties."

"What do you mean, 'evolved'?"

"Over millions of years, all plants and animals adapted to the changing climate of the earth. They developed chemicals to protect themselves. Some are valuable against different diseases."

"Protect themselves? How can a plant make such decisions?"

Simon smiled. "They don't, but each one evolved over millions of years. That adaptation becomes a new species—a new plant. That's how the world came into being."

Ahimaaz studied Simon for some time. "These are strange ideas. Dangerous ideas. I advise you not to share them with my father or the king."

"Why on earth not?"

"The Torah, blessed be the Lord who gave it, tells us God made the plants the way they are, each one perfectly designed for our use and benefit. He created

the world in six days, exactly 2,747 years ago.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Shimon, you come from another time and another place. Yet you don’t know the Lord. It is he who has made us and this world. We are his people. How can you claim to understand his creation without knowing the One who created it? If you come to know him, you will learn. Knowledge without truth is of little value.”