

Chapter 2

Simon and Kurt drove north from Kuala Lumpur through miles of green-black plantations of oil palm. The destruction of the native forest grieved Simon. He shook his head.

After finding their guides, they tramped into the sultry mountains, five hundred meters above the pollution of the plains. Simon breathed deeply, enjoying the fresh air.

The climb through the jungle had been steep and taxing, but Simon loved these forests. He knew the plants like close friends. Several times he stopped to admire a brilliant flower or the broad fins of a giant tree. The lowland flora eventually gave way to mountain forest thickly hung with mosses and orchids. He tingled with excitement. Somewhere here, his prize awaited.

At dusk, the guides made camp by a crystal pool beneath a cascading waterfall. Simon shed his sweaty

clothes and collapsed into the water. "Ah, that is so good."

Kurt flicked his wet hair from his face and stood in the shallows. "Ja, but this is a strange place, no? There is something funny about it . . . just a big hole. Why is it here?"

Simon laughed. "For us to swim in."

Something glinted on the floor of the pool. "What's that?" Simon swam to the stony bottom. The light shifted and the stone gleamed for only an instant. He grabbed it and pushed to the surface. "Here's some gold." He grinned and flung the pebble to his friend.

Kurt caught it and raised his eyebrows. "Sha, it's heavy. Maybe it is."

"Wait, there's more." Simon dived again. He'd seen a larger piece nearer the falls. The stone glinted, and he lunged for it. A solid weight filled his hand.

The surface seemed farther away than he expected. He twisted to push off the bottom, but the current dragged him down, its massive turbulence rolling him backwards, deeper beneath the falls.

Realization struck with such force he almost

breathed in a lungful of water. *What a fool.* The pool had no river flowing out. Instead, the current flowed into an underground tunnel that Simon was being sucked into.

Panic filled him as his lungs burned for air. *I'm going to die.* His foot struck the tunnel wall, then his shoulder. The darkness engulfed him.

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Pain. A repeated thumping throbbed through his head. Voices and the smacking of bare feet. The stench of sweat. *Tink, tink-tink, tink.* Metal on rock, unceasing, like the pain.

Simon opened his eyes. A blurred face peered down at him and smiled. Simon tried to smile back, but his lips wouldn't move. The face called out. Simon didn't understand the words. A hand tugged his jaw and water trickled into his throat. He gagged and coughed.

Another man spoke, firm and confident. "*Hu chai?*"

The closer face whispered, not turning his head. "*Raq.*"

"*Ta-knee-ach ot-oh,*" said the other voice, with more

authority this time.

The softer one replied. He seemed to be pleading.

Simon's vision slowly focused. He was near the mouth of a low cave. A tall man stared down at him without expression. Simon struggled to sit, but the pain was too excruciating. A stream rushed past him towards the daylight. Men wearing only loincloths carried baskets of a whitish rock. Their olive skin and black beards looked foreign.

The tall man nodded and walked away. Simon didn't understand a word, but the language was vaguely familiar. Arms thrust beneath him doubling the pain. He lost consciousness.

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He woke again, his mind a dense fog. Pain racked his head, shoulder and arms. His entire body shook. *Where am I? What happened?* His eyes opened.

A tall tree shaded him. From its branches, aerial roots dangled to the ground. It must be *Ficus virens*, the white strangler fig. He smiled. At least his brain was clearing. Some distance away, the strange-looking people worked like ants in a crude compound.

Simon's shoulder burned like fire. Glancing down at his body, he gasped. His arms were coated with a white paste that stung like a scorpion. Fear gripped him. He needed a hospital, and soon.

A man wearing a loin-cloth approached, carrying something wrapped in large leaves. He clucked as he spoke, chattering away in his native tongue. It was the same young man who had pleaded with the other man back in the cave. He had friendly brown eyes and a tufty beard. His smile lit his face. From inside his leaf parcel he scooped out a dark paste and pushed it into Simon's mouth. It tasted bittersweet.

