

Chapter 3

Kalah Bar, 997 BC

Simon couldn't stop shaking. It seemed he'd been transported into the era of his dream. He pictured the hooves. Was the youth in the purple robe King Solomon? *If this is the eighteenth year of his reign, King Solomon is too young.* Nothing made sense.

A second thought paralyzed him. *Will I ever return to my family?*

"No!" he yelled. "Oh, Ruby, Kathy, I'm sorry." Simon cradled his head in his forearms and sobbed. "It's not true. It can't be!"

He looked up. The ships were still there. Michael and Benjamin had left him on the side of the hill, alone.

Simon stumbled down the slope wrenching his mind for answers. *Can I travel through time both ways? Whatever caused the transport must be reversible.* Was the underwater tunnel beneath the falls a portal? Could he swim up it? Impossible. *I have to find my way back to*

England even if that means going to Israel first.

Simon stood on the rocky shore and studied the ships. The tubs suddenly seemed flimsy and small. A pair of oars swung from the stern. *Rudders?* The mast looked strong enough, but what about the ropes?

At dusk, the easterly breeze was steady. *This must be the Kawas.* Piles of gold ingots gleamed among a mountain of supplies. Workers filled large, amphora-style jars from the river mouth. With his weak shoulder and sore feet, Simon could only watch. Others handed the supplies across the tide-line into skiffs, which they rowed to the waiting vessels. Ahumm marched about, pointing, and waving his arms.

Michael walked over and stood beside Simon. "Ahumm is our captain. His name means brother of the sea. He is a legend." He smiled before slicing fingers across his throat. "Do not make him angry!"

"Then who is Abinadab?"

"Ben-Abinadab is in charge of the region of Dor. That is by the Great Sea, where the Kenaani live. He is the expedition leader. He married the king's daughter." Michael frowned. "But he gets sick." He

looked askance at Simon and spat into the sand.

A loud commotion grabbed their attention. Abinadab shouted at his men. They dropped their cargo. A few shouted back, waving their arms through the air. Ahumm marched up to Abinadab and shoved a finger into the big man's chest. Abinadab roared, shaking his head. The crew separated into two groups, each behind their leader. Pulling knives from their belts, they stood ready to fight.

Yaakov pushed between them. He spoke softly to Abinadab, then turned to the old captain.

Ahumm shouted and shrugged. He retreated, but spun around again. "We take too long with loading. We have less than one moon to cross the Eastern Sea. If we don't hurry, we die." He waved at his crew and stalked off. Loading restarted.

"Not good," Michael said. "They left several bars of gold on the shore. Abinadab says bring it all. Ahumm says the ships will sink." He chewed his bottom lip. "Abinadab is greedy. We already have five hundred and fifty talents."

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Two days later, the sailors rowed Simon to Ahumm's ship. It was dark. Simon climbed to the deck where Abinadab was organizing the last of the loading. He pointed at Simon. "We don't have spare food for you. Yaakov and Michael will have to share their rations."

The fleet left on the dawn tide, Ahumm standing in the stern. "May Baal and Yamm give fair winds."

The sailors leaned on the halyards, inching up the heavy sail. Simon marveled as the wind filled the canvas. The squat ship shivered as though sensing her freedom and pushed out towards the open sea.

Little waves slapped against the bow, and the boat heeled from the breeze on the starboard quarter. Once out of the bay, one of the ships rode deeper in the water. Simon had loved sailing and once learned that square-rigged ships could only sail downwind. What happened if the wind changed?

"How long is the journey?" Simon asked Michael.

"After one week we come to Chabah. Then three Sabbaths to Serendib." The names meant nothing to Simon, but how could they travel to Israel in such

primitive ships?

The first days passed peacefully in the heavy heat. For breakfast, Simon chewed on a handful of pre-roasted grain. There was no galley. He was allocated a hammock that swung against the others in the swell. The bathroom was the sea.

Simon spent most of the time with Michael learning Hebrew. His language improved, and Yaakov and Benjamin often joined them. But Simon couldn't share his deepest concern with them. Would they allow him to travel to England, was it possible, and would he still be in history? The more he fretted, the darker his thoughts became.

The fleet headed west, though how Ahumm maintained their course at night, Simon had no idea. With a steady breeze they were making between three and five knots. The fleet strung out behind them like a row of ducklings, the laden ship struggling to keep up.

