

He is one of the greatest patriarchs of biblical times. Born in the ancient Babylonian city of Ur, he became known as the Father of Faith. His name is Abraham.

Having come to rest in the land promised to him by God, he lives in peace with his family, his people, and his faith. But when this peace is shattered by news of approaching danger, Abraham finds himself amidst love and war, loyalty and traitors, the supernatural and the carnal. It is a test that will try his faith to the limit.

*Two Tests and a Wish* takes you deep into the minds and hearts of Abraham and his lovely wife, Sarah; you will feel their pain, share their joy, and partake in their awe at the workings of a mysterious God.



# ABRAHAM

## *Two Tests & a Wish*



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*Two Tests & a Wish*

As Told by Abraham

BY JULIE VASQUEZ

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*Portions of this story are based on the text found in Genesis chapter 22.*

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## **A STRANGER ARRIVES**

My story begins many long years ago in a land, dusty and dry, where the wind whipped through the shrubs and the dust twirled and danced beneath our feet. It was the land of Beer-sheba, the dwelling place of the Philistines, where we found refuge and a safe haven for a great while.

My company of people and the flocks and herds which they tended had settled comfortably in this land. We were surrounded by open expanses, often parched and barren. Small thickets and bushes dotted the plains about us. Our livelihood depended on the precious commodity of water which we drew from the famed seven wells of this region.

This is the territory in which our beloved son, Isaac, made his way into the world. Sarah and I, so perfectly joined that our hearts beat in unison, began our lives afresh when this little bundle of love emerged in the tent of the midwives. What a glorious day that was! Though thick, gray clouds loomed overhead, and the gales had lashed and churned up a dusty cloud, the calmness I felt in my heart made me oblivious to the elements about me.

I turned away from the midwives' tent to allow them to perform their duties. My face radiated a

glow which even I could feel emanating from me. *Yes! We have had a son, just as our God has promised us!*

I climbed atop a nearby boulder which juttied out from the dry earth and said aloud into the wind, “This day has the Lord, our wonderful and mighty God, fulfilled His promise unto my household! This day is the book of the Lord complete.”

In truth, the book of the Lord, as little as I knew about it then, was far from complete. Yet the book of the Lord in my heart and life seemed very complete at that moment. The heir to my name and all that I owned and possessed by faith had at long last arrived. Now I felt as if the book of my life had been closed. Little Isaac’s book had just opened, and the pages of its parchment which lay open in my mind appeared as fresh and crisp as his own tender smile.

At that moment, as my joyous words left my lips, a howling chill swept through the air. It quieted suddenly, and I felt my cloak, which had been wildly swaying about in the wind, drop to my sides. I looked up to the sky and about the camp. All was still. Then sounds of laughter and celebration began to drift through the air. I knew the midwives had now finished their work, and they would soon be bringing me my son to bless and to name.

I turned to leave, but felt the tug of God at my heart. There were no words, yet I knew I had said something that God had not found true. The feeling was imparted to my heart clearly:

*Your book is not yet closed.* I had endured a long test of faith in waiting for the promise of my son to come, yes, but my final test was still to come.

“Your will, my God, will I do. I am Your servant and I stand to do Your bidding, both now and in whatever may come in the future,” I affirmed in a whisper, with my glance cast toward the heavens.

I then turned to face the happy throng of women and children approaching, bringing in the midst our little treasure which had been so long in the making. His name was Isaac.

Ishmael, who was now a young lad, and the firstborn of my own flesh, had brought me great joy. Yet the Lord had spoken to my heart that he would not be the one to carry on my generations, though he would himself become the father of many. God had promised Sarah and me a child of our own. In time Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, departed from our camp.



Years passed, and each day was as full as the next. There were chores to be done, children to be cared for, herds to be tended, food to be prepared, provisions to be acquired, and bartering and trading to be done in the towns and markets nearest to us.

The young ones grew, and the elders taught them from their storehouses of skill and wisdom. In these days, I generally kept to the tent of counsel, as it was termed. Our company was large, numbering several hundred, and with the many families and relatives living together in such close proximity, there was an incessant stream of matters waiting to be heard. This took up much of my time, as did seeing that all my household and people were abiding faithful and true to the ways of our God.

In the early evenings, as the sun sank low into the horizon, a young man would light a fire and those who wished to would gather round. Games were organized for the young ones, and the elders told stories. The womenfolk talked among themselves and prepared for the evening meal, while the fathers and eldest sons kept guard and watched the young children who ran about with

glee, as they chased their own shadows, cast by the flickering flames.



One such evening, word came of a group of men on horseback approaching the outskirts of our camp. Immediately I summoned a group of valiant men, who armed themselves and went to meet the strangers. I stayed behind with the young ones, holding my dear Isaac, who had just turned six. The other little children clung to me or to their mothers, some with worried looks on their chubby faces.

“It’s going to be all right, children,” I encouraged them. “Come now, remember the stories you’ve heard of the marvelous and mighty works the Lord our God has done to protect us and to preserve us, even until now. Surely no harm shall come to us. Come, all hold hands and sing a song for me!”

Then I glanced up, and saw Eliezer of Damascus, one of our elders, and chief steward of my household, motioning with his hand for me to join them. I rose from my seat and instructed the womenfolk to bring the children to the tents.

As I came closer to the gathering of men, I looked into the eyes of these strangers, asking God for discernment and wisdom. A peace entered into my soul, and before I had heard a word from their lips, I knew that they were not to be feared.

All were silent as I approached, and then Eliezer confirmed what God had already shown me.

“They are strangers and unknown to us, but they have come in peace, and are not to be feared. They live in the crags of the rocky hillsides a ways off, and they have observed us and our presence here for some time. They are a peaceful tribe, small in number.”

“And what brings them out of their lodgings on this night to pay us a visit? There must be a happening in the air, for I see a look of anxiety on

their captain’s face, do I not?” I questioned.

“This is the troublesome part, Abraham. And I pray to God that He will help us find an answer and place of refuge; for these kind people have sought one for many a day, yet they have found none.”

“They have told us of another tribe that comes from the south, from the land of Egypt,” Kerah explained. “It is the tribe of their brother, and he comes even now to destroy these peaceful people.”

Then the captain of their host raised his hand and spoke with a strong accent in our tongue. “My brother—my evil brother—will come with a vengeance to destroy us, and in his fury he will also rid this land of all who dwell upon it. We come to warn your tribe and people, for if he comes upon you, there is little hope of escaping his wrath.”

“What would your brother have against my people?” I offered. “What harm have we done him? Surely in the multitude of words and gifts he can be persuaded to depart from our lands in peace.”

“No, good man. I see the charity in your eyes, but this is no way to deal with my brother. You must understand, we used to be one tribe, united together. When our father died, the seat of the tribe was left in my hands. But my brother’s lust for war and power split us in two. I chose to flee with those who wanted a peaceful life, and he vowed to trouble us all the days of our lives.

“We came to this land to escape his torment in our own country, and we have been received here well. We have lived our lives in hiding, but in peace and safety. It is for this very reason that we choose to find lodging in the sides of mountains and hills, and to remain strangers to all—that we might preserve our very lives.

“But alas, word has reached my ears that my brother has discovered our peaceful abode, and is



even now coming with a large band of men to exact his anger upon me and my people.”

I interrupted. “Perhaps I am dull of understanding, but if I may ask again why your brother would destroy *my* people? We can discuss among our council how we can help your tribe to find safety, but what motivation would he have in tormenting us?”

“My vile brother, Sabit, has little regard for peace, and those that dwell peaceably. This is why he searches us out. And I fear that once he is upon this land, he will stop at nothing to quench his thirst for war and blood. The horde he brings with him will no doubt relish the chance to loot, kill and burn wherever they can, not regarding the lives of any, even women and children. This is why we have come to warn you.”

Then followed a deathly silence. I closed my eyes and thought of all the women and children in our camp. *How could we move hundreds of people in such a short time?*

“How much time do we have, friend?” I asked, looking up at the dark skinned man whose concerned eyes peered out of the cloth which was wrapped around his head.

“Ahran is the name, good sir. And I am honored to meet you, Abraham. Word of your tribe—and of your God—surround you on every side. I have heard that you are called the ‘father of the faithful.’ If half of the stories which I have heard about your God and the works He has performed for you are true, then this day I have met a truly blessed man.

“As for time, there is none, or none that avails much. We fear that his band could be but a number of days’ journey off. We are not certain, but surely, it will not be long before Sabit’s force will descend upon us.

“I entrust your people to the hands of your God, Abraham. Should you need to call upon me, Eliezer knows where to find our tribe. Until then, I hope you will find a place of safety like the one I too will seek for my people.” With those closing words and a nod of solemn respect, Ahran and his men galloped off into the night.

I leaned hard against my staff, and Eliezer and the several other elders who had gathered about looked down at the ground. Then one man spoke. It was Jeriah, a young man who had been newly appointed to the council and had not much wisdom nor length of days. But he spoke convincingly.

“Abraham, we must call a council session at once. Let no man eat nor drink. We will take the night—even till the sun rises—to discuss these matters, till we find some path of deliverance. I will make my tent ready for this purpose.”

“Jeriah, Jeriah. Hold your words for a space. Do you not see that a time like this calls for communion with God, not man? We will in near time, no doubt, discuss and counsel and carefully examine our options, yet first we must bring the matter to God to hear His voice to see what purpose He would accomplish through this. I will go to pray alone for the night, and all you should do likewise.”

“Come now, Abraham!” Jeriah retorted boldly, “There is no time to be lost. I know that I am young and lively, and that there be many tales of heroism and valor that hang off your aged cloak, but this is not a matter to be taken lightly! It is a night which I will not spend speaking to the spirits in the heavens. I, as an elected member of the council, will responsibly serve the people who have put their confidence in me. I will take decisive action. I will inform the people of these occurrences at once.”

This was not right, and I felt Eliezer's gaze shift toward me. I could almost hear his thoughts, *What will Abraham say to this young one who could cause such a stirring and tumult throughout the camp?*

Indeed it seemed a grave situation, but not a man among us knew what should be done. As the spirit moved within me, I turned to face Jeriah, and said with an authority given to me only by God, "Jeriah, if you so much as utter a word to one soul in the camp, God will seal your lips with His Own hand. You will spend the night in prayer, as we all will. I will ask God for guidance, and in the morning I will tell you what God has shown me. Once God has given us His instruction, we will then discuss and counsel together. Not before."

My eyes burned hot and fiery as I pulled my stare away from Jeriah, and turned to look at Eliezer. He had been by my side for many years, and his wisdom in both years and experience was manifest by the peace and quiet trust his face showed. I always counted on his support.

"Very well, men, let us commence the night in prayer and fasting," Eliezer repeated, and the gathering of elders dispersed into the camp.

Eliezer walked with me back toward the tent of prayer or worship, which stood close to the center of the camp. We both stepped inside for a moment. A few lamps were positioned about the small room, casting a dim glow on the drapes which made up the walls of the tent. A few worn cushions strewn before the prayer table, and the enclosure which the four walls of drapes created was often home to my prayers. I knelt down for a moment. Eliezer stepped out of the room but soon returned. He placed a warm cloak around my shoulders which he had brought from my nearby tent.

"I have told Sarah you will be spending the night in prayer, Abraham. Isaac sleeps soundly. If you

should need me, please call." Eliezer then withdrew himself from the room.

I fell to my face in earnest prayer, and spent the hours that followed beseeching God for His mercy and guidance. Once I had poured out my soul, I sat still and waited for His voice. I knew He would speak, as He always did when I called upon Him. And within moments, the Voice I knew well sounded within my heart, and our conversing began.

*Abraham! Fear not for your safekeeping, for am I not the God of all flesh?*

"Verily You are, my Lord. You have always kept us and have promised to keep us yet. But You have heard the words of Ahran, the man who has fled from his own Egyptian people to seek refuge in the lands of Beer-sheba, and how his evil brother comes to torment him and those who dwell on the lands around him. What am I to do to protect so great a company as the hundreds who depend upon me?"

*This is indeed a grave and terrible band that seeks to afflict its own people, and those who have lived peaceably with them. I will protect and keep your people, yet the edge of the sword shall be wielded close to your camp. You must strengthen those about you. Gather the elders together and make certain that no man falters at My Word. I say to you that there is one among your counselors who is not prepared for this day of reckoning.*

"My Lord, do You speak of Jeriah?" I paused and shook my head. "He but speaks as a young man, lively and full of pride. He has not the knowledge of years, nor wisdom. Surely his heart is toward You, yet his mind entertains confusion and youthful fervor."

*I do speak of this one called Jeriah. It is true that youthful fervor stirs his heart and forms his forceful*



*words, but there is more brewing in his heart than a lack of wisdom. His faith has left My side and he seeks to carve his own path, whereby he may take for himself the glory and credit which My Name has brought upon you.*

*He sees this trouble in the distance as a boulder upon which to stand and proclaim to all the people his own righteousness and integrity. He does not see that the boulder is weak and tottering, and that upon his ascent, he shall find the boulder dislodged from its foundations, and set to roll upon his own self.*

*Take care, Abraham, that this one not be left to his own devices. For if he be left to his own ruin, he shall persuade the innocents to stray likewise into the path of their own destruction.*

“Yes, my Lord. And how shall I protect my people? To where shall we go? To whom shall we turn for shelter from this onslaught which comes upon us from the South?”

*You shall not move your foot from the land which I have placed you upon. My strong arm protects you round about and you have nothing to fear. There is a work to be done here, My servant.*

I remained silent for a moment. The word of the Lord had been spoken, and His voice was sure and definite. We were not to remove our foot from this land, despite the fast approaching threats of danger that loomed from across the desert.

For one who had experienced so much along the side of the Almighty, I sorely lacked faith in His Words at that moment. We had enjoyed years of peace which God had so generously bestowed upon us, and I had been glad for the fair lack of danger and troubles which had beset us in recent times.

Before the birth of Isaac, I had less fear as to what lay beyond my sight. Now that our promised son had been born to us, I had grown more

concerned for the safety of my family. I had been glad that our paths had not crossed with harm for some time. Yet now as I knelt before the Lord in prayer, I felt as if I were perched on the highest mountain peak, poised to throw myself, my people, and my beloved Sarah and Isaac off into the abyss of uncertainty and danger. I felt resistant and troubled.

*Abraham!* the Voice sounded again in my heart, *Why is your heart troubled? Have you not walked with Me these many years, and have I allowed evil and harm to come to you? Nay, I have preserved your household. Where is your faith? Have you forgotten all the mighty works which I have performed on your behalf?*

“No, my Lord. You have stood by us through every year, and have kept us through every trouble. Yet I cannot, with peace in my heart, leave Sarah and Isaac here in the camp when I know that grave danger is coming. This is my son!—My promised heir and seed! Isaac is the son promised to me by Your very lips, and I cannot put his life, and thereby the life of my future generations, in danger.

“I will move them a ways from the camp. I will stay if I must to encourage the people’s faith, but You cannot ask of me to keep Sarah and Isaac here. He is Your promised seed, and I must guard his life carefully, as a shepherd would tend to a newborn lamb. This I must do.”

I heaved a sigh of relief upon getting those feelings out of my heart, and raised myself to a sitting position. Just then the lamps seemed to brighten, and, after a moment, all grew uncannily dim. No wind had blown through the room; the evening air had been unusually calm and still. The Presence with me in the room grew solemn, and I felt a tremble rush through my body. Though there

were no audible words to be heard, the Voice grew stern and commanding.

*Abraham! Have I not called you out from among your people to stand as a leader to these you are called to serve? Wherefore do you shrink from your duties? How is it that you have allowed fear to enter into your heart? I am the Lord your God, and there can be no other gods before Me.* Then the Voice softened, and continued.

*I have given unto you this child of promise, Isaac, as a token of My love unto you and your wife, Sarah. I have given him unto you that I may continue the line of your seed for eternal generations. I have given you My word of promise that your children's children shall be numbered as the stars in the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore.*

*When I spoke these things, you faltered at My promise, and your wife laughed at My Words. Yet did I withhold My hand of blessing? Did I keep from you the fruit of her womb which I had pledged to give? Nay, I gave, though you were faithless. Now, would you hold so tightly to that which I gave you so freely? Would you choose to not obey My commandments unto you because of fear that I am not able to preserve and keep that which you love so dearly—that which I have given you?*

*I have given you My commandment. Your foot is to remain on this land, and your household with you. I have a work for the three of you to perform.*

*For your lack of faith, I say to you, that even if I would cause Isaac to be slain, My promises unto you would still be fulfilled and brought to pass. Your seed would still inherit the Earth and your generations would be innumerable.*

I quivered at these words and clutched my hands together. “Yes, my Lord,” I mumbled, but my heart and spirit were heated with anger. I closed my eyes tightly, attempting to keep my inner murmurings from pouring out in an angry torrent.

How could God speak of removing from my side my beloved son? He made it sound as if it were such a light thing in His eyes. Could He feel and understand the pain and torment it would cause Sarah and me should anything happen to our only child? His only word of consolation was that nonetheless, His promises would still be fulfilled. That brought no rest to my soul, for it did not matter in what other way the Lord would fulfill His promises; He had given us Isaac, and I was intent on keeping him. I would not disobey the Word of the Lord, yet my heart grieved and was heavy.

I opened my eyes to see the first rays of the day's sunlight peering over the plains as they penetrated through the tent's covering. My thoughts moved quickly from Isaac to the answers I would have to give the elders and the council within a few short hours. While I had spent more than an hour bemoaning the fate of my own family, there were hundreds of others who would also be depending on the word I had received from the Lord. I knew I must seek for the Lord's promises for their sake, and put aside my own concerns and troubles.

“Lord God,” I prayed, “I beseech You to give me a promise of Your protection and safekeeping, that I may speak Your Words to all the people in faith. Anoint me with Your Spirit, and give me the tongue of the learned, that all may rest in peace under the shadow of Your wings.”

In His mercy, the Lord gave me the anointing of wisdom, and I received a promise and pledge of safekeeping from the Lord to pass on to the people.

## **DIVIDING OF THE CAMP**

The easy part was the hours spent in prayer; gathering our entire congregation was no small feat. The Almighty was ever clear, His commandments always perfect. But alas, the confusion that comes with the multitudes!

Our council of elders had journeyed a ways off from the camp, and sat in the morning sunlight, to discuss matters where our voices could not be overheard, and where our thoughts could not be interrupted by the clanging of the morning meal pots, or children anxious to scamper about the camp and help with the herds.

It seemed as if the night had subdued Jeriah's wild spirit, and he sat calmly, not wishing to be put in his place before all a second time. The elders sat quietly, waiting for me to speak. I waited still, with my eyes closed, tarrying for a word from the Lord, as I silently asked God for guidance and assistance. Then the assurance came, and I opened my eyes, looking round the large circle of elders who sat expectantly about me.

"Your prayers and fasting have availed much, my good friends. God has spoken, and He has revealed to us a portion of His plan. There is much

yet that we do not know, but of one thing we can be certain: God's blessing and protection is about our camp. He has promised that His Own strong arm encamps us about on every side."

I recounted to them in fair detail the message of promise which I had received from God the evening before. The Lord had instructed me to tell them first of His promises, that they might find faith and hope in His Words. Then would come the word that we were to stay and not break camp. We were to hold our ground, trusting in God.