"Mee-kha-el." The young man touched his chest. "Mee-kha-el."

Simon coughed and shook his head. "Simon," he whispered, pointing to his own chest. "Help me, please. Where am I?"

"Shymonelpme." Mee-kha-el pointed at Simon and grinned. He handed him a gourd and laughed before walking away.

Simon took a sip from the gourd cup. *Water*. The liquid soothed his sore throat. A brief memory came

but faded. *He had come to Malaysia, but how did he get here? Why was he wounded? And who were these people?* Panic seized him. He fought it, but couldn't stop shaking.

He must still be in Malaysia, but these men weren't Asians and the language wasn't Malay. They were tall, with straight noses, thick hair and beards. He imagined guerrillas with AK-47s. He closed his eyes, more afraid than ever. *I'm going to die.*

The pain in his head and shoulder seemed to be easing. He sat up slowly and the world swam. His horizon leveled. He too was wearing a loincloth and the white paste covered his feet and ankles.

"Help me," he whimpered.

A thumping was coming from the compound and pulsed in Simon's head. Workers were crushing rocks, and then sweeping the shards into buckets. Others worked around miniature volcanoes beside piles of charred logs. Simon couldn't believe what he was seeing. He shook his head. "It can't be."

Furnaces shaped like beehives roared as workers pumped on crude bellows. A young man withdrew a

long pole from a furnace and poured glowing liquid onto the ground. He was in a smelting operation. *Iron? Impossible. Copper? No, gold!*

At once, the images returned—the nuggets in the pool, the waterfall, and the total fear as he was sucked into the tunnel. He must have died. Where else could he be? Maybe this was some near-death experience, or reincarnation, or heaven? He didn't believe in any of that. Perhaps this was another dream. No, the pain was too real. A sudden longing for Kathy and Ruby erupted into tears of helplessness.

Mee-kha-el returned, this time with an older man, short, with broad shoulders and thick scars on his chest. The older man's trim beard and hair glistened in the sunshine. He squatted beside Simon, inspecting his legs, arms, and head. He squeezed Simon's shoulder. Simon yelled.

The man grabbed Simon's wrist and wrenched the arm up and out. Simon's scream echoed across the clearing. Workers turned to stare. The older man scowled at Simon. Mee-kha-el strapped Simon's forearm into a plaited sling and laid a gourd of water

beside him. The two men stood and walked away, talking. Maybe Simon had found his hospital after all.

Through the blur of pain, Simon tried to take stock. In the cave he had heard pickaxes and watched men carrying baskets of rock. They had to be mining a very rich seam. The smelting seemed crude but effective.

Next to the furnaces a worker stacked golden ingots into a small heap. One heap must be worth a million pounds. He counted ten piles. Why such a crude set-up? Are they a lost, bronze-age tribe? If so, who buys their gold?

The sun had shifted, and Simon glanced at his wrist. A shadow of paler skin stared back. Of course, he had removed the watch before jumping into the pool. Somehow its loss reassured him he wasn't dreaming. Simon had to escape.

He twisted to assess the forest behind him, but the pain in his shoulder doubled. Fear squatted in his chest again like a dead weight. His mouth felt dry. He lay back, awash with black despair.

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Simon shivered in the cool air as he awoke. He pulled himself up. His limbs were slow to respond, but working. Except for his shoulder, other pains had eased and his head had cleared, too. Leaning against the fig tree, he took note of his surroundings.

By the angle of the sun, it must be a new day.

Mee-kha-el approached, smiling. He held another paste parcel and a broad leaf holding roast meat and slices of flat bread. Simon's stomach growled at the smell of the food. He smiled at the youth, who greeted him in his own language.

Simon's legs stung as he struggled to his feet. He hobbled to a dead tree and accepted the food. The meat was gamey and tough, with a crunchy charcoal flavoring.

"Thank you, Mee-kha-el." Simon nodded between chewy mouthfuls. "Mee-kha-el." He stared at the youth. "That's Michael, with a Middle Eastern accent. Are you Arab? Or Jewish?" Simon tried the only Hebrew he knew. "Shalom."

