

Chapter 4

The first squall flattened Simon to the deck. It ripped the sheets from the sail corners with a crack like a lightning strike. The huge canvas flapped like a giant flag.

Simon leaped up to secure the animals and birds in their baskets on deck. But the wind threw him against the gunwale. He clung on for his life. The baskets of livestock scattered into the sea like confetti.

Ahumm barked orders and the men ran to the halyards. By the time they lowered the yard, the wind was howling in the rigging and whipping the wave crests into foaming streaks. Simon helped the Phoenicians furl the sail to the yard and lash it down.

"Tie the rudders!" Ahumm shouted to the crew. "Yaakov, secure everything below." The sailors rushed to grab the rope. They strapped the rudders in place.

Simon shinned down the ladder. Below deck, jars full of water and grain broke free and smashed against

the hull. Roasted barley pooled in a slurry beneath their feet. Simon and the others grabbed rope and tied the water jars to each other, then to the ship's ribs. Next they secured the jars of grain.

"More rope!" Yaakov yelled at Simon.

"That's all there is."

"Then untie the hammocks."

Abinadab had braced himself in a corner, helpless with sickness and fear.

"I see you had ginger in your store." Simon shouted at Yaakov. "That might help him."

For the first time Simon saw real rage in the doctor's eyes. "Is he your friend now? Let the dead dog suffer."

It took an hour to strap everything behind a bird's nest of cloth bindings and ties. Simon climbed the ladder and shouted to Ahumm. "All secure below!"

The horizontal rain curdled the surface of the sea with gray. The swell increased, the vessel broaching to the waves. Simon was thrown against the rigging.

Ahumm tied himself to a rail beside the cabin and squinted into the spray. "If she goes about, we die. Get the sea anchor." The crew paused, uncertain in the

deafening storm. "THE SEA ANCHOR!" Ahumm screamed.

Again the heavy ship slewed sideways, the lee gunwale underwater, the mast at forty-five degrees. Simon clung on. He didn't believe they would survive. The sailors jumped into the hold. The boat righted itself slowly, stern to the wind. Then she twisted, rolling to another great swell. The wave plunged Simon underwater. His arms ached from gripping onto the rigging. As the ship righted, Simon emerged. He spat salt water and scrambled across the deck to the cabin.

The captain stood like a pillar, glistening in the spray. He shouted to the crew. "Hurry, if you want to live." This time the gunwale dipped further under the sea. Water poured through the cabin and into the ship's belly.

The Phoenicians wrestled a giant rope basket from the hold and fixed a hawser to the sternpost, flinging the sea anchor overboard. The hawser jerked tight, but it seemed to take forever for the ship to respond. At last the bow swung round, low in the water.

The next waves crashed over the stern swamping

Ahummm, who was still tied to the rail. "Bail out that sea," he shouted.

Simon struggled down the ladder and waded into the flood. The others grabbed the leather bailing buckets. Bracing themselves, the company passed buckets upwards and into the storm. Simon worked until his arms felt like lead. After an hour, the gold in the bilges emerged above the water.

Still the wind gained strength. Simon felt the ship climb the giant seas, hover on the crests, then plunge into the troughs with a sickening backwards lurch. For the first time he felt fear. He was certain the boat would break apart. "Ruby, I'm sorry!"

Most of the Israelites were seasick. With his stomach churning, Simon groveled to the doctor's cabinet to find ginger. He ate a chunk and forced himself to swallow. The nausea faded almost immediately. Surprised, he grabbed more for the others. He gave some to Abinadab, braced in his corner, his face the color of death. The big man glared at Simon, took the ginger and chewed.

Huge waves again crashed into the cabin, filling the

bilges once more. Simon and the chain went back to work, bailing. Abinadab emerged, still pale, and joined the gang passing buckets.

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For three days the storm roared. Ahumm remained tied to the rail, without sleeping or eating. Simon and the others ate and slept and bailed. On the third night, a massive wave swamped the ship, ripping the furled sail and yard from their lashings. They disappeared into the sea.

The wave flattened Ahumm, who was too weak to stand. He lay spread-eagled on the deck. The first mate untied him and took his place. The crew carried Ahumm below. Still he refused to sleep.

By the fourth day the wind had died and the swell eased. Simon collapsed exhausted on the deck. The ship was leaking. A rudder blade had snapped. A spare yard hadn't blown away, and the boat carried a second, smaller sail. After rest, Simon and crew fettled the ship as best they could.

Ahumm sent a man aloft.

He called down. "I see only one ship."

"Are they lost?" Simon asked Ahumm.

He shrugged. "They can be anywhere. We cannot go back."

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Days later, their battered boat struggled into a village port on the coast of Sheba. Two ships of the fleet lay at anchor. The intense heat hammered Simon and the shattered crew. The next day the fourth ship limped in with a broken mast. The fifth boat never appeared. Repairs took seven days.

Ahumm sweated up the hill to gaze out to sea. "Too much gold. I told him. Too much gold."

"Is it not easier from here?" Simon asked.

"Easier? This is the most dangerous water in the world. Bad currents, reefs everywhere, trapped between the mountains, pirates, and the wind always from the north. Often we give up and go by camel. Easy?" He shook his head. "We leave at dawn. You will see."

The breeze veered south-southeast and eased them

through the Gate of Tears and into the Red Sea. For two weeks they sailed north, the ranges on both sides drawing closer. Simon smiled at Ahumm with raised eyebrows.