After I had spoken of all these things, there were mutterings throughout the circle. Before anyone could speak or raise their voice, Eliezer raised his hands and spoke. "Brothers, we all have many concerns for the people in our care. I beg of you, before you give way to the thoughts that seek to trouble your minds and hearts, meditate on the promise which God has given us through Abraham.

"Our God is a living God. He moves His hand to protect His Own, and we are His Own. Through the years that we have followed Him through the words which He has spoken to Abraham, have we seen harm? Nay. We have seen much danger, but we have not been harmed, for the hand of our God is mighty. There is none that can withstand His power, which lies about our camp on every side.

"I will stand with Abraham, his family and his herds. I will be here to witness the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to us. Who will stand with us? Do not the mighty men stand by their God, Who has proven Himself mighty and just?"

"Amen!" called out Kerah, and a chorus of assents were given. It was decided by all that we would summon the camp together when the sun stood high in the sky, and make all known to the people.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jeriah shrug his shoulders and cast his gaze toward the ground. He had not said a word, and it was apparent that his silence was not agreeable. As soon as the assembly had broken, Jeriah rose to his feet and headed toward the camp in haste.

"Men," I said with a pause to the elders standing closest to me, "it saddens me to say this, but I fear many of you have noticed that something troubles our young fellow counselor. God has spoken to me about Jeriah. There is a trouble lying deep in his heart that will not do our camp good. Be aware of this, my friends, that we may keep those entrusted into our care pure and faithful. Pray that God has mercy on his soul, and that Jeriah will hear the Lord's voice and obey it."

"Amen." This time the responses came in a solemn tone. The elders knew well what kind of trouble an internal striving could bring, and their disappointment was reflected on their faces.

"Come now," I said. "The gathering of our people together draws nearer by the moment. There is much work to be done. Let us return to camp with trust in our hearts."

Each of the elders returned to camp, and headed towards the section of tents for which they were responsible. Messenger boys were dispatched to bring the word to those off with the herds that a gathering was to take place at noonday.

I sat in my tent with Sarah. After a few moments of silence, I explained to her the events of the previous evening, and looked carefully to see her response. I could see that within her she was troubled, for she had the same concerns as I. Yet in good faith she held her peace from uttering them, knowing that enough weighed on my heart and mind at that moment because of the explanation and message from the Lord that

I would have to give to the people shortly.

I knew Sarah so very well. She knew that I could see the fears and worries which attempted to hide behind her slight smile, yet she put her arms around me and, looking deep into my eyes, said, "My faith lies in our God. The foundation we have built our lives upon is as steadfast as a rock which cannot break. God will care for us."

"Thank you, my darling," I said, holding her tightly. Such a support and strong staff to lean upon my Sarah had been to me many a time throughout the years in which we had shared each other's lives.

Just then the assembly horn was sounded, and we both rose to our feet. "May God guide me and give faith unto the people," I whispered, as I walked out of our tent, and into the almost blinding sunlight.

Once all the people had been quieted, most being seated, I began to speak to them. I first recounted some of the many mighty miracles which our God had done for us over the years. I reminded the children of the stories which they had heard their fathers tell them of how the Lord had provided food for us when we were in danger of perishing for the lack of it. I reminded the men of how our God had protected us in the face of great danger, and had kept our host from the armies of our enemies more than once. This I hoped would bolster the faith of the people, to prepare them for the news of the arriving trouble.

Then I explained about the strangers who had come in the night, bearing with them a warning. I told them of the night in prayer that we, the elders, had spent, and of the promises which the Lord had given to our camp. I described these in great detail.

I could hear the sighs of relief and see many faces in the audience instantly set at ease when

I uttered the words of the Lord, for there were many in our company who possessed strong faith and confidence in our God. However, there were others who had not seen the hand of the Lord at work, and there were those whose faith had grown weak and weary.

By the time I had left off of my speaking, the crowd was generally quieted, although a slight air of anxiety ran through the camp, and naturally so. There was a sense of desperation in each parent's heart for the safety of their family, and we could only wait and see what the morrow and the days to follow would bring.

As the Lord had made known to me in the night, trouble was indeed brewing behind the walls of a certain tent. A short while after the general assembly, a very different message than that which I had spoken to the camp that day was being given in secret to a group of young men whom Jeriah had gathered together.



The next morning, a group of young men approached the tent of counsel, requesting an audience with me, saying that it was of an urgent nature. I granted their request, and one of them, by the name of Merin, began to speak.

"Father Abraham, our thoughts have been sorely afflicted in the night, as we have heard from the mouth of one terrible things which have been concealed from our congregation."

Jeriah flashed in my thoughts. He was not among this group standing before me, but was without a doubt, the perpetrator of this confusion. I did not need to hear a word more from them, as the words which the Lord had spoken to me the night before became clearer in my heart and mind now that these things were coming to pass before my very eyes.

“Young men, cease now.” I interrupted. “Where is the man who has told you of these things? How can you know that he has not told you these things falsely?”

Merin hesitated for a moment, and looked over his left shoulder, where another young man stood, prodding him. “Go on, Merin. Tell Abraham of our disbelief, and how we will not fall for the trap of deceit which he has spoken today, hoping that all the people, like dumb sheep, will be led so easily out to pasture, where an unknown evil lurks about, ready to destroy them.”

“Where is Jeriah?” I questioned, my voice booming out in clear disapproval. But no answer was offered by the group in front of me.

I waited a moment to calm my spirit, and replied, “Young men, from your youth you have been raised under the knowledge and hand of God. You, of your own free choice, have partaken of our belief and trust in God...”

“And we do believe in God!” Nahal said hotly, not allowing me to finish my sentence. “This is not a matter of questioning the Words of God, but the words of one who has set himself up to be the mouthpiece of God. We cannot be sure that the promising speech which you have uttered can be trusted, even to the end that our lives would depend on it.”

Eliezer stepped a pace forward from his usual standing place behind my chair, and with a note of authority in his voice that he did not often employ, said, “I would say to you, Nahal, and to all in your company: You would do well to heed more carefully the manner of respect. It is clear that you wish to state your piece, and you have been granted the time and ear of Abraham, father of this camp. In this you have been privileged. Take care not to overstep the good nature of the Lord’s

anointed, lest you find yourself tangling about with the words of the Almighty.”

I sat still, waiting for an answer from God as to how to best answer these accusations. But before the answer came, Merin spoke again, with apparent courage and force gathered within himself from Nahal’s words.

“See, brothers? This very exchange which we are beholding is what Jeriah warned us of. Is this not the attempted squelching of our voices and our protests? It is clear from Abraham’s silence that he has no good reason to prove to us, therefore he has resorted to tossing about his authority in communing with God before us, thinking that we will give heed and be kept silent. But we will not! We have now uncovered the secret means to your power, and we will not stay for the bloodbath soon to come!”

“Merin, Merin! All of you, hear my words!” I declared. “Your years and knowledge are as a young sapling which blows about and is bent over by every breeze which passes. You speak so confidently of that which you know not, unto these tall oaks of mighty strength who have seen much and who possess branches of insight and buds of wisdom which you have not yet begun to shoot forth. Hold your droppings of discontentment until you have leaves to show forth!

“The wind blows about you wildly, and you speak of the trouble to come. You proclaim that all your leaves will be tossed and torn off from your branches, and heaped in piles together on the ground. You know not what you speak of. Your words are as bare as the tender branches of your sapling which have borne no leaves as yet.

“If you would be convinced of the truth and of the Words of the Lord, give ear to the message He has given me. But if you would not heed even the



voice of the Lord Himself, then turn your face away now. For it would be better for you to have not heard the Word of the Lord, than to have heard it and to have not hearkened unto it.”

I paused a moment, allowing a space for those who wished to depart to do so, yet it seemed that their souls were captured under the awe of the moment, and no man moved.

“Very well,” I continued, “I will tell you the full happenings of that evening, and will hold nothing back. I have spoken before the people in truth as I have spoken before the Lord. I have not held back nor deceived, though there be portions which, for the sake of the spirit and hope of the camp, I have chosen to bear upon my own self.

“Judge ye now, as I speak unto you of these things, whether or not I have done wrongly or falsely in the words which I have said before the people.”

And so I told them all the words that I had heard from God. Should they have believed, there was little that I spoke which I had not said unto the assembled congregation. All that was needful and that God had instructed me to say, I had said, in honesty and in truth.

When I had finished, I charged them all, saying, “Divide now, every one of you, to this side of the tent or that. There can be no more wanderings between the camp of belief and the camp of disbelief. The trial of our faith is soon to come upon our camp, and only those with confidence shall be found remaining. It would be better to hasten yourself to the furthest mountain should you choose the path of disbelief, and of mocking the words of the Lord.”

A slight stirring followed, and the gathering of the young men divided ways. A number had chosen for the right, yet more stood on the side

of the doubting. Eliezer’s face bore a sober countenance; once the parting had taken place, he stepped forward to show the young men out, in the normal fashion.

As he walked past my side, something constrained me to stop him. As I did, the words came flooding into my mind, and I gave utterance of them as quickly as I could, as I tried to keep up with the Voice that spoke them.

“Know this, that you are now turning from the path of light into darkness. As you close your minds and turn from accepting the truth, you stray from the path that leads to the understanding of truth. If you do not reconcile your hearts with God, then you shall find the light which you once were surrounded by growing dimmer and dimmer, until at last, you find yourself surrounded in deep blackness.

“And tell Jeriah that I sorrow for him, for he has turned away from a goodly place of service into a barren desert in which his own bones shall fall. There is redemption for those who would be saved, but the time for repentance is now.” At that, the Voice grew silent in my ears.

I added, “Tell Jeriah that I bid him and his company part from the camp in good haste. The Lord has spoken to my heart that I shall not see his face again. He makes plans to leave our dwelling, in the hopes that his own might shall save him ... but he sees not the wrath that shall come upon him.”

With those words, the now smaller band of young men turned quickly out of the tent, and headed off through the camp in unsettled spirits.

Eliezer drew near my side, as did the few other elders who had witnessed this exchange, and the words which the Lord had spoken, making known Jeriah’s plans.

“Abraham, what would the Lord have us to do? Should an effort be made to calm these ones? Are they to leave our camp and go off on their own? Surely they will talk of their deceit and lies to others about them, and give cunning persuasion to those who will hear and be beguiled also. How can we shield our people from their tongues?” Eliezer asked.

My heart was heavy and I felt at a loss for words. “I know not,” was all I could say. Then in the stillness, the Voice spoke again to my heart.

*Abraham! Did you not give My Words unto the people this very morning, only a few hours ago? Have I not spoken My piece, and given unto your camp a promise of My protection? The Evil One has been given charge over these who have sought after his trickery, and they will seek to tempt those who are weak, and who care not for the love of the truth.*

*Fear not for their twisted speaking, for though some shall go with them to the wayside, I have called for this dividing of My people, that I may know who will stand by My side to see the deliverance and victory which I will give you shortly.*

*Stand back from meddling within these affairs, for I would that My solid promise give battle against their doubts and confusion. Those that will heed the deceit of their words above the Words of My mouth, given through the lips of My humble servant, shall reap the reward of their unbelief. I purge and purify and make your camp white. Fear not, Abraham, fear not.*

I passed on the Lord’s Words to Eliezer and the other elders about me, and with that comfort and peace stabilizing our hearts, we set about our day’s business.



Meanwhile, in the tent of the dissenters, fires of discontentment raged. Jeriah was infuriated by the outcome of the meeting which his recruits had held

with myself. He became angrier still when they told him of my parting words, revealing his plan to leave the camp, which he had told no one of.

“Jeriah, the Lord told Abraham that he would never see your face again,” one of the young men added solemnly.

“Nimshai, you sound as if you actually believe that the Lord told him that! How could you? It’s all made up! It’s a mockery of God. Abraham only uses these supposed ‘Words of God’ to justify the strange ideas that beset his old mind, and foist them upon the rest of us. I *will* see Abraham’s face again, but only to gloat over it in triumph!—And whether he will be dead or alive, I know not! His fate we shall leave in the hands of God.

“We have made our plans, and we will abide by them. Out with you all now, among the people! Gather the ones who will join us. See to it that you make yourselves appear friendly to the elders, that you do no harm, for the time of our departure draws nigh.”

Shortly thereafter, the young dissenters scattered throughout the camp, mingling with the herdsmen, the guards and the gatherings of men. Never were two of them seen together, to avoid giving the appearance of strength. Yet unto those who were discerning, the spirit of cunning words could be felt racing through the air, while many decided whether to trust God, or to follow the knowledge and persuasion of Jeriah’s youthful reasoning.



Evening seemed to fall earlier than usual, and by the time supper had ended, a messenger approached the campfire where I sat, watching Isaac and the other young children playing about. The news I had been waiting for was delivered: Jeriah and his company had departed from our

midst. Their tents lay on the outside of the camp, and while all had gathered for supper in the middle of our large dwelling, their quiet exodus had not been noticed.

“And what of the guard which stood at that corner of the camp?” I inquired.

“Naboth has been taken with them—of his own accord,” the messenger sadly answered, “as have others in the camp who you do not see before you this night.”

I looked around the gathering. Some families had begun to return to their tents already, to put the babes to sleep, and the men to see to their evening chores. The young men were already set out to gather water for the rising washes. It was hard to tell how many had chosen to side with Jeriah.

“Thank you for bringing me this news. If you should learn of how great a company travels with Jeriah, bring me word at once.”

“I will, Father Abraham. It should not be long before we have the numbers. We will count the camp tonight.”



By sunrise the next morn, all the camp had heard of Jeriah’s departure. The elders gathered together the people in small groups, and explained to the men and women what had taken place.

We had now learned that their company numbered over fifty persons. Most were young men, but some families and children had also traveled with them. We supposed that they had ventured into a nearby valley a day’s journey off, where our camp had held pleasant contact with the local dwellers.

Jeriah had often been into the bordering towns and villages on visits of trade and consultation. He would certainly be able to find a temporary camp

for his following, and he had, no doubt, meditated on all these things before setting off. From there, no one could say where they would go, or what they would set out to do.

Jeriah must have reasoned within himself that a portion of our flocks belonged to his company, and while some of the families who joined his band had small herds of their own, which they naturally took with them, the young men who had not gathered herds yet separated a portion of our sheep and goats to take as their own. Some of the elders and herdsmen were infuriated and sought to reclaim that which was rightfully ours, but the Lord instructed me to allow them to depart from our midst in peace, for their time of trouble was soon coming, and would be harsh. They had no need of our afflicting punishment upon them also.

Thankfully, within the day, God relieved the burden of Jeriah’s company from my heart, as He reminded me that I was not to see Jeriah again. They had chosen their own path, one that did not follow alongside ours; we had to entrust them to God’s wisdom and judgement.

## A DREAM OF INVITATION

During the night I awoke suddenly, and could not find my sleep again. I lay in bed musing upon the events of the last few days, when God's voice came to my heart.

*Abraham, it is I Who have woken you from your deep sleep. I have given you a message. Heed to its every detail.*

I lay still, waiting for more, but no more words came, not even a feeling. Puzzled, I whispered within my heart, *Speak Lord, for Thy servant lies attentive to Your voice. I lie ready to receive Your message, that I may understand, and thereby heed it diligently.*

Still no words came. I sat up in bed and buried my face in my hands. Had I missed a message from the Lord? Had a sign been given to me which I had disregarded or brushed off? My heart suddenly grew heavy. Why had the Lord stopped speaking to me? Had I not obeyed that which He had told me to do?

“Forgive me, my Lord, if I have strayed, or if I have forgotten Thy Words. I am but a humble man. Show me Thy truth.”

Sarah stirred and turned over to face me, so I lay back down and kissed her forehead. Then slowly,

scene by scene, the dream from which I had just awakened returned to me: I first stood upon a rock, the wind blowing about me. I lifted my arms up to the heavens, and God directed my gaze toward the rocky crags in the distance. Then a man on horseback galloped towards the rocky crags, bringing a message of invitation.

Then within my tent sat Sarah, Isaac and myself. We sat before a small number of people whose faces were not visible to me, yet I knew they were not of our faith, nor of our culture. Sarah began to speak to them of faith, and I allowed her to continue. Then Isaac sat in the midst of all, and talked, laughed and played, commanding the attention of our guests. This too, I allowed. Then I was left alone with one man, upon whose head I placed my hand.

That was all I could remember of my dream. Then I thought on its meaning, praying for guidance and the skill of interpretation.

The rocky crags symbolized the dwelling place of Ahran and his camp. I was to send him a message of invitation to our camp, for a small number of guests, to talk and commune with him. This meaning came clearly, but the rest of the dream's interpretation remained cloudy, so I put it out of my thoughts for the moment, and returned to sound slumber.



As the sun rose in the sky the following morn, the feeling of urgency within my heart about my dream also rose. I summoned Eliezer, and recounted to him my dream, and in counsel with some of the other elders, a messenger was dispatched by horseback, with an invitation to Ahran. This set my mind and heart at ease, and I trusted God to lead from there.



"Abraham dear, Leah, Tamar and I are going to take a group of young boys to spend most of the day with the goat herds. We'll return around supper time. Isaac and his friends have been pleading with us to take them for several days now. Will you be well?" Sarah gave me a gentle kiss on the cheek and walked to a corner of the tent, to gather up some food and cloaks which she had already prepared for the day.

"I will be well, dear," I replied.

"I'll send Isaac to say goodbye in a moment then," Sarah said, as she stepped out of the tent.

Sarah couldn't have taken more than a few steps from the tent when the last scene of my dream, which I had not remembered until this moment, flooded into my mind with great gravity. I saw myself sitting on the floor of our tent, with Sarah and Isaac before me. We held hands, sitting in a circle. Our eyes were closed in prayer, our heads were bowed, and we seemed to be awaiting something important—something from God. Then the picture vanished.

I knew it in my heart. Sarah and Isaac were not supposed to be away from camp this day. That was God's message.

"But Lord, I can't tell them to stay now. They have made all their preparations, and Isaac will be so disappointed. I have nothing to show for requiring them to stay. How will I explain it to Isaac? He will be heartbroken if his friends are allowed to go to spend the day with the herds, and he is made to stay home in the tent. Besides, it's too late." I argued out loud, hoping to find a way out of having to obey.

Just then the tent door opened, and Sarah came back in. "I forgot something," she said. "Isaac should be here any moment."

Then I remembered the Lord's Words to me, which said: *Your foot is to remain on this land, and*

*the feet of your household are to remain with you. I have a work for the three of you to perform.*

“Sarah ... ” I said timidly.

“What is it, Abraham?”

“Could you remain here the day, and go to the herds another day?”

“Certainly I could, but little Isaac ... he has his heart set on it. Are you not well, my dear?”

“No, my dear, I am well. I had a dream in the night which has returned to me—a message from God. It is not all clear yet, but I know that you and Isaac are to remain here for the day. As you stepped out of the tent, this was brought to my remembrance, and I struggle now with it, for I want little Isaac to be happy, and surely he will not understand my reasoning. What am I to do?”

“Ah!” Sarah sighed. “It seems a poor choice of days, but since we cannot see the morrow as God can, surely it must be the best day. Isaac will be disappointed, but it is better that he learn to obey his father, and the Word of the Lord, than to frolic about with the goats and sheep a whole day, is it not? I will take him another day, and our dear Isaac will learn patience in the meantime. I think it grieves us more than it will grieve him. Worry not; he will soon forget, Abraham.”