The youth grinned and prattled on for several minutes. Simon shook his head, and the boy stopped

talking. He pointed to the bread. "*Lechem.*" Simon repeated the word, and Michael smiled. He raised the gourd. "*Mahyim.*"

The young man looked like a smaller version of the youth from his dream. The images of the sacrifices flooded back—the golden-skinned youth in the purple robe, and the unknown language. If that was also Hebrew, the dream must have been about Israel. Simon looked down at his feet. No hooves.

A tall man with folded arms stood watching them. He glared at Simon. Built like a wrestler, he wore a large gold bangle on his wrist. Michael turned to follow Simon's gaze and jumped up when he saw the man.

The older man addressed Michael sternly—the same authoritative voice from inside the cave. Michael appeared to plead with the elder again, but this time the man just shook his head and walked away, but not before throwing a firm command over his shoulder.

Michael nodded toward his superior. "*Abinadab,*" he said, before scanning the forest and hustling Simon into the trees. Thick foliage buried them as the sounds of the camp faded. In the cooler twilight, they stopped

at a giant hollow log. Michael hurried away, leaving Simon alone.

Exhausted and still in pain, Simon chewed a little paste. He crept into his log and slept. He awoke to an evening alive with birdsong and the hum of insects. Small, long-snouted mammals shuffled past. Something about them puzzled Simon.

But it was the plants that worried him more. Some he recognized, but many he didn't. Malaysian plants were his friends. *Rationalize, Simon, think.* "I am alive. I won't die of my wounds. I am somewhere in Asia. I have been rescued by Hebrew-speaking gold-diggers. Two wanted to save me, but the Abinadab character wants me dead." That didn't help. It didn't help at all.

Simon crouched inside his shelter. His legs burned. Michael again appeared, this time with more paste, food and water. He said a few words before leaving. Was the young man also in danger? Simon chewed slowly knowing it was going to be another long night in the log.

After dark, the little mammals returned, snuffling for grubs. They looked like black shrews. *Aren't they*

extinct? . . . Bronze-age tribe? . . . Extinct animals?

Simon seemed to have traveled back thousands of years. Disorientated, he crawled back into his wooden home and wept.

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Simon woke as stiff as his log, but his mind was fully clear. Michael brought a breakfast of fruit and tried to teach him some Hebrew. Simon found the effort therapeutic until Michael shared the first sentence Simon understood. "Soon we return to Israel."

Would they take him captive, kill him, or worse, leave him behind, wounded and without food?

"Where . . . we . . . now?" Simon said in Hebrew.

"Ophir in Kalah Bar."

Is that a place, or new words?

Simon longed to get back to the tatters of his expedition, but after he failed to surface from the pool, Kurt and the others must have given him up for dead. He'd shipwrecked the trip with a moment of foolishness.

So much for being Ruby's hero. The news would probably kill his daughter. Kathy was right, he should have stayed with his family. He shook his head. For Ruby's sake, he had to get home.

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The following evening Simon risked a brief walk. His limbs were recovering and the white paste had flaked off his arms. His new raw skin was dry and clean. His shoulder still throbbed, but he could manage the pain.

A loud squabbling in the forest canopy led him to a large fruiting tree, another species of fig he didn't recognize. A new species would otherwise thrill him, but Simon's dismay returned in full force. Could he travel back in time? *Silly nonsense. What had Ruby said? A magic wall?* He shook his head. *I must be going mad.* He longed for someone to talk to—anyone.

With his wounded shoulder, he could forget about escaping. He'd have to trust his rescuers, even if it meant returning via Israel. Which meant he had to win Abinadab's trust. He stroked his stubble. A plan

formed—learn as much Hebrew as possible, make friends with these people, and find a way home.

* * *

Day after day Simon learned new nouns, verbs, and phrases. With little else to occupy his time, his grammar quickly improved. “Why you come here?” he asked Michael.

“Gold.”