"Why did you come on this expedition?" Simon asked Michael.

"Yaakov is my father. He works for the king."

"Your father? I didn't know."

"He has traveled many times. This is my first journey. I am learning to be a doctor like him."

"Is Solomon a good king?"

Michael gazed out at the ocean. "Is he not very rich? And do we not have peace from the River to the Wadi of Egypt?"

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Three days later the wind dropped. The sail hung like a rag, smacking the mast to the rhythm of the swell. They posted a shark lookout, and Simon joined the crew fishing or swimming, a relief to shed his stickiness and old sweat. In the flat calm, Ahumm stomped about the deck, peering at the sky and cursing.

The next day Michael vomited several times.

"He's a good sailor," Yaakov said to Simon. "He must have eaten something bad. Come, help me." They led Michael below to a bunk in the corner of the cabin. Yaakov pulled dried roots and a mortar from a large cupboard. He passed them to Simon. "Grind this."

Simon's eyes widened at Yaakov's supply of

remedies. Clay bottles and jars crammed the cupboard. Yaakov leaned over Michael and waved the amulet he wore around his neck. It was half a finger long and faded blue.

“What is that?” Simon asked.

Yaakov looked up. “Do you not know Sekhmet, the goddess of healing?”

Simon shook his head, handing him the ground root. “Are you the only doctor?”

“I am the only one.”

“What happens if they get sick on the other ships?”

“They stay strong.”

“Then why did you come? Were you forced?” Simon's words came out harsher than he intended.

Yaakov added oil and herbs to the mixture. “We are all volunteers.” He leaned over his son and administered the medicine they'd prepared. “Life is changing fast. I grew up in a village in Gilead, caring for sheep and goats. I learned the value of different plants to treat sick animals. I was fifteen when the great famine came. For three years it did not rain, and many people died. My parents too.”

"Yaakov, that's awful."

He shrugged. "We went up to Jerusalem. We had nothing. I had to beg for work. I used the plants I knew to care for people instead of animals. Sometimes it worked, sometimes—" He shrugged again. "I saved a little silver. I wanted to build a strong house and find a tutor for my children. But now," he frowned, "silver is not worth much today." He pointed below decks. "You have to have gold."

Simon picked up one of the jars and shook. It rattled. "Are all these medicines?"

"No. Most are for the king."

"For King Solomon?"

"He collects plants, animals, rocks, gold, horses, everything." He scowled and dropped his voice, "Even wives."

"Why?"

Yaakov gave him a cold look. "Is he not the king?"

Simon found this Hebrew way of not answering, frustrating. "Why plants? Why you?"

The doctor frowned, turning his attention back to Michael. Simon felt angry for upsetting the man. He

liked the doctor and needed his friendship.

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After three days of flat calm, the men began to squabble.

Ahummm spat into the sea. "We must have wind." He went below and brought up a squawking chicken. He beheaded the bird and tossed it into the sea, murmuring prayers.

Abinadab scowled. "This is foolishness. We have plenty of time."

"Are you crazy?" Ahummm sneered. "Soon the monsoon will arrive and then we're all dead. Your precious gold will feed the fishes."

"The monsoon won't come. The Lord and the king commissioned us, and—"

"You know nothing." Ahummm hoiked and spat. "If we don't leave Serendib before the end of Ziv, one moon away, the natives will steal our gold and eat us all." He whipped a knife from his belt and hurled it onto the deck where it quivered between the big man's feet.

Abinadab gave him a long stare, bent for the knife, and flung it into the sea.

The wind returned with strength, and by dawn Michael had recovered. He touched Simon's arm, pointing to land on the port bow. "Chabah."

Its low hills were green with thick forest. Rounding a small headland, they anchored in front of a village of thatched huts. Men holding spears stood on the shore.

Simon glanced at Michael. "Will they attack us?"

"We came here before. They gave us food in exchange for knives and axes."

On the beach, a great feast of roast meats, yams, coconuts and fruit awaited the crew. The hosts passed around gourds of a strong, fermented liquor. Simon sipped cautiously. It tasted bitter, so he passed it on.

Two of the ship's mates drained several gourds. They shouted at each other before jumping to their feet. They pulled out knives and slashed wildly at each other. Simon looked around for someone to intervene. Everyone remained seated. Simon stood.