“Here comes the scampering of those little feet,” I said, as Isaac’s shadow was visible against the tent for barely an instant. Then he burst in, smiling and laughing. He flung his arms around my neck and kissed me.

“Isaac, your father has something to explain to you. Sit still on your stool and be very attentive,” Sarah said, as she set his little stool in front of my chair, and then sat next to Isaac herself.

“Yes, father?” Isaac said respectfully, as he sat down and looked up into my face with his bright and shiny eyes.

“My dear son, you bring me such happiness. I have told you before of the miracle of your birth, haven’t I?”

“Yes, Father, you have. How mother couldn’t have a child, and God sent heavenly messengers to tell you that I was going to be born!”

“That’s right, son. God gives us many good things, many miracles, many blessings to make us happy. Then sometimes He asks us to do something that will make Him happy. He asks us to be kind and loving, to do our chores diligently, to be respectful and obedient. Sometimes He asks us to sacrifice something....”

“You mean like a sheep or a goat? Oh, are we going to make a sacrifice, Father?” Isaac interrupted with excitement.

“Isaac, remember not to interrupt your father when he’s speaking to you,” Sarah gently reprimanded.

“Yes, Mother. I’m sorry I interrupted you, Father.” Isaac apologized, looking down at the floor.

“That’s all right, son. No, we’re not going to sacrifice a burnt offering to the Lord, but the Lord has asked something else of your mother and me, and you. It will be a sacrifice—something that is difficult for you, but you have to remember all the blessings that God has given you. You should be thankful for them, and you should be thankful to sacrifice something for God.”

“I understand, and I am thankful for all my blessings, Father.”

“That’s good, Isaac. The three of us will need to stay home at camp today, because God has told me that He has a special work for us to do together. I’m not sure what it is yet, but if you and Mother go out with the rest of the boys to visit the herds, then you won’t be here to do the important work God wants you to.”



Tears welled in Isaac's eyes. "Oh, I was so excited about going to see the herds today ... "

"I know, son, and I'm sorry. Mother will take you in a few days, and you'll get to run about all you like, and see and learn all about the herds then. But today we have to do the Lord's business. Can you give today as a sacrifice to the Lord, Isaac?—Happily?"

"Yes, I can," Isaac said, putting on a brave smile.

"That's a good boy. Come give me a hug and kiss!" I said, hugging my son tightly, while I shed a few silent tears.

"Then can I go play with Josiah now?" Isaac asked, making the best of the situation. "He must be feeling sad that he wasn't going to be able to go with us to the herds since he hurt his leg the other day when we were playing."

"Of course you can, dear," Sarah answered.

Then as quickly as he had entered the tent, he was gone. Sarah and I embraced for a moment, and then returned to our respective duties.



By mid-afternoon, our messenger had returned from his journey to Ahran's camp. He brought Eliezer word that Ahran had graciously accepted my invitation to supper, and that they would arrive at our camp before sundown. Upon confirmation of their party's arrival, preparations were set in motion for the guests, and the hosting quarters of the camp came to life.

As I sat in my tent preparing my heart for what the evening might bring, I felt the familiar and tender hands of my lovely wife about my shoulders.

"Abraham, the evening meal is in order, and the tents are ready. I am glad that I remained at camp to see that all the preparations were taken care of for our guests, but I will now go with Isaac to visit some women in another part of the camp.

They have asked for some time to discuss matters with me. When you should need me or Isaac, please call, and we will come at once. I will pray for your guidance in showing these men the goodness of the Lord."

I took her hands in mine and turned to look in her eyes. Her beauty and radiance had been restored and refreshed since Isaac's birth, and each passing year of his life seemed to renew her youth.

"My lovely darling," I said, "I do not yet understand the message the Lord gave me in the night, but I do know that you and Isaac are to play an active part in our hosting Ahran and his companions."

Sarah looked puzzled. While she had been at my side through years of entertaining guests and neighboring tribes, there was something different that this evening was to bring, and all at once we could both sense it.

Sarah, as was the manner and custom of our women, would tend to the tables, serve the food, and provide the gracious hostessing that only she could do so well. The womenfolk, usually only one or two at a gathering, would be present to relieve the men of any duties which would distract them from their pressing discussions and negotiating. Such was the custom of our day.

In our private tent, Sarah stood as equal to me as any other man on the earth, and her opinions, cares and concerns were factored into all our decisions. She possessed a most unusual combination of meekness and spiritedness when serving both myself and others, a graciousness that allowed me to assume my God-given authority and position, both as a man and as the unworthy leader of our people. Yet she had a deep energy that I was sure at times could raise up the rocks in the desert to follow the inspiration of her call. No one could liven

up a dull tent as could Sarah, or make you forget about the gray swirling clouds overhead and the imminent rain when she would talk about the sunny days and wonderful moments of the past and the untouched possibilities of the future.

“I know, my dear, that it does not appear that we will follow our usual customs this even. I do not have an explanation. The instructions from the Lord have not been made clear to me yet, however, I believe that we both can sense His presence and leading even now. That wafting feeling in the air of a very fluid and moving Presence must be His Own, and if we only follow it and trust, no doubt we will find ourselves in the center of His plan.”

“There is never an uneventful day with you, my sweetheart, is there?” Sarah said, with a mild chuckle. “I once thought that once our promised son had arrived, that the wind would cease its howling, and that the urgent and pressing matters would cease knocking on the doors of our tent. But no! God is good, and He allows them to continue to come, that we may find joy in our labors and youth in needing to look to our Father to discover the newest mystery that He has set before us.

“Very well, I will follow your call, and the spirit that leads us. I will continue in my place until I should feel clearly the Lord’s voice in my heart and soul.”

“I am sure He will reveal His plan to us clearly, as He always does,” I affirmed.

“Perhaps we should gather Isaac for prayer. Have you any idea what part he is to play in this?” Then Sarah sighed, “I do hope he will not be a distraction or a nuisance. His energy gets the best of him at times. Leah tells me she is sure there isn’t enough ground around for him to run and play on! She hardly knows what to do with him to keep him

occupied. But there is such a kind twinkle in his eyes, almost a look of wisdom, though he is so young. He must have gotten that from his father,” she said, peering deep into my eyes.

“Well, let us see how his wisdom matures then. But there is no doubt where his energy came from. I thank God daily for sending us Isaac—not only for the joy he brings us both, but so that I can now keep up with you better since some of your liveliness has been diverted into him!” I said with a mischievous grin.

“Oh, Abraham!” Sarah smiled and shook her head. “Your life and spirit lives strongly in Isaac. Each night when he says his prayers, he prays to follow in the footsteps of God, and his father. I did not teach him to pray this, and Leah had not heard of it either, but what can I say against those words? If he follows closely in your footsteps, as the picture of God in his life, then he will grow to be a strong and upright man, filled with the wisdom and knowledge of God, and with a passion for hearing God’s voice.—And he will possess a tenderness toward his wife that most women can only dream of. Now I pray the same prayer as our little Isaac does.”

Indeed, God was good to me. I was most surely blessed. Touched by the love surrounding me on all sides, I was at a loss for words, but my thoughts gave praise to God. I knew Sarah could see into my thankful heart, so we remained silent, allowing our smiles and moist eyes to convey the feelings of our hearts.

Though I remained in a spirit of prayer during the hours that followed, no more specifics were revealed to me. Rather, as the minutes ticked by, the notion that we were to learn what our mission was only as the evening commenced was impressed on me the more. All things were set in order for the evening meal and, by and by, Sarah brought Isaac

to our tent for a word of prayer.

Sarah tried her best to explain to young Isaac that he needed to be attentive and calm during the meal, and that he could not run about or talk loudly. He tried to listen, but how much he would remember that evening remained to be seen. We both wondered what his attendance would cost the evening, yet his sparkling eyes somehow seemed to reassure us both. There was a distinct sweetness in his spirit which was apparent to anyone who would take a moment to converse with him.

After we had committed the evening to God together in prayer, Isaac was off to play under the starry sky. It was still light, but so clear that the stars could be seen faintly twinkling down at the world below.

“Well, Sarah, perhaps there is something about his presence, or a strength that has come with the fulfillment of the promise of his birth that will be a testimony to our guests. I don’t know why the Lord has instructed us to proceed in this way, but there must be a reason.”

“And I eagerly await to learn it,” Sarah was quick to respond.

There was my wonderful wife again, full of curiosity, and expectant to see what the Lord would bring out of this night. Her quiet confidence made my own faith seem small.

Sarah had slowly changed over the many years which we had spent together. In most respects, as is common to all husbands and wives, the changes had been gradual and small. But at one point in her life, there had been a drastic change, and her enthusiastic response to my presenting the Lord’s plan—however veiled it may have been—called my remembrance to a most unusual occurrence which had taken place in our lives a number of years ago.

It was upon the plains of Mamre, in the heat of the day, that the three strangers had approached our tent. One spoke the word that Sarah was to conceive a son. This the Lord had already told me once, and to hear it the second time pricked my heart, for I knew that the Lord is not a man, that He should lie. I held my peace. Yet Sarah, carefree and thoughtless in her words as she was at times, as she overheard these words, laughed within herself. Nevertheless, the word of the Lord was confirmed again by the mouths of these men, disguised as they were to Sarah at the time. And in time, the promise was fulfilled, and our son was born.

The visit of these three strangers marked the beginning of Sarah’s change. Though she had always been a respectful and loving wife, there was from that time on an inner struggle and turmoil going on in her heart and mind. I could sense this, but I was instructed by the Lord to let her be. I was not to interfere and try to sort out her thoughts and questions, but to let her learn to commune with her Maker without my intervention. I was not to represent her to God.

She spent much time alone in the time that followed that “visit of promise,” as we later referred to the strangers’ visit. At the time, I was not sure what troubled her heart so, but God granted me patience, for He knew that once she had resolved her case with Him, that all would become clear to me. And so it did.

The Lord had been clearly displeased with her lack of faith in His Words, when He promised our son to us. She had, in all natural reasoning, ample argument to laugh out loud at those words coming out of the mouth of a perfect stranger, yet it was only a manifestation of a deeper vein of unbelief. I was not keenly aware of this throughout the years, but once this had been purged from her heart, the

absence of it was noticeable to all, even the small children, it would seem.

Till the end of my days, I never did question her as to the resolutions she had privately made with God during those days of decision, but my prayers upheld her through every hour, and when she returned to us in full spirits, she had acquired a belief and trust in God and His Words that could not be easily matched. I reasoned that she had fixed in her heart to never doubt the Words of the Lord again—a promise which she has kept well.

I often wondered if she now had stronger faith than I, for at times when the Lord's commandments were most difficult to hold up before the people, Sarah's support and confidence strengthened my resolve. At other times, when I faltered in believing that God could change a life or heart, Sarah was brought to my remembrance. Her change and great repentance gave me hope. I often thanked God for His wonderful workings, the change in Sarah's life being yet another gift to us in our new life with our promised son, Isaac.

Sarah's kiss on my cheek brought me back to the present. "Where were you, darling?" she asked. "You seemed to be gliding through memories from years past."

"So I was, my darling," I whispered. "And all the while, thanking God for you." I squeezed her hand in mine. "Come, our guests will be soon approaching."

As we stepped outside of our tent, we paused for a moment to look up at the beautiful sky above. The sky was now a shade darker, and the stars seemed to be hanging a little lower in the sky than usual. They seemed nearer to us, almost as if they were calling out to be noticed.

## HOSTING FOR ANOTHER

Just then, Eliezer approached us, as a watchman had noted that a covered caravan and some riders were not far off from our camp.

"I presume these are our guests for the evening, Abraham." He paused for a moment, then continued, "Yet it seems somewhat unusual for them to bring a caravan, does it not? I had not imagined any other than a small group of men on horseback, able to be numbered on one hand, to arrive at our camp tonight. Shall any additional preparations be made, or precautions taken?" Eliezer asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

"I share your sentiments, Eliezer. It is strange—that no one can deny. Yet I suspect this is only the first of a number of unusual happenings that we will witness this evening. As for preparations, inform anyone who is to be in the hosting area of the camp to bear in mind that there is a working of God's Spirit taking place. They must keep their spirits subject to His, and not be alarmed or surprised by whatever direction God should lead us in."

Sarah gave Eliezer a knowing sort of smile. It almost seemed that the look in her eyes was telling him something, though she said nothing. Whatever

the exchange, Eliezer appeared to have gotten the interpretation, and his countenance relaxed. He rested his hand on my shoulder and, looking into my eyes, said, "The preparations will be made. I will be on duty for whatever purpose God should see fit to use me in."

"Ah, that's better. Now, we have only to wait and listen to God's instructions. All should go very well tonight," I said with a smile.

The air was clearing, and as it did, a fuller peace descended on us all in regards to the hours which lay ahead of us. Eliezer excused himself to check on our arriving party, leaving us in quietness—for the moment. It was shortly broken by the pattering sound of energetic feet, followed by Leah's cry, "Isaac, wait! Wait!"

I turned around just in time to avoid being knocked over by Isaac, who, when catching a glimpse of us nearby, had escaped from Leah's watchful eye, and made a dash over to where we stood. He wrapped his arms around me, and I knelt down to hold him close. Moments later, Leah arrived, panting and out of breath.

"Isaac! ... Oh, Abraham! Sarah! I'm sorry for letting him out of my sight. He just was gone before I hardly knew it. I'm afraid there's no keeping up with him once he sets out to run somewhere. I used to be able to catch him, but this year, I tell you, he seems to have a double portion of vigor."

"Doesn't he?" Sarah exclaimed, so happy to see Isaac. "Leah, don't worry about him coming over here. You are so good about caring for him, and I never worry when he's in your keeping."

"Besides," I added, "It's not all that often that we get to see our little lad. So much of our time recently has been occupied with pressing matters of the camp. It's no wonder he wants to escape for a visit with us."

Leah appeared relieved that Isaac's interruption hadn't inconvenienced us at an important moment of discussion, and promised that he would be ready to join us for dinner with our guests at the appointed time. We spent a few minutes with Isaac, until he started pulling Leah by the hand to return to his friends and other activities.

Eliezer then returned to inform us that the party was arriving, so we made our way to the edge of the camp to greet our guests.



They had most certainly brought a caravan, and an ornately decorated one at that. Ahran was on horseback, as were three other men. He was dressed in a glimmering black robe, bordered with colors down the front opening. The loose tan garment underneath his black robe set off what little of his dark skin we could see. An ivory colored turban was wrapped around his head, leaving only his eyes visible to us, yet in the absence of recognizing his features, his manner and the air about him proclaimed his position, and I immediately pointed him out to Sarah.

"He almost looks kingly ... yet meek or mild mannered," Sarah quietly observed.

"Yes, from my one meeting with him thus far, you seem to have just about summarized all we know about him."

"What could they be bringing in the caravan?" Sarah wondered aloud. "Perhaps it's part of their customs to provide a gift or offering of some sort. I do hope we've set everything for the evening in a proper fashion, one which is acceptable to them."

"Well dear, it all seemed fine to me. Our messenger did talk to one of Ahran's men about customs peculiar to their people. It seems that since they have had to leave their own country and people, they have had to adapt to the customs

of other lands. They have lived here for a fair bit of time, and he indicated that we could proceed hosting as usual without too much concern as to their approval.”

“In any case, this is not exactly our meeting. We are but the hosts, following the plan of Another. I’m sure this detail has been thought of.” Sarah stated this in such faith that I was nearly surprised.

“Most certainly,” I agreed, and headed towards their caravan which had just come to a stop.

Ahnan dismounted from his horse, and we both stepped forward to greet the other. After a short and kind exchange, Ahnan introduced me to the other men that had accompanied him.

“This is Korel, my uncle. He provides the base of wisdom for our people. He is my trusted counselor and old friend—my father’s youngest brother. He has a great understanding of Sabit’s mind and conniving. I believe that the two of you will have much to talk about, and many plans to interest one another in. He has wished to meet you for a great while now. He has followed the moving of your camp more closely than any of our people, and is fascinated by the way in which your God seems to deliver you out of some of the precarious positions in which you have found yourself. I shall allow him to tell you of his curiosity himself at a later time.”

Korel seemed a fine man, from what could be seen of him. He, and the other men, in like fashion with Ahnan, had kept their heads and faces covered till this point, so one had to be very discerning of their eyes. He appeared to be an older man, and the lines around his eyes did bear the marks of wisdom.

I wondered if their custom would permit them to remove their head coverings, enabling us to get

a better look at them, although at this particular moment I could see the sense in having such a covering on. The wind had begun to whip the loose dust on the ground in small circles, and those of us without any protection from the sudden fury of the wind had to squint and cover our eyes to keep the dust out. This hurried along our introductions and made us anxious to get inside shelter.

Ahnan sensed nature’s insistence to move things along, and more briefly introduced the other two men at his side—young men it seemed, though well-built—as Ranin and Bemar.

“They are my good friends, childhood friends, in fact. They are always by my side, and accompanied me on the first night that I came to your camp. They are fierce warriors and protectors,” he said, and noting my brow wrinkle slightly at the mention of fighting men, added, “but they share my desire to provide peace and tranquility for my people. This is our only objective.”

My forehead relaxed, and I greeted Bemar and Ranin. The firm grasp of their hands against my arm on both sides told me much about their inward selves. *Good men*, I thought to myself, *strong and sturdy. He seems to place a great deal of trust in them, as I do in Eliezer.*

By this time Ahnan and his companions’ horses had been tied up a ways off, and Ahnan motioned toward the colorful caravan. I was unsure of what to say, so held my peace as the two of us walked slowly.

“Abraham, I am sorry for our acquaintance,” Ahnan spoke. “It seems I have brought nothing but troubles upon your people. First I brought alarming news of my brother’s attack upon this region. Then in accepting your invitation this evening, I bring another burden upon you.”



“Come now, Ahran,” I said, hoping to set him at ease. “We are glad for your company, and inasmuch as God has caused our paths to cross, we shall try to be of assistance to you and your people, as you have been in warning us of your brother’s intentions.”

“I fear we have great need of your assistance, Abraham. I should more accurately say that I have need of your assistance. The caravan will explain my reason.”

More intrigued now by what secret the caravan held, we walked up to it. Before Ahran could push aside the thick covering to the entrance, the sound of a young child’s voice gave away the mystery.

“Your child?” I asked.

“Yes,” came the heavy reply.

At this, Ahran removed his head covering, and looked deeply into my eyes. His was indeed a kind face, and much concern and care for his people was written upon it. Though not more than thirty-five years old, his face had aged more quickly, no doubt by reason of the difficulties which he had been facing for a number of years.

I turned towards the group of others who were standing a ways off, still talking together and awaiting Ahran’s and my return. I caught Sarah’s eye, and motioned to her to take the guests inside the main tent, and to begin entertaining them. This seemed to be an important moment for Ahran to explain to me about his child, or whatever matter it was that was concerning him, and I wanted him to feel free to do so without the pressure of others about.

Sarah understood my gesture at once, and relayed my message to Eliezer, who called the others together and began leading them into our camp. Ahran’s three companions talked together

for a moment, and then two went along with Eliezer and the others, while one remained—presumably Ranin or Bemar—to wait for Ahran a distance off.