Ahumm's black eyes glinted. "The gods favor us."

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In the morning, Simon and the others stood on the deck. The mountains of Midian to the east were a dusky mauve. A ribbon of land appeared directly ahead.

Michael pointed, grinning. "Israel."

Simon's eyes pooled with tears of relief. "Ruby, I'm coming home. Somehow."

The ship approached the flat valley dotted with scrubby bushes, date palms, and the adobe hovels of an old village. Behind the mud houses, new stone walls rose, seething with builders. Inland, the tops of many tents poked above the walls.

A small crowd had gathered on the foreshore where several men sat in the shade of a canvas awning. The crews anchored, lowered boats and rowed to the

waiting reception. The land reeled under Simon's feet. They had been at sea for three months.

The central figure rose and strode down the amber sand towards them. He wore a turban and white robe, dazzling in the fierce light. Silver streaked his long, black beard. Although older and heavier, Simon wondered, *Could this be the king in my dream?*

Abinadab greeted him first, bowing low. The man embraced him, smiling. "Ben-Abinadab, my son."

"Your servant, my lord king."

"You return safe. Is this not a day of great celebration? And Yaakov Ben-Kallai of Gilead, my friend, how I have missed your counsel. And is this Ahumm of Dor? You are a legend, I am told. It is my privilege to meet you."

King Solomon turned to Simon and smiled. "Shimon, how wonderful! You are alive. We had given up all hope. I didn't know you were a part of this expedition." Solomon embraced him as affectionately as his own son-in-law.

Simon reeled in confusion. How on earth did the king know him? They'd never met, except in the

dream. "Your majesty. I'm sorry, I am confused. I am not behaving as I should." Even his Hebrew sounded stilted. "I don't remember—"

"But Shimon. You were with us for so long, were you not? We rode together. We built together. We planted the Saleh valley. Did you not have a wife and child? We thought you were dead. Could you not have warned us of your rather sudden departures?" The king laughed.

Every remark deepened Simon's bewilderment. He shook his head. "Sir, I think there is a confusion with someone else."

Solomon raised his eyebrows and turned to Abinadab.

"Yes, my lord," Abinadab said. "He is the same. We found him injured in the Ophir cave. Where the gold is." He eyed Simon for several seconds. "He would have drowned, but I recognized him and rescued him. However, my father, it seems he has forgotten everything. He even had to relearn the language. It is still . . . imperfect."

King Solomon studied Simon, but Simon read only

compassion in his dark eyes.

"Well now, come into the shade and tell us of the journey. Did you bring the gold? Did we not send five ships?"

They walked past the old village and into the city of canvas. The king led Simon and the party into a large pavilion with embroidered silk linings, carpets, and cushions. The comfortable fragrances of spices and burned oil from the lamps greeted them.

Several men rose. One embraced Simon. "Shimon, such a surprise. We were sure you were dead."

"Yes, yes, " said a small, square-shouldered man with a white beard who stepped forward. "It has been eight years and eight months since you last disappeared."

Simon blinked, more confused than ever.

"It seems he has lost his memory of those times." Solomon turned to him. "So how did you come to be in Ophir?" Simon stood silent. After a few awkward moments the king said, "Well, well, let that be. Much has happened. But come, let us eat."

Slaves laid dishes on the floor in front of the men,

and for a while all were silent. The aroma of freshly-cooked food was overwhelming.

"Eat wisely," Yaakov said, "after so long at sea."

"It is our greatest joy to have finished the temple." Solomon wiped his mouth. "And it is truly magnificent. People of many nations admire it and worship the Lord. Now we are building the royal palace with courts and a place for the queen. Pharaoh will be pleased. Were you not there at our betrothal?"

Simon shook his head. "Your majesty—"

"Ah, but you do not remember. Well, your forest at Saleh is growing fast, but we need more water. I have arranged to bring an engineer from Egypt to build an aqueduct. My brother," he waved at his side, "is governor of Ezion-Geber here. He has reopened the copper mines at Timna, and, as you can see, we are building a city. It will prove most strategic. The world is about trade, Shimon." The king raised a goblet of wine. "From Hebron, the best." Solomon smiled. "It is five hundred years since our people came out of Egypt, so we are erecting monuments on the Red Sea in memory of our forefathers who crossed there, and in

honor of Moses who led them. God has truly blessed us with prosperity and peace on every side."

The king's speech meant nothing to Simon. How could I know him? Did I return to history with no recollection of it?

Simon was given a tent to himself. He lay awake with his mind reeling. He recognized no one except the king, and that was only from his dream. Abinadab had lied, but why? Building? Planting? A wife and child? Simon shivered. Perhaps he would wake tomorrow in the ward of a mental institution somewhere in Bristol. He ached for Ruby and Kathy.

Someone moved outside the tent. Its flap eased back. A human form filled the entrance.

Simon's heart thumped. "Who is it? What do you want?"

"You betrayed me," Ahumm whispered.

"Ahumm? What do you mean?"

"You told Abinadab our secret. You are not a Phoenician. You are a traitor. Now you must die."

"That's not true. I never—"

Ahumm lunged at Simon hitting him hard in the

stomach.

Simon doubled up with the pain. His hands felt wet. He had been stabbed. He tried to call out for help, but his voice withered into a shallow gurgle.