"Don't do it, Simon." Yaakov held up his hand. "It's an old grudge, and you'll get hurt."

One of the fighting mates collapsed, bleeding from his stomach.

"He can stay ashore," Ahumm said. "We fetch him in the morning."

Back on the ships, Simon couldn't sleep. He hated violence. He stayed on deck and stared at the stars. *Why didn't Ahumm do something? Or Abinadab?*

Ahumm crept from the cabin holding a small Y-shaped stick. He turned to the north and held it upright. He marked it with a knife before going below. *What was Ahumm sighting? Why the mark? And why the secrecy?*

The wounded mate died sometime during the night. Ahumm appointed a replacement and the fleet left at dawn.

Simon soon settled into the monotony of ship life. He joined the crew fishing and helped fettle the tackle, amazed at their skill. He even enjoyed their dice game. His shoulder had mended and his Hebrew had improved enough to understand a little Phoenician, although the crew laughed. "Captain, the earth is round," he told Ahumm one day.

Ahummm stared at Simon for a long minute. Then his eyes brightened, and his face creased in laughter. Soon he was holding his sides, shaking his head. "Where do you come from, stranger? If it was round," he gasped for breath, "we would all fall off." His mirth rose to new a level.

They were sitting below decks in the food storage room that doubled as Ahummm's quarters. When he'd quieted, Simon moved behind one of the amphora.

"Imagine this jar is the sea. When I am standing, the angle between me and the jar is high. When I am kneeling, it is lower. When I sit, you can only just see me."

Ahummm was still shaking his head.

"Captain, if you sit on the floor you will see."

The captain sat, feet splayed, enjoying the great joke.

Behind his jar, Simon raised his fist. "The North Star is always in the north."

Ahummm nodded.

Simon moved his hand around the jar. "When you are south, the star is near the horizon. When you are

north, it is high. If you lie down, the star hides as if you are traveling south. Because the earth is round. The star has not moved. You have moved around the earth."

Ahumm rolled on the floor with laughter, tears filling his eyes. He looked again at Simon's fist, held up his own, and burst out once more. Simon left him to his merriment.

The next day Ahumm called him back. He sat on the floor of his cabin, clasping a large gourd. He held it aloft. His forked stick protruded from its top. With his other hand, he moved another stick around the globe. Ahumm eyed it from beneath, squinted at the angles.

"By all the gods, you are right. White stranger, where did you learn this magic?" He bolted upright, black eyes gleaming. "This is a good secret. Yes, this is worthy of the Phoenicians." His laughter died. "But don't tell Abinadab. He'll kill—"

"Don't tell me what?" Abinadab stood in the doorway.

Despite his age, Ahumm leaped to his feet, one hand on another knife at his side.

Abinadab's face was a dirty green.

"This is a secret. Even so, you wouldn't understand." Ahumm spat.

Abinadab swallowed several times and raced up the ladder.

When he'd gone, Simon turned to the captain. "You are Phoenician then?"

Ahumm sat. "The Israelites call us Kenaani, but we're not. We drove them out two hundred years ago. Tyre, Sidon, Dor. These are ours now, and fine seaports we have made them." He pointed with his chin towards the stern. "We have been coming here even longer, trading with the Shang people, from far in the east."

"Captain, on the night before we left Chabah, I saw you taking a measure with a stick."

Ahumm's eyes narrowed. "What do you know about that?"

"Nothing. I just wondered what you were doing."

"It is a secret." Ahumm waved his arms. "How do you think we can sail the oceans? And keep the trade to ourselves for two hundred years?" He gave Simon a long, cold stare. Then grinning, he leaned forward

flashing his blackened teeth.

"One secret deserves another, but with this you become a Phoenician. If you tell a single soul, the curse of Baal will come upon you. Your insides will rot. Worms will come out. Your family—" Ahumm shook his head.

Simon's felt a stab of guilt at their mention. "Captain, please."

Ahumm ignored him. "The Phoenician star, may she be blessed, is always in the north. Faithful. So. Every place on earth has a level. I put the North Star in the Y of the guiding stick. Then the horizon is the level of that place. I mark it. When we return, if the star is above the mark, we sail south. If below, we sail north. When we reach the level we sail east or west, whichever way we are going, and we find it. We have many secrets like this, so we are rich." He glared. "Now you are a Phoenician, by oath." He pronounced what sounded like a string of curses, words beyond Simon's vocabulary.