Ahran had by this time noticed everyone’s movement, and seemed more at ease, knowing that he wasn’t keeping the entire party waiting on him. He pulled back the caravan’s covering, to reveal a young boy lying on a bed, a young nurse at his side.

“This is my son, Jehmi. He is six years old.” Ahran paused for a moment, and I could tell that this was a sensitive matter.

“He’s the same age as my son, Isaac,” I said, looking at Jehmi. But there was certainly a difference in their spirits. Jehmi lacked that buoyancy that Isaac had. He seemed to lack life. *Was he ill?* I imagined that was my next unspoken question which Ahran would answer.

“You have a young son?” Ahran almost seemed startled.

“Yes, just Jehmi’s age. My promised son, the light and joy of my life—and of my wife, Sarah’s.”

Then it dawned on me again what a great miracle God had done in giving us Isaac. My age certainly did not allow one to imagine that I had a young son. Yet as I was living among my own people, and they knew of the promise that God had fulfilled to us, this had dulled this wonder in my mind.

“I understand,” I continued, “that you must think this very amazing, and it is. My wife, Sarah, is more than well past the time of childbearing. She was barren for all our years together, but our God had promised us a son, an heir to inherit our faith, and as He has promised, He surely performed. It is a miracle, Ahran, but miracles are not uncommon with God. Perhaps this is one reason why He has brought our paths together?” I offered.

“Perhaps so,” Ahran said, with a definite hesitation in his voice. “Although my people do not worship your God, we have heard much of Him. And now it is because of these sayings that I bring my son to your camp, that I might give your God a chance.”

“He is very merciful and understanding to all men, Ahran,” I assured him. “Tell me of the problem and we shall seek His face.”

In the back of my mind, I had wondered what course Ahran and his company had decided to take in preparation for Sabit’s attack upon them. However, he had not brought this up, and I did not imagine he would do so until after we had dined, when the men sat around to discuss more serious matters. Without a mention of his concern for his people, Ahran was presenting me with his son, and without saying so in words, he was offering my God an opportunity to convert his soul.

Ahnan and I stepped up into the caravan and seated ourselves next to his son. “My son,” he began, “is not physically ill. Though he looks as if a horrible illness has taken hold of him, the physicians and healers can find nothing wrong with his young body. Since two moons have come and gone, he has become more ashen-faced by the day. You can see that all color has been drained out of him by an invisible force, and with it, so has his spirit and life. He is able to move about, to walk and play, but with only half his strength. And most grievous of all, our son’s joy has been torn out of his heart, and we do not know how to replace it.”

“Does he always lie in bed now?” I asked, though the question did not seem significant.

Ahnan almost seemed annoyed. “No, he does not need to, and it makes no difference. At first we made him rest for days on end, but there was no

improvement. Whether he rises or lies, his condition remains. Yet the healers, having no other recourse, insist that it is best for him to be confined to bed. I do not agree with this, as it seems to only dim the few stars that are left shining in his eyes. But I am often away, and upon my return, I always find that the physicians have had their way. Now Jehmi has lost hope, I am afraid.”

For a moment I thought my question had been a mistake. I had angered Ahnan, and perhaps my comment had appeared insensitive. But then I understood that God had placed those words on my tongue. As Ahnan finished speaking, another scene of my dream crystallized in my mind, and I could almost see the stars begin to twinkle more brightly above us.

*Of course, this is the purpose for Isaac! He was meant to remain at the camp in order to be with Jehmi. This is part of the purpose.*

With a calm smile on my face, I meditated on my dream for a moment. Then Jehmi’s voice, weak and thin, cracked through the silence. “Sir, did you say you had a boy my age?”

“Why, I did, Jehmi, yes. Isaac is his name. He’s just the same age as you. Ahnan, I did not expect Jehmi to speak our tongue.”

“Ah yes,” Ahnan seemed pleased, “I have tried to teach him as many tongues as I know. Regions are becoming more diverse by the changing tides, and one can only have as many allies as the tongues he is able to speak. They learn quickly at this age, you know.”

“So a wise man trains his son. I will have to make certain to use that wisdom in the raising of my son also,” I agreed.

Jehmi’s eyes seemed to glow a hint brighter at the mention of Isaac. Ahnan looked at me, then back at his son.

“Ahran, of course you are welcome to bring Jehmi in. Isaac would be delighted to have a friend this evening,” I assured him.

Ahnan leaned forward to me, and in a hushed tone said, “Abraham, that is most good-hearted of you. But do know that I did not bring Jehmi here to consume the time of your good people. I only wanted you to look at him for a moment. His nurse and he are prepared to remain here. They have all the necessary supplies and provisions for the evening. Besides, it is not the custom ... ”

“You are our guests. As for the customs, we will allow God to dictate them for this night,” I interrupted. “We will go to join the others now, and when they are prepared, his nurse can bring Jehmi in.”

“Very well,” Ahnan said, somewhat awed by my definiteness. He turned to Jehmi’s nurse, muttered some words in his own tongue, which I imagined was the relaying of my message. He smiled, patted his son on the head, and spoke a few words to him also.

We then headed into the camp, where the sounds of music and laughter could be heard wafting through the air about the hosting tent. We soon were seated, and joined in the good-natured atmosphere which our gathering afforded. Sarah and a handmaiden scurried about ever gently, delicately tending to the desires of the men folk who comprised the loose circle of guests.

The food was excellent and the drink was plentiful. It was only then that I noticed that Korel, Ranin and Bemar had also taken off their head coverings. They all had good looks about them, and gave certain appearance that the staff which they provided their captain to lean on would not be easily broken. It seemed their custom was to only remove their head coverings once they had taken

shelter or were within the confines of a private tent, at least when surrounded by strangers or people not of their own kin. I reasoned this because when Ahnan entered the tent, with his dark face and hair uncovered, each of his men had taken careful note, though without appearing to do so.

I explained that another young guest would be arriving shortly, and told our people about Jehmi, Ahnan’s son. In a general way, I attempted to give them as much information as possible about his condition, without saying much. Eliezer, Sarah, and the other counselors in attendance had been forewarned that the events of our meeting might not be customary, but all other eyes in the room rested on Ahnan.

I imagined that Ahnan’s companions were not used to their captain being so forthright and open with near strangers, as we were to their people. Furthermore, he demonstrated great openness with his choice to bring his son also within our camp, to play with one of our children, and to, in some way, be influenced by our beliefs and lifestyle. Their respect for him was now tinted with looks of wonder, almost anxiety, as to how much of our beliefs and faith he would hear or what the night would hold.

Presently, a soft voice was heard at the door of the tent, and the handmaiden in attendance glided to the entranceway. She looked back to me for my approval, indicating that it was Ahnan’s son and a nurse woman with him. I nodded my assent, and motioned to bid them enter. In stepped a pale boy, and his nurse behind him. She did not appear to be timid in herself, but the present company and situation made her apparently nervous.

As Sarah turned from serving Bemar a portion of savory meat, her eyes caught Jehmi’s. I had wondered what Sarah’s reaction would be to seeing

this frail boy, so close in age to our own Isaac, yet so spiritless that the very thought of a young child in that state sent a chilling ripple down one's spine. Still, I had not imagined Jehmi to be quite so ghostly looking. The darkness of the caravan, and his lying on the bed had shielded some of the truth from me, though he did not appear to be very ill, as Ahran had said, only weak and lifeless in appearance.

Sarah, as intuitive as she always was, assessed his condition, and understood in a split second what it had taken me nearly half an hour to assimilate. She did always have the true heart of a mother, even though the Lord had seen fit to cause her to wait until nearly the end of her days before granting her with a child of her own womb. The concern registered in her eyes, but her lips gave a lovely smile. Korel, who must have been wondering the same thing about Sarah, had his eyes fixed on her also. He seemed pleased with her response.

"I would venture to say that your wife is a most perceptive woman, Abraham."

"So she is, Korel. She is the other half of my life, most truly. And not only perceptive, but wise." I had nearly surprised myself. While everything I had said was true, this type of speech was normally reserved for private moments, and was something which neither men nor women customarily discussed. Sarah was a touch taken aback as well, but the sparkles in her eyes didn't stop dancing about. She nodded courteously to Korel, in acceptance of his compliment.

"And would my lovely wife have a word to speak?" I asked, driven as I was to get those words out of my mouth, yet not for myself. Women were not permitted to converse when serving, and more unlikely than the sun to set

twice in the same day ever to be asked a question by the host. This was not the custom solely of our people, but of the surrounding countries, as far off as I knew. All went silent for a moment, except for Sarah, who didn't seem half as dumbfounded as the rest of us men.

She stepped back, and in a voice so gentle it seemed almost a whisper, said, "In truth, my lord, I would offer Jehmi Isaac's company." Sarah paused, then nodded to indicate that her request was finished.

Ahnan's eyes flashed to Sarah's, and then returned to the feast before him. There was not a long pause. Sarah's prudence had impressed them all, and each man gave their assent. Jehmi had just been seated to the side of the tent, and as Sarah passed by, she knelt down and whispered to him, "I'll go to fetch Isaac. He will be so glad to meet you. Wait just one moment now." Jehmi looked hopeful.

Ahnan had watched their exchange with interest, and within a moment Sarah had left the tent, and we resumed conversation in better spirits than ever. Soon Sarah reentered the tent with Isaac, and most turned to watch the meeting of the two boys, none more obviously than Ahnan. The conventionality of the evening had already been broken, and wonderfully so; no one seemed to mind in the least.

Children never have trouble making friends, and Sarah's introduction between the two was hardly necessary. The exchange between them was immediate. Nearly as instant was the light in Jehmi's eyes which began to grow brighter. He actually returned Isaac's smile. I wondered if all the others in the room could feel the same blessing descending on the two boys' friendship as I could. It lay on me thick as a cloak, warming

my heart, and dispelling any further nervousness about this encounter between our two peoples. There was more to this than God simply arranging a friend for Ahran's son; Isaac was destined to change Jehmi's life in some way. I could only wait to see how.

Sarah ushered the two boys off to the side, and wisely so, for it is hard to keep two young lads quiet no matter how many times they are told to mind their manners beforehand. The adjoining tent provided a perfect home for the two boys to quickly resume their all-consuming discussion, and they scampered about from time to time. When the chattering ceased, we knew that they had gone outside. Most likely Isaac was showing Jehmi his brilliant friends in the sky, telling him their names, and keeping vigilant guard for those stars that streaked through the sky, as was one of Isaac's favorite pastimes.

Meanwhile, I pondered Jehmi's illness. The burden of his recovery began to weigh heavily on my heart. After all, Ahran had come to prove our God, using his son as a sign. I knew it was not right to bear the load of responsibility, yet I was the representative of our God to Ahran, if he were to believe. He could not see Him. He had not heard His voice. I was the channel of God to this man who had set foot on our soil as a stranger only days ago; now the life of his son and perhaps more that I did not yet know of rested in my hand.

## THE CHOSEN VESSELS

So went the next hour of our evening, until all had been satisfied, and conversations flowed like swift moving rivers. I sat silent for a moment, allowing others to carry the dialogue, hoping that I had not missed God's signal at some point. *How was I to bring God's mind or Words into this evening? Was I meant to say something? Would God make it clear to me?*

Then He did, yet through another. Ahran was right when he said that Korel and I would find much to talk about, much to interest one another. He was moved that night, as if he were a glove in which God put His Own hand, to direct the thoughts of all the others present.

"Abraham, I have much interest in your people, in your faith—and in your God. I speak now not on behalf of our people, as a counselor, but as a man alone. I would like to hear of your faith, and of the miracles which God has done for your nation, if you would explain some of these things to me."

"Most certainly, most certainly," I replied. *This couldn't be better orchestrated by God, I thought. And in such a comfortable setting, being asked a question by a sincere seeker of the truth ... God is good to me.* I drew in a breath to prepare for the string of words I trusted would follow, as they always did. Speaking

of my God and of our faith was like conversing with an old and trusted friend. It hardly took thought, for the very depths of my heart and soul gave bountiful utterance the moment I turned my thoughts heavenward, meditating on even one of the many things which God had done for me, and for us as a people.

Yet no words came. Korel looked at me and all waited for my speech. It was gone from me. The seconds dragged into a minute. Sarah immediately sensed my strait, drew near and knelt down beside me. "Are you well, my lord?" she barely whispered, much to the understanding of all.

"Yes, my dear," I said, raising my hand to assure her. She sat back at those words, but did not rise to leave.

Then I remembered the vision of Sarah speaking to a group of strangers not of our culture. *This is the time, is it not?* I silently asked God. Receiving a peace in my heart, my words returned to me, and I explained with marked authority in my voice, "Our God works in ways which we cannot always understand with our mortal minds. Our reasoning and understanding not only fall short of His, but are often far removed from His.

"God has spoken to my heart. He has kept the words from my mouth that I would have spoken unto you, for He has another servant through whom He wishes to explain to you the faith of our people. This vessel, frail and tender, is she that has served you this same evening the meal which has nourished your earthly bodies. God has seen fit to allow her the privilege to likewise deliver unto you the words which will minister to your spirits. I can testify to her faith and trust in God, for in the eyes of God we are all His children."

With that, I gasped, as it seemed the last words had come out of my mouth, and a force stronger than my physical body kept me silent. The others in the

room seemed to understand this, and coupled with the almost mystical hush that came over our tent, and the maturity of spirit which Sarah had shown the entire evening, each man turned his eyes towards Sarah, who bowed her head respectfully, and gently moved into the circle.

She seemed to have already been prepared by God for this moment. Perhaps she had felt that, when the anointing was being lifted off of my shoulders, it was being rested upon hers. Where my words, normally so many and eloquent, had disappeared, they emerged one after another from her lips, yet with the grace and sensitivity that only a woman could have put forth.

I had seen Sarah stand before many a man in the past and cast what seemed a magical spell on them. In our travels through borders of all sorts, her beauty and charms had saved our lives many a time. Now she again commanded the attention of the men about her. In the past, she had not spoken, for God had not called upon her to speak. She had held her tongue and obeyed my bidding. In one or two instances she pled for the life of her people, but in no manner of eloquence speaking from her heart about our God, for it was not given unto her to do so at that time. Perhaps it was because she had not settled some matters with God in her heart; thus only her outer shell could be used as a tool in His hand. Now that she had yielded her inner spirit to Him, He had granted her tongue the desire to speak.

As I listened to her speak to these men about her, I understood why it was that God had chosen to work in this way. Her gentleness was a great persuasion, and surely, being the proud and confident men that these were, they would have had difficulty accepting such simple truths as God poured through Sarah that evening. It was evident to all that Sarah was a mouthpiece, a vessel, and



that the hand of our God was upon her. Her eyes sparkled and her spirit shone; she glowed with an unearthly light, and every man's eyes reflected the same.

When she had finished, there was a calm about the room, and a clear sense of understanding. The words she spoke were powerful, yet her presentation was such that all felt encouraged to learn more. Our guests seemed acceptant of the fact that our God was offering them a chance to heed His ways, and to be recipients of His blessings.

The evening had run its course, and it was now late. Ahran thanked us for the wonderful time, and excused their party to return home. Quickly Ranin and Bemar rose to their feet, and Korel followed a moment later. After warm farewells, I sent two young men to fetch their horses, and the group set off toward the edge of the camp. Jehmi's nurse had a difficult time collecting and settling him, but he seemed in good spirits, though still pale as ever. Isaac accompanied him to the caravan, with Leah, his caretaker, following a few paces behind to see that he fell to no harm.

Ahram walked with me behind all the others. He seemed very happy for the visit, and I implored him to come again before long. At length I said, "Ahram, allow me to beseech my God for Jehmi's health. I will ask Him to show me what can be done for your son. Our God is able to heal any manner of disease."

Apparently I had spoken too loudly. One never does know when children are listening, or when they are absorbed completely within their own world. I soon learned that Jehmi had been intently listening to my conversation with his father about his health.

"Father, that's what Isaac told me!" Jehmi burst out, with such enthusiasm that I nearly thought it was Isaac speaking. "He said that if we worship

their God and pray, that He will heal me! I so want to be better again, Father!"

There was a slightly uncomfortable silence for a moment, until Ahram said, "Yes son, I know. We're talking about it now. Go along to the caravan."

The two boys scampered off, and Ahram turned to me with a slight smile, "Well, it seems that this faith in your God lives strongly in the hearts of all your people, and not merely in the workings of a lone priest or sage. Even your young son cannot hide his faith in play."

"Indeed, friend, though your son's words surprised even me. But one cannot doubt the words of a child, which are spoken in sincerity and truth." I paused for a moment, then respectfully added, "Will you consider these things?"

"For certain. I already have, and will the more. I must discuss these things with my wife, for she is as much part of me as Sarah is part of you. There is much to think about. But no doubt Jehmi will not permit me to rest until I have given him sufficient answer on this matter. Your son has sparked faith in him, and since we as a people have not had available to us the ornaments of religion that we were familiar with in our homeland, we have strayed from the teachings of our upbringing. Some in our company have adapted to the gods of the regions in which we live. The majority have chosen to put all faith aside. Life is hard enough when simply managing one's family and provisions. Jehmi's faith has never been firm or settled, therefore the possibility that he may turn to your faith through this poses a serious question which my wife and I must reason together about."

"I understand, Ahram. You will send word to me then if you wish to meet again ... that is, if your people remain here. We have not spoken of your

brother's intentions. Have you any more word of his plans?"

"Yes, he has gathered his men, and they camp seven days' journey off. It will take him some time to reach us, but his evil intentions, like the claws of an eagle, are willing to fly over a great distance of land to swoop up and devour innocent prey. I trust you are preparing your people, as I am mine. By the setting of the sun on the morrow, I will bring word to you as to what course we will take."

"Very well then. I shall await your messenger. Until then, may God be with you, Ahran."

"As your God is with you," he replied, covering his face once again to return as he had come.



Once their party had departed, Sarah whisked Isaac off to bed, and he was asleep in no time. He had enjoyed his evening, and talked about Jehmi until the moment Sarah tucked in his covers around him and he nodded off to sleep. A few young men assisted the handmaidens in clearing the hosting tent and returning everything to its normal state.

Sarah and I were soon in our bed. We did not speak much, but rather marveled together in serenity at the way in which the night had gone. Finally I spoke. "Sarah, all things did follow the overall course of my dream, however, it did not seem to be completed. There was more in my dream which did not take place tonight."

"I sensed the same," Sarah agreed, "but perhaps your dream was not meant to be fulfilled all in one night. I am sure that the friendship which was born tonight between Isaac and Jehmi will bring Ahran and his family back to us shortly."

"You are most probably right, sweetheart. And in the meantime, I must seek the Lord concerning Jehmi's health, and what He would have us do for this boy."

Sarah turned over to nestle her head on my shoulder. "Yes, my darling. Jehmi seems to be of utmost importance in this situation. If God would heal him, all would be able to see His power so clearly. It would make it so easy for all of them, who haven't much knowledge of the ways of the Lord."

"For some reason I question whether God will work in that fashion or not. Given the inner hunger that Ahran has, God might require more of him than He would an unbeliever or scorner. We can only wait and see."



We had not heard news of Jeriah's company that day, although a caravan of traders had gone to buy and sell at the markets. They inquired about their gathering, and some said they had headed out to find pastures to claim as their own in the surrounding hillsides. Others said they had spent much silver to acquire more animals and to fortify their men with weapons.