One warm afternoon, Simon showed Michael the plants he knew. Michael grinned and walked away. The boy returned with the burly doctor who had attended to Simon's shoulder.

“I am Yaakov Ben Kallai.” A small figurine dangled from the man's neck. Stern-faced, he checked Simon over with nods of approval and removed the sling. He explained they'd run out of the antiseptic white paste. “Do you know a plant to use?”

Simon led them to a clearing where a vine scrambled over a half-fallen tree. He pointed to the heart-shaped leaves. “Betel.”

Yaakov and Michael collected large handfuls and bound them with a twist of the vine. “Do we cook it?”

"No." Simon made a grinding motion. "Make small."

Yaakov asked further questions that Simon didn't understand. The two walked away and returned a short time later. Michael seemed excited. Yaakov grabbed Simon's good arm. "Come. We spoke with Abinadab."

Simon's heart pounded. He jerked away. "Where you take me? Why?"

Yaakov placed his arm around Simon's shoulder. "You can help us. You have—" again he used words Simon didn't know.

They crossed the red-dirt compound toward several black tents. Michael ducked into one and beckoned Simon to follow. Inside, the tang of stale sweat caught his throat.

Michael pointed to a pile of dry palm leaves. "You sleep here."

"Michael, how did you find me?"

"You floated down the river in the gold cave. You looked dead."

"Why do you . . . care for me?"

"It is what we do."

Simon stood in the half-light, alone. Someday he would wake from this nightmare. *Please let it be soon. Do dreams last for weeks? Could I have slipped into history?* He shook his head. That was a magic wall—the stuff of fanciful fiction. Then again, hadn't Einstein proved that time wasn't an absolute? He tested the palm leaves, which felt soft. He laid down and slept.

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Simon emerged to the aroma of roasting meat. A crowd had gathered around several fire-blackened pots. They stared at Simon, suspicious.

Yaakov greeted him with a smile. Clucking like a proud parent, he ushered Simon to the front of the queue. "Sheemon, come and eat."

A chunk of meat, a flatbread, and a gourd of soup were thrust into Simon's hands. He sat beside Yaakov.

"This is Benjamin." Yaakov waved his bread at a lithe youth squatted next to him, chewing. "He is a useful friend."

Simon smiled. "Shalom."

Yaakov spaced his words, miming. "He killed the deer you are eating. He's a good shot with a bow and arrow." He made a slinging motion with his hand. "He doesn't miss with his *qela*." He dipped his bread into the soup and slurped.

Several workers sat apart listening to a small and grizzled old man. Simon didn't understand a word.

Michael followed his gaze. "Kenaani. They have their own language. We leave tomorrow, now that the Kaws wind has begun."

The Kaws wind? And who were the Kenaani? Simon grew frustrated, doubting he could walk far and knowing he couldn't stay behind either.

At least I'm coming home, Ruby. His tears patted to the ground.

* * *

They broke camp before dawn and headed west. A refreshing breeze was cool against Simon's back. He counted eighty in the party that strung down the jungle path, all loaded and striding out. He saw no gold. The well-worn track wove downhill, following a river. Tiny stones flung arrows of pain into the soles of Simon's

feet. His pace slowed.

Michael ran ahead and returned with sandals. Simon tied them to his bleeding feet and hobbled on. The path seemed endless. As they forded the growing river, Michael and Benjamin had to support him. At dusk, Simon caught a scent of salty air. The small party had reached the sea.

A wide cove of turquoise water opened out to the ocean. Simon gasped. Moored in the bay sat five, single-masted, wooden ships—broad tubs, each with a figurehead of a horse. He had studied ancient sailing ships. These had to be Egyptian or Phoenician, and at least two thousand years old.

His heart filled with dread as realization dawned. The unknown plants. The crude camp. The extinct shrews.

“Michael? What year is today?”

“Is it not the eighteenth year of our king?” Michael stood erect and smiled.

“And who is your king?”

“King Solomon, son of David, of course. Did you not know?”