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With fair winds, the ships reached Serendib before the new moon. *Sri Lanka*? Simon didn't care. After weeks at sea, he was overjoyed to step ashore.

The slower boat rolled in a day late, the crew exhausted from bailing the leaking ship. Ahumm waved his arms. "It will take days to fix. Time is wasting."

While they waited, Yaakov suggested searching the forests for new seeds for the king.

"Can I come too?" Simon had a rare opportunity to study the flora of three thousand years ago.

Joining Yaakov, Michael, Benjamin, and three local tribesmen, Simon tramped into the hills. Where the forest thickened, their guides hacked a path with bronze knives. With a jolt of fear, Simon was back in Malaysia and a previous life—Cam, Bristol, Kathy, IVF. Would he ever return? He longed to hold Ruby in his arms. Helplessness again overcame him. He closed his eyes and forced himself to focus on the present—if it was the present.

Yaakov was holding a branch with some seed pods. "There are new plants here. Michael, bring a jar."

A sudden crash erupted. Simon spun round. A tiger burst through the undergrowth, only meters away.

Simon yelled, "No-o-o!" Without thinking he ran towards the cat, planting himself between the party and the bounding animal. His unexpected move caused the tiger to freeze, its colors crisp in the dull light of the forest. It snarled and hunched its back.

Simon yelled again. The beast faltered and slewed to a standstill. Benjamin armed his bow and in rapid succession, fired three arrows into its heart. The party stared at the dead animal and each other, too stunned to speak.

Simon's heart slowed, and he walked to the tiger. It was huge. "Why did it stop?"

Benjamin nodded at the cat's head. A stone was lodged between the eyes.

Yaakov laughed, harsh relief in his voice. "I told you he was good."

The three locals produced knives and grinned. "Fine skin."

While they flayed the animal, Simon scanned the forest for its mate. The party scooped up the precious

seeds and hurried back to safety and the shore.

The little fleet sailed two days later, heavier than ever. Simon shook his head. They'd stuffed the holds with sandalwood and ivory, and cluttered the decks with baskets of birds and monkeys. The ships looked like an over-laden camel train.

Yaakov checked over the livestock. "Shimon, will you care for them?"

Before Simon could answer, Ahumm sacrificed another chicken. "By the gods we reach Israel in one moon. If not, we die."

Their course lay north, but the winds turned fickle. They struggled to make headway. After three days of oppressive heat, Simon joined the others and leaped into the tepid sea. He paddled over to Benjamin. "You saved our lives."

The young man looked embarrassed. "It was nothing. The Lord delivered us."

The next day Benjamin tripped and smashed a jar of precious drinking water. Furious, Abinadab ordered him beaten.

Two sailors stripped him naked and tied him to the

mast. The men grunted. The whips cracked. Benjamin's blood puddled the deck.

Bile rose in Simon's throat. He was at school again, paralyzed before an innocent victim. Inside the dream again, he was digging in his hooves. He leaned over the side of the ship and retched.

Yaakov untied the young man and dressed his wounds. The pain must have been unspeakable, but Benjamin never murmured. They washed him with salt water and Simon smeared him with betel paste.

Yaakov glanced at Simon. "You did a brave thing in the jungle."

"I don't understand why. I usually run away. Especially when . . ." Simon faltered. "It was Benjamin who saved us."

Benjamin lay comatose for two days, burning with fever. Simon bathed him with sea water. On the third day, Yaakov pressed his ear against the young man's chest and shook his head. Simon took his feet, Michael his shoulders, and they threw the body to the sharks. Yaakov was silent. Michael wept.

Simon couldn't believe it had happened. His initial

rage at Abinadab soon faded to a black despair. He was sick to death of this culture, where violence was normal and life was cheap. Would he be their next victim?

He was desperate to get home, but brooding only made it worse. Somehow he would find a way. Somehow he would get his life back and help his daughter. Oddly, he sensed something would happen and soon.

A sudden gust from the west smacked the sail against the mast and died. Then quiet, breathless heat. Silent and edgy, Ahumm glared at the horizon, shaking his head. He muttered to the cloudless sky. "We die."