This day we set about to fortify the camp. Groups of men cunning in mind set about to inspect the perimeter of our camp. Our herds were moved and positioned in such a way that the few wooden fences and encasements provided the most protection they could afford. Wagons and supply stocks were made to border the outside of the camp, while the supplies and necessities were moved to the inward camp. The tents of the families with children were moved closer to the center, and the young men and guard tents were placed about the borders.

At the midday meal, I instructed all those who could not assist in protecting our camp in strength, to protect our camp in prayer. Three times a day all were to stop and beseech God for His protection and safe-keeping.

This day the camp had been quiet.—Yet perhaps only quiet from an observer's point of view, for I learned as the sun was setting that the elders had

never met with so many people in one day. Many needed encouragement, and had questions about the Lord's ability to shield us from danger. The elders tried their best to comfort and to reiterate to the people individually the Lord's Words of comfort and promise, but it seemed to not be enough.

Eliezer, after having gathered with all the elders in the early afternoon, approached my tent to speak a word with me. Sarah showed him in, and then stepped out to bring in some water to refresh us in the heat.

Eliezer sat down and removed his light cloak. "Abraham, I have just met with the elders, and they say that they have never had a fuller day of counsel. There are so many people who yet wish to speak with them. What are they to do? These are not matters of squabbling or bickering; these are matters of faith, and they cannot be dealt with quickly, nor can they be pushed aside, for when the faith of one who is weak is not strengthened, then how can they impart faith to their children and those about them?"

"I understand, Eliezer. This is a matter which shall require much faith and trust on the part of all. I have even found myself wondering at the direction this seems to be taking us." I sighed and rubbed my hands together.

"But Abraham, you are the one responsible to hear the voice of the Lord and to pass on His messages concerning these matters," Eliezer responded.

He must have seen my eyes drop toward the floor as those words rolled over me as a heavy weight at that moment, for he quickly added, "Indeed, you bear more weight on your shoulders than any one of us. Yet God has promised, Abraham, and God will fulfill His Word. I am sure of it." He moved over to place his hand on my

shoulder and I nodded quietly.

"Very well, Eliezer. I know what it is that we must do—that I must do. It is wearying, but for the faith of the people we must gather each morning and each afternoon. I must strengthen the resolve of our people. I must remind them of God's glorious works. I must speak unto them His fresh Words, that they may touch His power and feel His peace.

"But you and the elders must pray. God will have to strengthen me, for I know not what to say, and the press of the people demands much virtue, which I have not storehouses of at this time. I am an old man, Eliezer. I have served my God, I have followed Him faithfully. I have now the responsibility of raising a son, whom I do not see enough, for so many other matters invade and claim the time that I would spend to teach him of the ways of the Lord."

"Isaac is a strong boy, Abraham. He is well instructed in the ways of the Lord. I delight in the times when my great-grandsons play with him, for I know that they will learn faith and confidence."

I smiled. "Eliezer, you are a man of good words; if it were not for your sound wisdom and oft-manifested concern, I should think that your kind words seek some hidden benefit. But I know it is not so, my good friend, and I thank you for your speech. I do imagine times of rest and peace, and glory be to God, we have had them in years past. But now He leads us into troublous sands once again, and I must don the robe of the prophet and latch up my walking sandals, for I must meet God in the wind and sun."

Eliezer was quiet for a moment, and then seemed to receive the interpretation of my unclear words. "Will you go to commune with the Almighty now, Abraham? Shall I accompany you to the edge of the camp? I will find a young man to stand vigil with you, and fetch anything that you should require."

“In a short while, perhaps. First you must inform the elders that the entire camp will be summoned to gather in the morn and at noon. This will encourage their spirits. I will ask God to provide me with the words to answer the broadest of their questions, their concerns and their worries. Then He will give the elders wisdom to allay the fears of the individuals, but the foundation will have been set, and they must only revive the hope which I trust God will place in their hearts during our gatherings.

“I am tired now. I must rest before I go out to face the work which I feel even now God is forming for me. I must rest,” I whispered.

“Very well. I will inform the elders and we will pray,” Eliezer assured me. He slipped out of the tent without a sound.

Moments later Sarah entered. She removed my shoes and covered me with a worn soft covering which was cool and scented with her perfume. She kissed my cheek and I heard her soft footsteps making their way to the door of the tent. Shortly after, it darkened, as she must have let down the outer coverings which blocked the sun’s rays from penetrating. Soon I was fast asleep.



I awoke to the sound of music and reverent singing. I could not tell the hour, for it was dark within the tent, but as my eyes adjusted, I knew it must have been more than an hour that I had slept, for no bright sunlight seeped through even the bottom edges of the tent. *It must be sundown*, I thought, as I rose and put my cloak over my shoulders.

Opening the tent door confirmed my thoughts. The sun was just sinking below the horizon, casting its last few rays of pink and purple across the cloudy open expanses which were dotted with a few hills amidst the sand and dry earth.

I passed through the cluster of tents that made up our portion of the camp, and soon reached the center of the camp, where a fire blazed brightly and a fair gathering of people milled about. A curly-headed child ran by me, making her way to the festive group.

As I approached, the singing became clearer, though not familiar. It was Leah singing, and what a lovely voice and command of it she possessed. Sarah was always trying to interest Isaac in being tutored under Leah in music, but he had not taken a fancy to it as of yet.

Jochim, Leah’s hopeful husband, provided the music for her singing, and as always, he gazed at her beautiful face with an adoring look. Leah was quite pleased with him, yet she had ever so gently requested to delay their marriage, for she had strong ties from her heart to Isaac’s. She knew that once she gave her hand in marriage and settled down, she would bear her own children and would have less time to care for Isaac. She knew that Sarah and I would always be happy to have her help, yet these early years of Isaac’s life were especially important to her; she somehow knew that his care and training must be solid, for there would be a great work ahead of him. God must have issued this call to her heart, for neither Sarah or I ever placed such a thought in her mind, yet we were ever grateful, and took her in as one of our family.

*They must have practiced this song together, for it is lovely*, I thought. I sat down toward the back of the group in a wooden chair, simply enjoying the moment. It was not long before Sarah sensed my presence and joined me, making sure I had all that I needed. A few moments later, Isaac, curious as to where his mother had disappeared to, reasoned that I must be present, and soon joined us, chattering on and delighting us with the events

of his active day.

“Darling, all here are hopeful about the gatherings tomorrow. Thus, they have set aside their worries and wished to join with others in praising God. Isn’t it wonderful?” Sarah exclaimed, as she stood behind me, wrapping her arms about my shoulders while giving me a gentle kiss.

“Yes dear,” I said quietly. “Although I was supposed to be communing with God about these gatherings, not sleeping the late afternoon away.” I shook my head in disapproval of my own self.

“Abraham, think back on times past,” Sarah whispered, as she bent down to bring her lips close to my ear, “God has not always required of you that which you required of yourself. I trust that God will give you the words, and no doubt you will need to commune with Him. But what if He should not require the amount of time or energy spent in preparation that you suppose? I suspect He would be equally interested in preserving the life and health of His prophet and the ruler of His people, would you not? Perhaps in this instance, He decreed that you should receive the rest that your body demands before you receive the anointing that your spirit demands.”

Her words could not have rung more clearly in my ears. God not only spoke to me in that special Voice in my mind; He also spoke to me oftentimes through my wife or through other elders, as clear as could be. I nodded. *There is no mistaking His wisdom*, I thought, as I leaned back to enjoy the rest of the song.

## A HASTENING DECISION

Late that evening, a messenger arrived from Ahran’s camp. Because of the great differences in written characters among the tribes and peoples of this area, the conveying of messages was done largely through word of mouth. Though often lengthy, the remembering and recounting of such messages posed little difficulty to those whose minds were trained to retain such things. Sarah and I were already fast asleep, and Eliezer was woken to hear the message. At dawn, it was relayed to me. This message was to set things in motion, and more rapidly than I had thought possible. Ahran’s message was this:

*Abraham, I have gathered my people together and explained to them all the evil which is coming upon us. Being unable to provide for my people many routes of escape, I chose to tell them of my encounters with your camp—and your God. Though I have not yet seen for myself His power or workings, I have met enough trustworthy men who testify to His truths. Thus, I chose to let my people choose for themselves this option also. I hesitate to put this burden upon you, my friend, for I have*

*known you a short time.*

*My camp is dividing at the very moment in which I send this message to you. Those who would try to outrun and outwit my brother, Sabit, and his band of terror, will do so at nightfall this day. The rest found hope and faith in the words which I spoke unto them. I told them of my own choice to prove your God—the God of Abraham—to see if He Who has performed so many gracious acts for your people, would not have mercy and restore my son’s life also. These have chosen to remain by my side. We entrust the freedom and safety of our families into the hands of your God, as you do likewise.*

*Truly, I do not know much of your God, none save that which you and your wife, Sarah, spoke unto us in your tent. I plead with you to consider my request, and that of those who will remain with me. Bring us, along with you, under the protection of your God, and into His favor. We will pay any price for this place of refuge.*

*I must meet with you. While I have spoken brave words unto my people, I know not more what to say to them. If you will accept this, I shall ride to your camp at the height of the sun on the morrow.*

A chill went through my body. I bent over my crossed legs and hung my head in my hands. *What am I to do, O Lord? He has sent this message in good faith, and by this morning, the half of his company have already left their dwelling. If we refuse them, where would the others turn?* I cried out in my heart, waiting for the answer to come.

Slowly and calmly the Voice made its presence known. *As I have always instructed you, Abraham,*

*bear not the burdens of other people, for I am the Lord your God. Am I not able to shoulder the weights which would seem to crush even your own existence?*

“Yes, Lord, You are able. Still, it is foolish for us to take in Ahran and his company to our dwelling. If we remain as we are, chances are Sabit might leave us in peace. But in pursuing Ahran’s safety, we make ourselves sure targets for this man’s wrath, and lead ourselves into the slaughter market as dumb sheep!”

*I would that My children be as sheep, and that My sheep have a shepherd. Abraham, you are this shepherd. Your choice of pasture may appear as one which dumb sheep or a foolish shepherd would choose, yet if you hearken to My voice and heed to My Words, obeying them with care, then the slaughter shall pass by thee and thy flock.*

There was a pause as I tried to assimilate the Lord’s Words, then He added: *As for this weight, it shall prove to be a strength unto you and your people. My plan would bring your people and their people together for a short while, that I may show My mighty power and strength to a people that have not known Me. Trust Me, Abraham. Accept his request with joy, else I will not be able to give unto you My full blessing.*

“Yes, my Lord,” I said without hesitation. The prospect of the blessings of the Lord being withdrawn from our midst was not one that I, even in the depths of despair or doubt, could afford to entertain in my mind. The matter was settled. We would aid Ahran’s people with all the means we possessed.

I rose from the floor of my tent and hastened outside to find Eliezer. I bid him to send word to Ahran that his request had been accepted with joy, and that I would expect him when the sun



was high in the sky. Eliezer looked on with marked astonishment, but did not question. He then summoned a messenger and sent him on his way.

“It is a time for great trust, Eliezer, perhaps greater than we have ever known,” I confided in him upon his return.

He could have asked me to explain more, for I would have, and he felt comfortable in my presence, yet he chose to remain silent. I reasoned that he did not want to have to bear the burden any earlier than was necessary. I was proved right when some time later, as I walked through the camp, I saw Eliezer walking his grandchildren out toward one of our herds that had found grazing pasture nearby. He held the youngest tightly in his arms as the others playfully skipped along beside him. He knew that such a crisis, though unknown in detail to him as of yet, would demand all of his time and attention, so he spent his remaining hours with his children and family.

Before long, I met with Eliezer and the elders. I explained to them the unusual decision and ensuing request that Ahran had made, then passed on the message that the Lord had spoken to me.

Silence hung heavily over all present. Brows wrinkled, and one counselor clutched his staff tightly and pressed it into the ground.

“And to think that we considered Jeriah such a troublesome one,” Kerah said quietly.

“Ah, fellow counselors,” I said, “there can be none among you who feels the burden of this more weighty than myself. Let us spend a moment in quietness and see if God will not comfort our hearts and show us His way.”

All bowed their heads reverently, while some muttered prayers and inaudible requests under

their graying beards. Then the wind hushed about us and I heard the Words of the Lord, as they were whispered in the gentle breeze and rays of sunlight which streamed down upon us. *I am the Lord your God. I am the Protector of the innocent, the Keeper of the just. Can you not put your confidence in Me?*

My eyes remained closed as I waited to hear more. This message had been delivered in a most unusual way. Never before had I heard the Lord’s Voice so audibly, gliding past my ears as part of His very Own creation, His Own nature bearing tidings of peace and comfort. Then I realized that I had not given forth the message, so enrapt had I been in the sensations which accompanied it. But before I could open my mouth to speak, a voice erupted with excitement.

“Did you hear it? Did you hear it?—The voice of the Lord Almighty! I heard His voice as He whispered through the wind that He is our Protector and Keeper. Was my hearing only deceived, and my years dulling my senses? Or did I truly hear the voice of our God?”

It was Kaboth, the eldest member of our council. He who had previously been so worried and fearful of countenance now bore a youthful smile. His eyes sparkled with brightness.

I was surprised. There had not been many instances in which others around me had heard the Lord’s voice, as He had spoken unto me. But Kaboth had heard the Lord’s voice, for what I had heard, he had heard.

“And my senses deceive me not, for I too heard the Lord’s voice—just as you have spoken!” Kerah cried out. “Oh for the days and nights in which I have waited to hear the voice of the Lord so clearly.” He raised his hands in praise to God, and the rest of the council did likewise, along with joyfully recounting how they heard the

voice of the Lord.

It was truly a miracle. All in our gathering had heard the Words of the Lord as He whispered them in the wind, and all were comforted and restored in faith. I had not normally seen our God work in this fashion, yet He must have known that such a sign of His power and increased faith as a result was required, else He would not have given it. Yet in some ways this also heightened my anxiety, for I supposed the test ahead would be great.

From our council meeting, which we had convened several paces from the edge of the camp, I returned to my tent. There, heeding the nudge of God and the wise advice of my wife, I latched my sandals, threw a rough cloak about my shoulders and headed back to the edge of the camp. I walked further into the distance to speak with my God, to receive His guidance for the events of the day at hand.

Upon my return, I met with our entire congregation. My step was stronger and my heart lighter from my morning encounters with God. I had heard His voice dancing through the wind; I had heard His instruction as I sought His face among the sunlight. My heart was encouraged and renewed, and as I gave forth of my praise to God before the gathering, He filled my mouth with His chosen Words and I did speak unto the people.



Ahran reached the borders of our camp not a moment later than he had declared. I was there to meet him. One look at his horse and that of his companion, Korel, told me that they had traveled fast and furiously, without allowance for rest or enjoying the journey. Clearly Ahran was set on discussing the business at hand, and did not mean to be entertained.

He dismounted his magnificent animal and at

my motion, handed the reins to a young boy who stood nearby. He pulled a leather skin pouch off the side of his horse and with a slight toss of his head, motioned for Korel to also leave his horse in the care of the young lad.

They were both soon by my side. Our greetings were brief and we were soon walking toward the interior of the camp, heading for my tent where we were to hold our discussion. The urgency in the air must have contributed to Ahran's apparent disregard of their customs, for no sooner had we begun walking toward camp than he pulled off his light brown turban and hung it about his neck. Korel did likewise, although he carefully folded his, placing it within the folds of his inner cloak.

*Such trivial customs must seem of little importance to a man whose family and people are in danger. Perhaps he hopes that relating to our people in ways more like our own will find him credit with our people—or more importantly, with our God, I mused.*

Once we entered my tent, the camp about us became still. We heard no noises and were interrupted by nothing. Sarah had prepared the tent ahead of time, setting out a light meal and drinks to the side of the animal skin which would provide seating during our discussion. She sensed that it would not be wise to disturb our meeting, and she was right.

The two hours which followed passed quickly, each moment and decision made representing days of work to come. Then, as hastily as they had come, upon conclusion of our discussion, the two men rose and bid me farewell. Korel gave his regards to Sarah, and it was evident they had not a spare moment to remain. They departed speedily, the only proof of their having been at our camp the clouds of dust which their horses kicked

up at their departure.

I was tired. Spent from our meeting, I made my way toward the tent of prayer, hoping to find a moment of refreshment. Once inside, I removed my sandals and looking up, noticed Eliezer already kneeling. I quietly approached and knelt beside him. He turned to face me for a moment in silence, before returning his gaze and arms upward, as we both passed the next several minutes in prayer and communion with our God. Once the feeling of renewal came, I praised my Lord in my heart, then began to rise. Eliezer helped me to my feet and we made our way back to the center of the camp, where the menfolk had prepared a roast for all.

The details of my discussion with Ahran and Korel would have to be shared with the elders, however, I felt it best to first discuss the matter with a few. I summoned Sarah and Eliezer to join me in my tent, where we settled in for an important council.

“You are my closest and most trusted counselors,” I explained. “I trust that you will be able to accept, if not understand, the path which our God is sending us forth upon. It may not be to our choosing, but it is our duty to heed His commandments, which He has given in this matter. I will now tell you of Ahran and Korel’s tidings.”

I paused to wait for Eliezer and Sarah’s reactions, which thankfully, were nods of assent, and even a curious sparkle in Sarah’s eyes. I proceeded.

“I would tell you in all truth that my original intent has been greatly altered by the hand of God. I stood firmly against any notion that would seem to put our camp and people in harm’s way, yet God has directed me even against the wisdom which I thought He had blessed me with. I was instructed

to remain silent and to hear Ahran and Korel’s words; to not judge the matter in their presence; to allow them to proceed according to their desire, and above all, to manifest faith in our God that they might find strength in Him. It was in this frame of mind that I entered into our speaking, or rather, my listening.

“Ahran appeared taxed beyond measure, and left Korel to explain their position. Perhaps God ordained it to be so for my benefit, for Korel does speak with a wisdom and temperance that Ahran is yet acquiring. He stated that they wish to move their camp alongside ours. In fact, *within* our borders.”

Eliezer sat up straight at those words, closing his eyes, as if trying to imagine the confusion this would bring into our already large camp, not to mention the obvious danger in associating ourselves so willingly with Ahran’s camp. I could see the images forming in his mind: The elders, now with an even greater load of persons to manage; the children, unfamiliar with the grounds and terrain; in general, their people being so different from our people, in custom, in speaking, in tradition, in rule, and not least of all—in religion. How would the pieces fit together? Were we now to voluntarily throw ourselves in the midst of this conflict?

Sarah sat quietly. She lay a hand on my knee, but kept her gaze fixed toward the floor. Her fingers played with the edge of her long dress, where some strands were coming loose. The intensity with which she unraveled the threads further showed that her mind was also fast at work.

“Oh, there is so much to be discussed, even if this were to be only a far away dream,” Sarah said with expression, putting into words all of our anxious feelings. “Are we youthful enough to carry

this task through to completion?” she then inquired, which I must confess, I had not yet thought of until then.

No one answered, perhaps because we knew that our God was not going to reconsider this matter; thus we concluded our time would be better spent in discussion of how to make the needed preparations.

Eliezer and I remained lightly brooding over the matter, while Sarah had uttered her piece. Though perhaps one could call her words doubtful, given the circumstances, they were not more so than our own thoughts. Somehow she traveled farther than the both of us during the silent moments which had just passed, and she shortly spoke again, this time with a lilt in her voice.

“Well, it is a good thing, then. God must see us in His sight as youthful and strong, for I have never known Him to be unjust or unwise. I shall undertake the care and the assembling of all matters pertaining to the children and women of their company, if you would see fit for me to do so. There is not much time to be standing idle now; there is much to be done.

“Tell us, Abraham, how much time do we have to prepare? How are we to accept them? As part of our people? Are we to assign our families to instruct their families in our ways, or are we to allow them to live as they would in their own camp? There will be many questions to answer and much to explain to our people, for we cannot have them unsure of how to approach or give answer to their questions. No doubt there will be many, for their customs and lifestyle cannot be compared to ours.” Then she sighed, and with a slight smile, added, “We are blessed with such a wonderful life. Perhaps we can interest them in partaking of some of it.”

I looked up at these words. Eliezer glanced up

also, and I noted a faint glimmer in his eyes. “What is it, my aged friend?” I asked with a hint of a smile. Eliezer was thirty-some years younger than I, and regardless of the situation, however pressing or despairing, Eliezer always maintained his ability to graciously accept a joke.

He smiled, seeming to shake off the cloud that had previously dampened the air about him, and said cautiously, “You are right. I fear my age is taking its toll, for I am the last one to understand the workings of the Lord. I only begin now to see a ray of purpose in our predicament. God must have found great favor in Ahran, for I do believe, or see veritable reason, that He would want their people to partake of the goodness of God. It is unusual that they would be brought in so close, even in our midst. But I shall be content to discover those secrets in time, as God would see fit to reveal them to me.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, “I know not the mind of God, or how each of these questions are to be answered. But God has made known to me that this joining of our camps is only to be for a time. How long this time will last, I know not. But when He has accomplished His good purpose, I believe He will send the both of our camps on to the path of His choosing.

“As to what degree their people will partake of our lifestyle or customs, I know not. I trust that God will lead in those matters as we proceed.”

I finished relating the topics of our discussion, namely when Ahran’s people would be arriving—on the morrow. They would settle their camp and all their workings this day, then pull up their borders in the evening, and break camp at the first ray of sunlight, making their way to our camp by the early afternoon. They were still awaiting a final word from me, but in keeping with the Lord’s Words to my heart to accommodate their desires, I made

it known to them that they would be welcome. The rest of our discussion briefly wended its way through the accounting of their numbers, supplies, herds, caravans and the like, so that our camp could be prepared to receive their people and all their possessions.

We formed a general plan of where to locate their company within our borders, and proposed to move some of our tents in a relatively open area elsewhere, so that Ahran's people might settle together. Their tents and supplies would form a semi-circle around the area, giving this previously less guarded area a stronger appearance. Their herds would be sent off a distance immediately, to provide as much peace and calm as possible.

We began to discuss many other matters relating to their arrival, and quickly realized that the three of us would not be able to tend to these matters, as they presented much complexity. We opted to convene with the council of elders, and explain the matter in full. Then we would divide the council into smaller groups, each group taking upon themselves a number of responsibilities and tasks, which they could further discuss.

At this conclusion, Sarah dismissed herself to locate a messenger to pass the word to all the elders to meet in the tent of counsel at the appointed time. Tired from sitting, Eliezer and I soon were out of the tent and walking along the outskirts of the camp, looking for the last time at our smoothly-running, happy and peaceful gathering of God's people. Our former problems and concerns had diminished considerably, and we now felt grateful that God had given us so many days of relative peaceful and simple living.

All too soon it was time to meet with the council of elders, and I found myself again in front of the group, my stomach in knots, wondering how they

would receive the news. As the last few elders entered the large and airy tent, Eliezer leaned over and said, "Abraham, worry not. I have spoken with the elders some, to prepare their hearts for the Words of the Lord. They will receive your words in good faith."

"Thank you," I responded, and with that assurance, wasted no time in telling them all that had transpired, and of the Lord's instructions. Eliezer was right. Either they had been well prepared by his words, or God had thrown over them all a veil of faith and trust; I believe it was both. The myriad concerns still showed on their faces, but they all gave their willing assent to carry out the required preparations, and to devote their minds and strength to the good of the camp and to the will of the Lord. I was relieved of a great burden through these many counselors, on whom I could depend.

Once the general plan had been presented by Eliezer, the elders came to life and in turn, put forth areas that needed attention, preparations and inquiries that needed to be made, and a host of practical matters to be looked to. A scribe was immediately set in motion, that none of these concerns be neglected. In a matter of moments, each of the elders being already inclined to certain areas of rule and organization, committees were established and even within the tent, the elders shifted seats with others, in order to sit in their committees and begin their planning and preparations. Eliezer began to say something to me, but my ears were pulled away from the busy scene.

*Abraham, give the word that each group of elders seek My face and counsel in their reasoning. You are not able to receive every word from My mouth, for this task is large and daunting. You must rely on their*

*ability to gain My wisdom through their moments of communion with Me. For there is an intricate plan, even in each of these practical matters; all these things will contribute to the salvation of these people whom I have created.*

“Abraham?” Eliezer gently shook my shoulder. “Are you well?”

“Yes, yes,” I said, as my senses returned to the tent. I then spoke to all the elders gathered: “I have received a word of admonition, of counsel and advice from the Lord, that we are to place much weight upon hearing the voice of the Lord in our preparations, even in those matters which seem to be routine and ordinary.

“Up until this time, you have mostly relied upon my ability to hear the voice of the Lord, although I know that some of you have heard His voice yourself. Now is the time for each of us to begin to seek Him more earnestly. You must not only labor in prayer; you must also beseech Him for His guidance and wisdom.”

I related to them the message, and received affirmation from all that before the elders would regroup with Eliezer to outline the plan in full, each assembly of elders would bring the concerns under their oversight before God, to receive a confirmation and blessing on their efforts. With this, I retired to rest.

## PRESENTING THE NEWS

At the afternoon meeting with our congregation, I was to explain to all about the turn of events, and the company that was to soon join us. While among the elders we had built up a certain amount of faith—and by now, almost a feeling of confident expectancy toward what would occur—the people knew nothing. Some were most likely even unaware of the fact that Ahran and a few visitors had come to dine with us several evenings past.

There was so much to tell them—all at once. I stopped for a moment to consider the possibility of not telling them: *Our people are only now bracing themselves for the trouble coming this way. How can they be expected to have yet another burden placed on their shoulders? Surely this is asking too much!* I had hardly gotten through my first thought before the Voice of the Lord interrupted me.

*Abraham, let not your heart waver or be fearful! You must proceed. You must speak words of faith unto your people. Yes, you will find some doubting, some despairing, and some fearing, but tell them that the Lord their God will give them a sign—and it shall come by the even.*



*A sign! How wonderful,* I thought, as I set forth toward the large assembly of men and women.

As I approached, I felt a slight chill though it was a hot and dry day. Most people were aware that something unusual was taking place, for the elders were not often absent from their posts, being called away to unexpected meetings. As nothing had been explained, anxiety ran through the crowd, a bit of it seeping into my spirit as well. All the young ones were being cared for by a small group of women, so that the others could give their full concentration to this meeting. Aside from the occasional whimper of a baby in the arms of his mother, the gathering was quiet.

I felt less confident than I had a moment earlier, but this was no time to meditate on my feelings of incapability—there was a crowd before me. Thankfully, the anointing of God descended and I began to address my people. I recapped the recent events which had led to this present day, and the way in which God had guided us each step of the way. Interspersed throughout my recounting, I reviewed the various messages which the Lord had given our people, the covenant which He had given for us to keep, and our obligation to remain loyal and true to His requests.

When I had built up their faith as much as I possibly could, there was no other way to present the news than plainly. It was simply one of those times when God's people had to obey the voice of God, and I was under obligation to tell them so.

The reactions of the people were just as God had forewarned me. Among the crowd I saw looks of surprise, wonder, obedience, acceptance, worry, fear, hopelessness, questioning, unbelief, and anger. There was too much commotion to continue speaking, so I silently prayed for my people, and I imagine the rest of the elders did likewise. There

was no telling how this would turn out.

As the crowd assimilated the news, I was reminded of the promise God had given me just moments before I began to speak to the people: *He promised to give a sign—by this even.* I knew that I must tell the people this, else God would not be glorified. *But do the people even deserve a sign? And for all the upheaval this news has caused, what if God should see fit to withhold the sign for a space of time? Then would it not set the people in further distress?* I questioned the need to hold out this ray of promise before the people, lest it not be fulfilled in the way they would expect, and they be disappointed or disillusioned with the Words of the Lord.

Meanwhile, Eliezer and Kerah were quieting the people, instructing them to once more give ear to my words. As I raised my hand to speak, all became quiet once again. Every eye was fixed intently on my face, as if ready to cling to the words that would come out from my mouth. I knew what words to say.

“My people,” I said loudly, in the most assuring tones I could put forth, “as I walked here to meet with you, God spoke to my heart. He has said that, unto you who despair, who fear, who worry, who feel cause for alarm, He will give a sign. Perhaps it will be a sign of His protection, of His strong arm, to encourage and refresh your weakened faith,” I ventured. “And in His mercy, He has promised that this sign will come to you ...” I paused for a moment, “... in the even.” Those words brought a hush to the crowd.

I soon closed the gathering, but most remained, choosing to mill about among the crowds. We did not gather as a complete body frequently, which made for much conversation for the men and womenfolk on such an occasion; coupled with the significant

news they had just heard, we had no choice but to set the children to scurry throughout the crowds. Once they had located their parents, the informal gathering was soon brought to a close, and the afternoon went on into the evening.

I presumed I would have a measure of calm and quiet before the morrow's events, but I had been mistaken. After all had taken their fill of the evening meal, the women and children dispersed, each one returning to their own tents. There had been nothing that could have been perceived as a sign as yet, but the even was not yet over. I remained outside to take in the fresh, clear air, and to gaze for a moment at the starry sky overhead, which was just beginning to darken, providing a magnificent backdrop for the array of stars that lit our nights.

Our meals were not all shared together, for we were too great a number. Rather, as the camp was divided into smaller groups of tents, each being of a manageable size of several families, we found it more accommodating to eat within these groups, and to prepare the food likewise. On occasion of a feast or festive celebration when we all dined together, close to thirty men would prepare the meat for the meal, which would be roasted for the entire camp. The trimmings and other dishes would be brought by each camp group.

This evening, as was customary, as the women prepared the young ones for bed, a group of men gathered about the fire and thereabouts. Several more joined the gathering as they brought their empty water pots and jugs from their tents, and filled them from the large well which was situated in the main center or open area of the camp. Talk of the afternoon meeting had by no means ceased, and while I sat a ways off from the gathering of men, I could hear their voices rising steadily.

Finally, the crowd seemed to disperse.

Then just an instant later, I heard heavy, brisk footsteps approaching where I sat. Then I heard the voice.

"Abraham!" it yelled out with a rage.

I sat up quickly from my formerly relaxed position and my eyes strained to focus on the man swiftly approaching me. He was a large fellow, lumbering toward me with no intention of stopping, it seemed. His face burned red, and his spirit was enraged. I looked around to see where I could turn to. Thankfully, some of the surrounding men had noticed the same, and two men rushed up beside him and constrained him just five or six paces from where I was. I was standing by this time, bracing myself for what was coming next.

A man held him at each of his arms, pulling him back by the shoulders, but he continued to struggle forward. Shortly a third man came and they steadied his body and prevented him from his intended actions. But they could not silence his tongue or his anger. He was in a frenzy, and let his tongue loose to tell of all his thoughts. He cursed and foamed, spilling out hatred and discontentment, much of it unintelligible, but what could be understood was in connection to the "damned heathens" that I was forcing the camp to bring into our midst against their will—against his will—bringing their troubles more surely upon us all.

I knew that we could not stand by listening to this raving man for long. His words were in direct opposition to the will of God. I closed my eyes and immediately received a vision of three scenes:

I saw this man standing in the camp, attending to what would be the normal duties of a man. He appeared to be sane, normal, and a decent man.

He remained in the second scene, yet to his left side lurked a dark and vile creature, a demon

of sorts. While this man was looking away toward the dark distance, this creature's mind merged in a semi-transparent sort of way over this man's mind, and the dark creature's mouth covered his own. At that moment, the man's body twisted and staggered. His face reddened and his countenance took on an enraged and frenzied look. Vile words began pouring out of his mouth, and he could not quiet himself.

In the third scene, the man lay on the ground, shaken, his body wet, but nonetheless calmed. To his side stood a small jar with a liquid. In the distance the imp could be seen diminishing, and a faint scream ended the sequence of visions.

I understood the meaning, but before I had long to ponder it, I was brought back to the case at hand by another loud torrent of profanity from this madman. More calmly now I bid one of the men to fetch a jar of oil. By this time all the men in the surrounding area had gathered round, perhaps forty or fifty in number. A few women could be seen from the doors of their tents, wondering what was going on.

The jar of oil was brought quickly, and I instructed the men to force the man to his knees, and the rest of us likewise knelt on the ground. I placed my hand on his forehead, holding his head firm as he twitched and tossed it about wildly. Then I took the jar of oil and began pouring it over his head.

As soon as the oil began running down his head and over the sides of his face, he quieted. All looked on intently. I then lifted my voice to the heavens and said aloud, so that all present could hear: "God of the heavens, Thou art the God of all flesh. Make Thy power known now among us, and deliver this one from the power of darkness and evil. May the evil one that

troubles his soul be cast out of him! Cleanse his spirit and mind with the oil of redemption, and restore him to his rightful being."

At those words, a faint scream tore out of his mouth, and just as had appeared in my vision, the man fell limp to the ground, and lay there, shaken and wet from the ordeal, but calmed. We gave glory to God. Shortly the man's sister came to tend to him, and he was brought to his tent to rest.

Sarah, noting that the gathering had fairly dispersed, though most of the men still remained in the area, came to inquire as to my strength and health, bringing me an additional cloak and something to drink. I had by this time confirmed that the man's name was Loshur, and Sarah informed me that word of this outburst was already spreading through the camp. I briefly explained to her what had happened, and we resolved to discuss the matter further once we had retired for the evening. *Was this the sign God had promised?* I wondered. *If so, how does He mean for it to prove His power to His people?*

Although the sky was darkening, all of us who had witnessed this event remained fixed to the location where we had just witnessed the conflict of spiritual forces. Some of the men stood about talking; others were silent, looking out into the distance, no doubt thinking about what had just taken place, perhaps others entertaining questions or doubts of their own. It was this thought that struck concern in my heart.

I called over to a man standing nearby and began talking with him about the occurrence. Within a short while, more men gathered around, wanting to hear what was being said. One man asked how I had known what to do to restore Loshur to his proper state of mind. I explained the vision that I had been given, and gave God the glory in that He

had led and guided me to fulfil it, for verily, I had not had to deal with such an incident before.

Through relating the scenes as they had been shown to me, I was able to explain to the men how this had not been a case of Loshur's own anger and words coming forth to attack me, but rather that of an evil spirit or power that had overshadowed him, taking control of his tongue and spirit, likely through some allowance on his own part. This was well understood, for many who knew Loshur testified to his being a prudent and diligent man, faithful in his duties, and not the sort to voice such vehement opposition to God's appointed leader. One acknowledgement made was in regard to his temper, which admittedly was fiery, but bore little resemblance to the fashion that had been displayed this day.

This led into discussing other spiritual matters, and we talked for some time. I asked if there were any among the crowd who had further questions, or who were troubled with thoughts akin to Loshur's accusations. I assured them that such doubts or fears were given to man, and that it would behoove them to speak their contemplation now, rather than allow it to fester within until such a time as they would not be able to hold it back; perchance they too could then be used as a tool for the declaration of evil, as we had just witnessed.

One brave man spoke his piece. It was Narod, keeper of the herds and animal trader, a cunning and skilled man, with a reputation of honesty and loyal devotion to God.

"Abraham, I put my faith in the Words of God. But I must confess that I have had troubling thoughts this day when thinking on the safety of my family. When Jeriah left the camp with those who chose to follow him, I rested in the strength and power of our God to protect us. Yet now that

double peril has been placed upon us, I cannot help but think of Jeriah and the safety of his camp. No harm has befallen him. I do not wish to doubt the will of the Lord, but I do find myself hoping that I have not failed my family in not choosing to seek further protection for them—such as those Jeriah has provided safety for." He hung his head in shame, and added, "Alas, perhaps it is only my faith that is weak. I know the Words of our God to be just and true, and if I were to fail Him, that would also be grievous to my soul, and so much the more."

Other men then spoke up, indicating that they, too, had thought on the same matters. Jeriah's departure had left questions in their hearts and minds.

Another man put the group's feelings into words: "Jeriah left camp against the Words of the Lord, yet he now appears to be the wisest of us all. Is there no punishment, no retribution for those who step outside the borders of God's protection? I do not wish ill to befall his company, yet many have questions because of this. Is the Almighty but presenting us with a choice which bears no significant consequence in either direction? Will He hold it to our fault if we should choose to follow after Jeriah's footsteps?"

"Your reasoning is sound," I replied. "I do not condemn any of you for your questions, for I know that your hearts are set to do the will of God. As for the answers, I am but a man, and I know not what to make of Jeriah and his company; God has relieved the burden of them from my heart. But He has made very plain the way in which we are to walk, and has said more times than I can count that we are to remain here, and to do the work which He has placed before us.

"Of one thing I am certain, and that is that it is vain for man to question the workings of God, for

we do not see as He does. The way in which He leads us to walk for certain does not hold a snare. As for Jeriah's company, if the Almighty sees fit that judgement should come upon them, then it will come in the season of His choosing. Until such a day should come, we should watch and pray, leaving the judgment of our own brothers in the hands of God."

"Amen," came a familiar voice from behind me. Eliezer had apparently joined the gathering at some point, but had remained silent. To hear his voice was an encouragement to me, and the other men echoed his sentiments.

"And do not forget the sign which our God has promised us this very evening," Eliezer added, "We have not long to wait, for the late even is nearly come. Therefore put faith in your hearts, good men." The informal gathering soon disbanded, and every man returned to his own tent. Eliezer sat down next to me.

I was just about to ask him where he had been during the past few hours, but he sensed my question before I asked. "Abraham, I regret that I was not here with you, for Sarah has told me of Loshur's behavior, and of all that followed. I was engaged with some of the elders in preparation for the arrival of Ahran's company on the morrow. I did not hear of the incident until we had finished."

"That is well, Eliezer. You cannot spend your every waking hour by my side. God was with me, while you attended to matters of the camp. I never doubt that you are engaged in important matters, though your presence does me great benefit, my good friend. And as for the great arrival on the morrow, it had nearly vanished from my mind this even. These days I am unable to give heed to more than one matter, or two perhaps, at the same time."

"It is for the good, Abraham, for you are now able to hear the voice of the Lord more clearly. And upon this does our entire camp depend."

"That is indeed true, Eliezer," I affirmed slowly, "but I hope that I have heard correctly in heralding the promised sign from the Lord, due to arrive even as we speak. May God forgive my lack of faith, for when you reminded the men of His promise, my heart was gripped with dread, for the hour is late. What will the Lord do to prove Himself? Ah, but I am a foolish man. How can I question my God thus?"

"You must be sorely spent, Abraham, yet you continued talking with that group of men for some while. You must rest."

"And my conversation with them is what troubles me so. Did you hear the words of Narod? He is a just man and true to his God. He had not the spirit of doubt or rebellion, as did Jeriah. Yet he, and the others also—each on their own—have been besieged with thoughts of Jeriah's presumed wisdom in leaving the camp. They see no evidence that God is displeased with him, or those who took to his side; therefore it is hard for them to remain here as God has commanded, when Jeriah leads his people to greener pastures, and we abide, awaiting certain confrontation. No doubt this sentiment has spread through the entire camp by now.

"I do understand their concerns, Eliezer, for did I not have the same concerns for my own family—for Sarah and my beloved Isaac? I am old and soon will perish; I only long to live my last days in peace with my son and wife. Yet I have heard the Word of the Lord for my household. Though it be not my own choice, I am convinced that we are to remain. Yet these good men, they have not heard the Word of the Lord

in their own ears; they must rely in faith upon the words of another—an old man, weakened in years and gray. Surely God will bless them for their faith, which is greater than mine.”

“For certain,” Eliezer said, as he helped me to my feet and walked me to my tent.

I spent the next hour lying in my bed, tossing and turning, pondering on the promised miracle. Time had almost run out on God’s promise, and I decided to not worry myself further about it. I dreaded waking the next morning, for fear of having to face the people with no sign from the Lord, yet the events of the day had taken their toll on my body, and my mind was too weary to entertain these thoughts for long. I was soon fast asleep.

## TIDINGS FROM JERIAH’S CAMP

When morning broke and I opened my eyes, still groggy and only half-awake, I saw Sarah sitting by the side of the bed, watching over me. She was dressed in a light and flowing dress. Around her neck was a finely decorated necklace made of hand-crafted beads, a gift given to her by Sheriah, the elderly keeper of women for the house of Abimelech, king of Gerar.

My mind flashed back to the day that I faced Abimelech’s wrath at my having deceived him by saying that Sarah was my sister, rather than my wife. The king had given us many gifts, for he was greatly pleased with Sarah, and once he had taken her into his dwelling, he continued to bestow gifts upon our company, to keep our good will. It was largely due to his provision that we were able to become established in that land.

But God had reproved me for my deceitfulness and lack of faith. As a token of repentance, He required that we suffer the loss of the gifts and possessions which we had acquired at the hand of the king. In our humility, we gave both the herds and the silver unto the poor of the land, that God might bless them, and turn our sorrow into good



for the land that we had wronged by our untruth. All this we did, in shame and humility, and our hearts were softened and I was low in my sight before all the people.

As we prepared to depart that day, Sheriah had come to our caravan, bringing this necklace for Sarah. They had grown to become friends during Sarah's time in the king's court, and had spent much time together. Sheriah had seen both Sarah's and my brokenness as a result of the whole encounter, and as she placed the necklace about Sarah's neck, she had said, "Sarah, let this sit about your neck as a keepsake of what you have learned here; let its beauty remind you that the humility you have gained is a costly treasure, but lovely in the eyes of all who look upon you." With those words, she kissed Sarah on the forehead and parted, never to be seen by us again.

This necklace was the only material possession our camp possessed from that time which I always longed to forget. Yet now it truly had become a symbol of loveliness. Sarah wore it with finery, and the humility that we had experienced that day at the rebuke of the king had remained with us in large part, for which I was now grateful.

Sarah's long hair was plaited and tied up gracefully, with a few strands of curls that had fallen loose adorning her lovely face. With a slight smile, she bent down to kiss me.

*She is perfect in every way, I thought. It's no wonder that Abimelech wanted her for himself. Any man would. I have been so blessed to have her by my side all these years.*

Before I could fully take in this enchanting sight that lay before my eyes, her voice took on a sober tone. "Abraham, I believe the sign has come." I was all at once awake. Sarah still looked as beautiful as ever, but now all I could focus on

were her lips, repeating in slow motion the words, "The sign has come."

"Sarah, tell me. Tell me!" I begged her. "What has happened?" I had only just then remembered that we were awaiting a sign, so deep had been my sleep.

"It's Jeriah and his company..." her voice trailed off. She was not smiling; this did not appear to be the kind of sign that brought rejoicing to one's heart.

"From where did the news come?" I inquired, as I rose to dress myself. Sarah had my sandals ready at the foot of the bed, and handed me my staff. I did not always carry my staff around the camp, so I looked at her curiously, but took it. She responded by putting her arms about me and sighing, "Oh darling, you must go and hear the news in person. I understand that the messenger is in the tent of council, where most of the elders are now gathered."

I was soon at the doorway of the tent of council, where the astonished faces of my fellow counselors silently greeted me. Eliezer was the only one fit to speak. "Abraham, come and sit," he said.

"What news is there?" I asked anxiously. "And who is the messenger who has brought these tidings?"

"The tidings were told us by Joram, who, along with a small company of men, took a caravan of supplies for trading into a city two days journey from here. They left six days ago, and knew nothing of Jeriah's departure, nor of anything else. On their return to camp, they chanced to pass by a desolate way, where they found Naboth lying beaten and bruised."

My brow wrinkled, as I tried to recall Naboth's face. Eliezer continued, "Naboth was the night guard who joined Jeriah's team as they departed.

It was from his words that Joram learned all that we have now come to know.

“They had settled in a comfortable area, and things seemed to be going well for them. Jeriah, according to Naboth, became more haughty and demanding as the days passed. He began to insist that undue respect be paid him, for he touted before his people that he was their deliverer and protector from certain death. His words divided the people. His counselors and mighty men tried to force the others into submission, but some were unwilling to concede to his demands, wishing rather to simply live their lives without Jeriah being put in a place much above them.

“Dissension began to spread throughout the camp, and in the midst of their confusion, they were attacked by pillagers. Half of their herds were stolen; much of their supplies also ravaged. A number of the men were attacked and beaten, as was Naboth. Some of the women were taken as spoil. But Jeriah ...” he paused, “... Jeriah was killed.”

“Killed? Were there others?” I could hardly believe my ears.

“No, only Jeriah. Apparently he could not hold his tongue, and incited one of the robbers to end his life.”

I leaned my head against my staff. *Jeriah, Jeriah*, I moaned in my mind. *You were just a lad, young and thoughtless. Why did you have to choose to go against the ways of the Lord?*

“And what of the children?” I asked, hardly wanting to know.

“The children are safe, Naboth told Joram. Praise be to God. We have Naboth in our camp now; he pled with Joram to be brought back.”

“And what of the others?”

“A smaller group, as we understand, has deserted their camp—these mostly being the men

who stood by Jeriah's side, Merin and Nahal among them. They fear for their lives, and believe that a curse has been placed upon the land where they pitched their tents. Where they have gone, we know not. But they have left in their stead women and children, and their families to fend for themselves without the additional strength of the fighting men or the wisdom of the traders, for most of these have fled from their camp. It seems the remains of their dwelling is in a pitiful state.

“Those who remain have been broken under the hand of God. Naboth had dragged himself a ways off from the camp to die alone, so stricken with guilt was he. As Joram chanced upon him, he found a measure of hope and pardon, for Joram knew nothing of the matter, and extended sympathy and compassion toward him. Naboth begged to be taken back to our camp, and Joram, of course, was pleased to assist him.

“Now Naboth pleads for the lives of the others who remain. They have turned their eyes toward God, but know not how to repent on their own. They wish to return to camp, even if they must face God's wrath...”

“For they deem it better to suffer wrath at the hand of a God they know, than at the uncertain mercies of one whom they do not know,” I said, finishing Eliezer's sentence for him.

I ran my hands along my staff, meditating on all these matters. By the day our camp was burgeoning, and the walls of our tents expanding on all sides. *Soon we will be a formidable foe!* I thought to myself in jest.

Terah, an elder who was noted for his habit of listening rather than speaking, interrupted the silence. “It does appear that God has given us our sign, and a more persuasive one than any of us would have imagined. For was not the silent fear

running through the camp as a small fox the ponderance of Jeriah's peace and prosperity? Was it not the notion that God minded not their disobedience?

"For even I, who sat still in my tent last night, putting my young ones in bed, telling them tales of God's great doings, heard the rumblings which shook the entire camp, though the hour was late. I had heard nothing of Loshur's insurgence, yet within a short while, I too heard of the fears and concerns, which all seemed to have taken to their heart, as if it were hidden within the air that we breathe.

"This is the sign, my fellow counselors, at least I am sure of it. For it clearly states the mind of God on those who turn their back from His will, when they know to do good and do it not—in earnest. What say you, Abraham? These be only my words; has the voice of the Lord spoken on this matter?"

"Terah, it is good to hear your words," I answered, trying to remember the last time he had spoken his mind at such length. "Great wisdom has been stored within you from all your years of observation and listening," I remarked, and then continued.

"In truth, I have not yet this morning heard the voice of the Lord. I had barely awoken when the news was relayed to me, and I came here at once. I am certain that God will speak when I quiet myself, and it would do us all good to observe an hour of affinity with our Maker, for today is a great day, I need not remind you.

"In answer to your musings, Terah, I do believe that this is the promised sign from the Lord. We must make it known to all, that they may stand in awe before our God, and find within themselves renewed fervor to take the next step—whatever that may be."

"If I may ... " Irad ventured forth, "make no mistaking that I do believe this to be a sign—truly a great and terrible one—yet it will surely be noted that our God promised our sign to be delivered by the yesterday's even, which is now quite passed. How are we to respond to this?" he asked, directing his question toward me.

"Ah, it is but a beauty of God's workings," Eliezer filled the silence, "for the sign was indeed delivered unto us last night, but we were all fast asleep. Joram and his company arrived at camp before the late even had passed into morn. Though unbeknownst to him, the sign was brought unto us by his return."

Though grieved by the news, and the loss of Jeriah's life, I marveled at the ever-constant faithfulness of our God. Then I recalled the Words of the Lord to me, that I should not see Jeriah's face again. I did not suppose at that time that I would be seeing the others who had gone with him again either. *Truly, every one of Your Words are fulfilled, my God.* I said inwardly.

"Can you not clearly see the hand of the Lord in having one who was ignorant of all the camp's turmoil to have stumbled upon Naboth?" I put forth. "Joram had no judgements of his own to put forth. As our God is good and merciful, so was Joram, caring for Naboth as a brother—without personal anger or vengefulness."

"And may we nevermore doubt the words of our God, for when He promises a sign at a given hour, it will most certainly come. He has until this day never failed to keep His Word. We must also prepare to bring in the rest of Jeriah's company; those who would return in meekness are welcome. A team must be assembled to manage this regrouping." I paused. "And I must now go to ask God for forgiveness, for I did trouble myself with thoughts of His sign not appearing, and I must now repent,"

I confessed before all. Many elders hung their heads and resolved to do the same, for they too, had endured a night of unnecessary concern.

The camp would be summoned for our morning gathering, as had been customary for the last day or so, at which time we would explain in full the news of Jeriah's camp. Meanwhile, I headed to the tent of prayer, to request the mercies of my God.

As always, God rewarded the humility of my heart, and blessed me with the garment of peace and restfulness. As I sat, with all my attentions directed toward God's wishes, He gave me the understanding of His workings.

*But why could I not see it before? I wondered. Miracles as great as those which are to come in the days ahead require great measures of faith. God has been testing our reliance upon Him. He has allowed us to see that we have fallen short, as weak and faithless men when we do not see with our natural eyes the manifestation to that which He has promised. Yet He has in truth answered as He has promised, and we must set our belief upon this principle, regardless of whether or not our eyes bear witness to this. In time, we will see the manifestation, as surely as the sun will rise each morn and set each even.*

With this purpose set resolutely in my heart, I stood before our entire congregation and, with a burning passion in my heart, passed on this message to them. And as we all witnessed, God's promise of a sign had not been solely a display of His power, to show His children how far His mighty arm can stretch, but rather it was a personal act, that touched the heart of each man and woman sitting before me that day. I saw a little bit of that burning flame in my heart extend to each of them.

As all left the gathering to prepare for the arrival of Ahran's company, there was a light in each

one's eyes, and an unshakable confidence in our God. There were also tears of joy shed at the news that those from Jeriah's camp who wished to return were welcome, for there were many friends, loved ones, and even relatives that had found their lives broken apart as a result of Jeriah's contention and dissension. Tears of remorse were also shed for those who would never return.

A company of strong men were set out to recover the remains of Jeriah's camp, and to aid those who wished to return, which were in number nearly thirty. When they returned a few days later, they were greeted with love and compassion. Some of their bodies were broken, but all their hearts were in need of repair. Special care was given to them, and the elders tended to their spirits. With time, they recovered in full.



Ahran's company arrived in the afternoon, and immediately all quarters of the camp swung into lively motion. Our herdsman met their caravan train a ways off, so as to divert the herds from coming within close distance of the camp. Their herds and herdsman were led to grazing pastures, and the rest of the caravans continued toward our camp.

Eliezer rode out to meet the caravans when still a ways off. He rode back alongside Korel, who, by this time we had ascertained, managed the coordinating of their camp and counselors, as Eliezer did ours. They discussed logistics, arranging for a quiet evening once all had been settled. On the evening of the morrow, there would be a feast with song and dance, once Eliezer made certain that song and dance did not strictly clash with their customs.

"As your people wish," Korel assured him, "so will we do. As for customs, we have not many, at

least not any more. They have been broken down over the years away from our land. We have talked to our people, and they expect to partake of your customs and practices. They rest in the faith of your God—and of your people. I must warn you that having no such heritage of belief, though they have been instructed to try, I foresee an amount of difficulty on this issue. How are they to have faith in something they know nothing about? Few of us have seen men who walk so closely beside their God.

“I hope this will not present large difficulties to your people, for no doubt they will speak of their thoughts to them. It is not a pleasant matter, I realize, but I thought it best to tell you now.”

“Yes, that can be foreseen, and it is not the fault of your people, Korel. Yet our God has strengthened our people this day, in giving us a sign of His power. He has shown every man and woman that He does not watch from afar, but that He looks down on each of us individually. It becomes clearer by the moment why He chose to give us the sign that He did, though it was not what we were expecting.”

Korel listened respectfully, without asking more about this mystery sign. His years of acting as counselor to his nephew had taught him to remain content in what was told him by another man of authority. If there was more to be known, it would be revealed in good time. To pry into another’s concerns would only add to the burdens which he would then have to bear.



For such a magnificent integration of people, the afternoon arrived and went with little commotion. Ahran’s people were hard workers, and they did not assume more than they were given, nor did they expect men from our camp to tend to them. They were used to being self-sufficient; by

supper their tents were raised, and they proved themselves to be crafty builders, devising sheltered areas for cooking and other conveniences out of few materials.

Though most of Ahran’s people spoke little of the local language, having retained their own native tongue, this did not restrict all communication. Our people were curious. A group of our women approached some of their women to converse, to the best of their ability, about the children. Leah and Tamar were taking a group of children off into the distance to stretch their legs and run about. They invited a few of their womenfolk and children to join them, which they happily did. It was such interactions, on a small scale, that brought our two companies of people together. Through kind gestures on both parts, small bridges were built throughout the afternoon and evening to cross the wide chasm that might have separated us.

The day that followed brought with the rising sun its share of work and shifting about the camp. The women met to consult about the children; the men built more shelters and moved the caravans about to encamp the new settlers in. Areas for cooking and open fireplaces were built. They split their camp into smaller groups, following in our fashion, for mealtimes. Singers and dancers prepared for the evening festivities. Performances from both of our camps were to be presented, and all the children were awhirl with anticipation of the evening’s celebrations.

Preparation for supper began hours before the sun went down. A number of young men enlarged our communal sitting area, for we now had one hundred and thirty more people to accommodate. Yet in our gladness for all having gone so well, it seemed there was room in our camp for many more.

The night took us through a variety of cultures as we enjoyed the song and dances from not only our own people, but from the men and women of Ahran's tribe. Being of Egyptian descent, their tribe provided entertainment unique to their own people, along with the graceful movements of the Egyptian peoples. The children all at once began imitating their dancing movements, and soon the entertainment turned its ground to the children, who, although they had prepared nothing, seemed to hold the rapt attention of all present, with no lack of laughter and fun.

It had been a wonderful day. All were tired by the end of the festivities, and our camp fell into a deep sleep. To an onlooker, there seemed no cause for concern for the inhabitants of this happy little oasis camp, but for those who were responsible to face reality, a meeting was set for the following morn to discuss Sabit's approaching host.

## THE DARK NIGHT

"He sits a day's journey off, my scouts tell me. Or a day-and-a-half at the most," Ahran said without expression, his clenched fist resting on the table. "We must act."

I turned my face toward him. *Act?* I thought. *Is it not given unto the power of our God to act? What is it that we can do?—Marshal our forces and send forth a band of fighters? We are not a fighting people.*

No, I shook my head, thinking to myself, *That will not be our course of action.* "How is it that we can tell our God how we will act?" I said aloud.

"A god is a wonderful thing," Ahran politely acknowledged, "but the saving of our people is a most important thing, in which we must act, whether any god sees fit to or not."

"I share your concern, Ahran," I remonstrated, "but the saving power of our God—in which you chose to put your trust—cannot be dictated by the whims of man. We wait on our God, and though He may see fit to bring the edge of death close to our camp, He will protect and save us. Just how, at present, we do not know, but we do know that He will save us." The room grew silent. It was the first clash of our faith against the lack of it.



"I understand," I offered, "that it is hard to place your reliance upon something you cannot see. It has taken us a lifetime to acquire this dependence, and at times it is still hard for us. But in order to be worthy of His might and protection, we must sacrifice our own human reasoning, that He may be able to do as He pleases."

"Your God makes it hard for a man such as I," he said under his breath. "I will excuse myself. If we are not to make solid plans, then I see myself of no use." Ahran bowed slightly as he left the tent.

A few of the elders present shifted about, and eventually began talking amongst one another. However, an inner battle had already begun to rage within me. We did have experience in fighting, for God had caused us to defeat the armies of four kings only a few years earlier. But we had since enjoyed a time of peace, and were not prepared for a full attack. But I knew that we could, if the need arose, muster a force of a few hundred men. Yet I was not in a warring spirit. I felt God pulling my heart away from preparing for a large battle.

Korel approached me, bringing my mind back to Ahran who had excused himself.

"Abraham, do not be alarmed. He will return in better spirits."

"I hope that is meant to be a comfort to me," I replied. "Young men ... there is too much fight in them."

"That there is," Korel agreed with a smile, "But there is one thing I feel I should tell you."

I looked up into his eyes as his voice took on a more somber tone.

"I am not a spiritual man. I do not see visions nor feel premonitions; I operate on my logic, the facts I receive and the mind I have been given. Yet something has been stirring within me concerning Ahran's temperament, which I feel I

can do nothing about. I believe it has been left to your discernment to watch over him in this way. It is concerning his son..."

"Ah," I sighed, feeling another weight of responsibility being placed on my shoulders. "I know, it must be tended to. You are right, Korel."

"I do not mean it like that, Abraham. Rather I feel that somehow Ahran will not endure the ... I am not certain what the correct word to describe it is; perhaps it is the testing that will come upon us shortly, that is, if he has not made some concessions with you, or your people, or could it be with ... your God?"

Korel shook his head. "I know not even what I speak of. An unsettled feeling has come over me that perhaps this has something to do with Jehmi.

"Knowing Ahran, I must confess there was great surprise on my part when he decided to join your camp, for I had not imagined, in all my foresight, that he would do so. He has always taken the barren road and the desolate paths. It is uncharacteristic of him to place himself in another man's keeping, and no doubt he is feeling the insecurities of it already.

"From my observations of the working of your God, there is much patience to be learned on his part, and also a surrender. I know not how else it could come other than through his son, for at this time in his life, Jehmi is the only motivation which he possesses to be convinced otherwise. That is all."

"Thank you," I said. "I must retire to ponder all these matters." Korel nodded and we both left the tent.

I sat down before reaching my tent, and the thoughts began rushing through my mind. *Why is it that I am being told everything by those around me? Should You not be the One to reveal these things unto*

*me? Perhaps age is dulling my senses, and I can no longer hear the Voice of my God as clearly, therefore He must use the words of those about me to instruct me as to the next course of action.*

But God proved me wrong. Abraham! Can you hear these, My Words? Can you hear this, My Voice?

“I can, my Lord, my God,” I replied.

*Then it is not your senses growing dim, but rather the working of My choosing. You are incapable of sustaining all your people during this time. You are in need of your counselors, your helpers, even those who are but visitors to your camp. I do speak My Words through them also, that you may have greater assistance, and that you may have the presence of My Spirit and counsel even when you are not able to be quiet and alone before Me. Therefore give thanks unto Me, rather than be dismayed, the Voice chided.*

“Yes, my Lord. I am but a foolish man. I do give honor and thanks unto You for Your workings. And now, what am I to do with Ahran, and his son? Surely You have spoken through Korel in this matter, to show me a part of Your plan. But I understand not how I am to turn his heart toward You. There is not much time.”

*I have already shown you what you must do, Abraham. In quietness I will restore the vision to your heart. Be prepared, for Ahran is a proud man. His nerves are strained at this time. Do not allow yourself to be distressed or alarmed. Your confidence and calmness will provide a torch in this, his dark night.*

I sat still, eagerly waiting to hear more, for God had begun to reveal unto me the inner secrets of Ahran’s heart. *This ... his dark night?* I mused. But the Voice grew quiet, and from the familiar feeling which encircled me, I knew He had left off speaking for the time being.

“Oh, do not quiet now!” I pleaded. “I am not ready

to face this man, for yet I know not what to do.” But the Voice was gone.

I rose and began walking toward my tent, in hopes of finding quietness, in order for the vision to be restored unto me. I put forth an effort to think on God’s goodness, knowing that He would be more gracious unto me if I held a heart full of faith. And He did honor my faith, however feeble, for my original dream was restored to me in full through a vision, and I felt a peace in my heart.



“Jochim, have you seen Sarah about?”

“Yes, she’s in Leah’s tent,” the answer came.

*I should have guessed! Whenever anyone is in Leah’s tent, Jochim will know who it is,* I chuckled to myself.

Shortly I found Sarah and I asked her to send an invitation for Ahran and his family to join us for supper.

“And where is Isaac?” I asked.

“He just ran out to fetch something for Josiah. He’ll be back in a moment.”

“Good. I’d like to walk with him for a bit. You know, he’ll need to be with us for supper.”

“Will he? Oh, he’ll be so excited, dear. I’ll have him ready in a minute.”

Isaac, like most young boys, was full of energy, and hardly let me get a word in edgewise. He told me of his day, what new things he had learnt, and of the new friends he was making from the “visiting group” as he called them. I barely had a chance to tell him what I had planned before it was time to return from our short walk.

Sarah met us both, and after Isaac had greeted her with a big hug, she informed me that Ahran had insisted on entertaining us.

“Well, in custom we have served him, and now he is within his right to serve us. We must accept,”

I said. "Let them know we will be there at the hour of their choosing. Did you inform them that Isaac would be coming?"

"Our invitation was for their family, so I believe they are prepared," Sarah answered.

"Very well then, let us prepare!"



Inside Ahran's tent we experienced an entirely new glimpse into the lifestyle of this former Egyptian tribe. I say former, for as Korel had so accurately told me, their customs and culture had nearly vanished, merging and blending into those of the native people in whose lands they sojourned at any given time.

Glancing around their tent, I recognized trademarks from various tribes and peoples whose lands we had also traveled through. They seemed inclined to travel a fair bit, for their possessions reflected necessity and were made of sturdy materials. Perfection gave way to the practical. Perhaps it was for this reason that their people seemed to have cultivated a wonderful skill in handcrafting, for along the walls of the tent and hanging in the doorway were the most exquisite pieces of decoration I had seen for some time. Our young women adored their works, and already about the camp were seen simple duplicate works hanging about, and lessons being given in the art of handcrafting.

*It has only been two days, yet already we are deriving bits of their culture and richness, I thought. No doubt this is how they acquired so many trades and skills; they seem to leave themselves open to learn from anyone.*

"More food?" Ahran's offer interrupted my musing.

"I have had sufficient, my good man, but I cannot resist a small portion more," I said, as his

lovely wife, Ulyina, served me another helping of a tasty dish.

"You must instruct our womenfolk on how to prepare these dishes as well, for it has been a while since we have had such variety," I complimented Ulyina, and she blushed slightly.

"We are as family in this gathering, Ahran. If it would please you, we would that all join in the evening," I politely said.

Ahram looked towards Ulyina and nodded with a smile, indicating that she was free to speak and converse with those she was hosting.

"Thank you, sir," she said gently, with a thicker accent than Ahram's, but such a delicate voice that her accent was entirely forgotten.

Isaac had been sitting aside with Jehmi, who remained half in his bed, and half sitting up. He didn't want to miss this time with Isaac, but was forced to comply with his parents' wishes and remain in bed. He barely ate at all, and Isaac, after a few bites himself, left the remainder of his food on his plate to join Jehmi.

Sarah remained composed, but ever so discreetly tugged on little Isaac's vesture as he passed behind her. When she had finally gotten his attention and his bright eyes looked at her with a questioning look, she glanced over at his plate of unfinished food.

His eyes faced the ground. Leah never let him get away with eating less than all of his food, and he was usually a good eater. It was obvious to me, and I could read Sarah's mind: *Of all times, why must you now choose to leave your food, Isaac? We are with guests.*

I placed my hand on Sarah's lower back, trying to convey that there was no need to worry. Ulyina, sensing Sarah's concern as mothers naturally do, said, "I have a dish you can take it home for him

in, and all that you like. He will be hungry before bed, no doubt. I fear their talk and play has far surpassed their desire for food, and it will not return to them until they have had their fill.”

Sarah smiled, obviously relieved, and Isaac skipped over to Jehmi’s side. Ahran, however, candidly remarked, “Perhaps that is the case with Isaac, but not with Jehmi. His malady is not one so simple, yet it has taken all the simplicity out of my boy.” Ulyina put her hand around her husband, but he would not be comforted. Presuming that the conversation would continue in this vein, Ulyina rose and let down a thick drape that separated the bed where Jehmi lay from where we dined.

“Enjoy yourselves,” she said to the two boys, and then joined us again.

As Ahran continued, I prayed for wisdom to know what I should say. Should I hold my tongue and be silent, or was there a message that I was supposed to give him? If this was his “dark night,” as God had told me, then was there not some light or hope soon to come?

His words soon culminated in an expression of despair, and he ended with an almost hopeless question, implying that there was nothing that could be done.

“I relate to your feeling of despair, Ahran, but that is not true. There is most certainly something that can be done. Our God has all power in Heaven and in Earth, and if He is willing, then you may see the answer to your prayers. I believe that He wants you to call upon him for the health of your son.”

“Very well then,” Ahran replied curtly, “you shall pray. Anoint my son with oil, or with whatever your custom dictates. Perhaps it will be that your God will heal him, for have I not brought myself under His care?”

“We will be happy to provide support in your prayer, but I do believe that God wishes for *you* to approach Him, and offer the pleadings of your own heart, Ahran.”

Ulyina looked hopeful. Though she did not understand much, in her sweetness and love for her son, she was willing to offer prayers in the hopes of her son being healed. I questioned whether God would honor her desire, seeing as she sought after the blessing, rather than the Blessor. But God was not requiring anything of Ulyina that night; His eye was on Ahran. God had covered his shoulders with a heavy darkness, that he might more clearly see the light should he choose to believe.

Sarah and I could see his inner struggle clearly. Perhaps even Ulyina could sense it, as the expression her face wore was one of hope that her husband would choose to approach our God in whatever manner He would require.

I tried to be cautious and delicate in my suggestions, knowing that Ahran was a proud man, and that this step would be a great test of his humility, but my care did not avail much. The tension became too great and Ahran rose and left the tent. Ulyina hung her head, too ashamed to say anything.

Sarah moved over toward her, and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder, “Do not worry, Ulyina. These are weighty matters, and God will give your husband strength to do right if he will only acknowledge Him.”

“I will go and find him, and tell him then,” she burst out. “I will tell him that he must do it for me, for Jehmi, for our family! He will listen.”

“Yes, perhaps he will,” Sarah’s voice grew softer, “but this is a time of decision that is his alone. It is a decision of the heart, not a matter of trading

for gain. It must come from his own willingness, else it will do no good.”

Tears streamed softly down Ulyina’s face, and she soon rested her head against Sarah’s shoulder. I nodded to Sarah that I would go and search out Ahran.

“Do not worry,” I said with a confidence that almost surprised myself. “God has told me that we are not to be alarmed. He is in control and all things will be made right if we beseech Him thus.” Sarah and Ulyina both nodded, promising to keep silent vigil, while I rose and left the tent.

Shortly I came upon Ahran, who leaned against the side of a caravan, his face tense and his teeth clenched together.

“I am sorry for the difficulty,” I said. “I understand the burden of such a decision, yet I also have experienced the joys and rewards that paying such a high price yields.”

“This is a reversal of my entire life,” he retorted. “It is not a matter of prayer.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Do you not know? This is not a matter of my son’s health. If it were, I would be joyous to partake in such a prayer. Is that not what my original intention was when I brought Jehmi to your camp in the caravan on our second meeting?”

I thought back for a moment. “Indeed, it was. Therefore why is it now so hard to come closer to your son’s deliverance?”

Ahram shook his head. “I was blindly willing to use your God—Whoever He may be—to receive a boon for my family. *What could it matter?* I thought to myself. *I will be gone soon enough, and will have made a wise trade for my son’s health.* Do you see? This displeased your God; I can feel it. With every increasing trouble I have been pushed closer to your camp and to your people, but with the lure of this miracle, I have,

without much thought, accepted the binds that He has placed about me, thinking I could shortly cast them off. I have been wrong. Now I find myself being sought after by your God, and I do not like the place where I am finding myself.

“It is not a matter anymore of Jehmi’s recovery. That cannot be secured for certain. It has come to a matter of faith—faith which I have not had, yet which I am requested to profess, at least a willingness to possess. What will become of me if I should do this thing?”

I had not realized God was requiring so much of him. I had set aside a great portion of tolerance in my mind for Ahran and his people. They knew not our God. They knew not our customs. They knew not our ways of faith. I did not expect them to conform to our way of life, though I had been pleased with their willingness to adapt and to make themselves useful and not be exceeding contrary. They had been hospitable.

I reasoned that God would perhaps heal Jehmi as a manifestation of His power, that His Name should be spread abroad. In the event of such a miracle, Ahran and his family’s hearts would be turned toward our God, and they would perhaps find faith in Him. At the time of my original musings on this matter, the thought of Ahran’s people had not entered into my mind, nor the thought of Ahran being so hounded by our God, as he expressed it to me. *God’s plan must certainly be much larger than mine,* I thought.

“I cannot tell you the mind of the Lord,” I answered. “But one thing is certain to me, and that is the knowledge that God has called upon your life. I was not aware of all these workings, nor of the extent to which He has pursued you. Be certain that it was not through any plan of mine that you have been brought to this state.

“And as to what will happen to you, Ahran, that also I cannot say. Although I have rested my entire days in the grace of our God, He has never brought me to a place that was not better than the last, nor required anything of me that did not in the end yield good and wholesome fruit.

“As a wise man told me this very day, there is a reconciling lingering in the air. God stands on one side, and your people on the other. And you, Ahran, it appears have been chosen to be the mediator for your people. He expects to speak with you.”

Ahnan was too consumed in his thoughts to ask who this wise man might have been, but perhaps it was better that way. Our exchange seemed to have softened his spirit, particularly the learning that I was not entirely aware of God’s workings. This seemed to impress upon him a greater seriousness, and he pondered on the matter a while longer, until his emotions flared again.

“Your God pushes me into such a state, that I have no choice. He seeks to break me down, to cast down my spirit. To what limit does He expect my spirit to hold? I have been shamed and humiliated, even at our councils, for I am forced to stay silent and observe the manner of your workings. Am I of no good? Now He expects me to approach Him and surrender what dignity remains within me?”

Fully expecting a compromised answer, I shocked Ahnan with an unwavering answer: “Yes.” Then I heard the Voice again, and I spoke aloud the words to Ahnan as I heard them in my mind, with my eyes closed and my hand raised.

*Would not a man that has been blessed in his own right give thanks and honor unto the God Who has tended to his needs, as one of His Own creations? You have not known Me, but I have known you. Humble yourself in My sight, that I may*

*prove My power to you, Ahnan. For I have blessed you in that I have brought you within the borders of My Spirit. Would you set yourself in scorn toward Me, or would you be spared and remain to observe My mighty hand?*

As the message ended, my raised hand found its way to Ahnan’s shoulder, and I felt that he was trembling. “Come,” I said, “we must return and do as the Lord has instructed.” Then I looked into his eyes with my question written clearly across my face: Had he found the courage within himself to do so?

The answer came slowly, but with great relief once it left his lips: “I will, Abraham. I will.”

Till this day, I do not know if I have heard more difficult words spoken—the words of one who was required to give up so much of his own reasoning in such a short time, to a God he barely knew, yet whose call he had clearly felt tugging on his heart and soul. Tears welled up in my eyes. I put my arm about him tightly and we walked back to his tent.



## **SURRENDER TO PRAYER**

As we entered the tent, it seemed that not a moment of time had passed by. The women remained in nearly the same position that I had left them in. The boys could still be softly heard, chattering and laughing away behind the thick drape. Sarah and Ulyina seemed more peaceful, and we seated ourselves. There was no need to explain what had happened; the transformation was apparent to all. There was a peace and calmness about Ahran. He sat still, waiting for me to show what we were to do next.

“We should fetch our sons,” I said, directed to Ahran, “for your prayer should be toward Jehmi and his recovery. The abundance of your heart will reach God’s ears, and He will know all the other that you wish to speak unto Him.”

Ulyina rose, with Sarah following behind to fetch the two boys. The drape soon opened again, and out came Isaac, followed by Jehmi, who walked slowly. Finding a seat nearest his father, he sat himself in a heap, with Isaac close by him.

Isaac, ever perceptive, did not wait to be called on, despite my attempts to prompt him as to appropriate behavior on our earlier walk before

supper. “Father, are we going to pray for Jehmi so that he can walk and run and play about once again?” His expectant eyes glowed, waiting for an answer.

“Yes, we are, son. Will you join us in prayer?”

“I would like to pray for him, father. He is my good friend, and I so want to see him better again. Then he can come and play with me outside, and we can go tend to the herds together.”

I could foresee Isaac going on and on about their future activities, so I interrupted him. “That’s very good, son. We all want to see him get better.” I glanced toward Ahran, wondering how to answer Isaac’s sincere request to pray, when Ahran had labored this night to find the strength within himself to do so. I could not let little Isaac take the place that was for Ahran. *But was it?*

I had no sooner questioned it than my original dream flashed in my mind again: I saw Isaac in the midst of a group of people talking. *It is meant to be*, the answer came.

“Of course you may pray, Isaac,” I answered. Turning to Ahran, I explained, “God has put it within Isaac’s heart to bear your prayer unto Him. He has heard your heart already, and if you would accept, Isaac will pray for Jehmi, that he might be healed.”

It was unexpected for Ahran, and I imagine yet another difficult moment—to allow a child to stand in his place, yet he conceded. Once he had, relief seemed to fill his soul, and it was evident to all that God had, in His graciousness, put it within the heart of a bold and fearless child to remove the burden from Ahran’s shoulders, who hardly knew what to say from his heart, much less his lips.

Isaac wasted no time. “Do we have oil, Father?” he asked.

Sarah looked at Ulyina, and within a moment a jug of oil was present. Isaac stretched out his hand for the jug, and it was given to him. Sarah looked on with amazement. Isaac was certainly bold, but never had he commanded a situation so entirely.

The instruction from God to use oil in anointing the sick had come many years earlier when many in our camp had been besieged by a strange illness. After the miraculous recovery of these who were near the edge of death, whenever anyone was seriously ill or injured, I would often anoint them with oil, in obedience to the Lord’s earlier Words. I presumed that since Ahran had heard of the oil I had poured over Loshur’s head at the earlier incident, he attributed it to be our custom. Now it seemed to represent a sign of his belief.

“Come over here now,” Isaac said to Jehmi, as he situated him in a better location. By this time, Isaac sat nearly in the middle of our circle, having pushed some of the dishes to the side, and he poured a little bit of the oil into the palm of his hand. “Jehmi, just close your eyes and talk to God inside. I’ll say the words,” he explained. We all closed our eyes, except for Ahran, who I noticed was in awe, and couldn’t keep himself from watching this display of faith from such a young child.

Isaac then anointed Jehmi’s forehead with the oil, and prayed: “Thank You, God, for making the whole world for us to live in and enjoy, and so many wonderful things. Thank You for each of our blessings. Thank You that I met Jehmi, and that now we’re friends.

“Please heal him from this sickness that he has. Make him well again, so that he can play and run and jump, and not be tired and have to rest in bed. He’d like to be normal again, and I would very

much like for him to be also. Father taught me that if we anoint someone with oil, then You will touch them with Your hand. I've anointed Jehmi with oil now, so please touch him and make him all better. Amen."

"Amen," we all chorused.

"Amen," Jehmi echoed, a little later than the rest of us. His bright eyes opened wide and he asked Isaac, "So, am I going to get better now?"

We parents held our breath. Isaac, confident as he was happy, replied, "Yes! We asked God to heal you, and now He's going to. Our God does mighty miracles to protect us and take care of us, so He can easily heal you."

"What is a miracle?" Jehmi asked.

Isaac turned to Sarah, "Oh mother, can Jehmi come to the story tent sometime? Then I can show him about the different miracles God has done for us that we've been learning about. Can he, can he?"

"Well dear, we'll have to ask Jehmi's parents first, and if Jehmi is feeling well enough, then perhaps they would allow him...." Sarah answered cautiously, knowing that this was a matter of religion, and perhaps Ahran and Ulyina didn't feel ready for their son to receive teachings of our faith just yet. Isaac was, after all, very convincing.

"I think it would be good for Jehmi to see these things Isaac speaks of," Ahran interjected.

"See, Mama?" Isaac bubbled over with joy. "Jehmi, wait till you see the wooden carvings that Jochim made for us. He's made lots of figures of our forefathers that we can play with and act out the whole story! Now he's working on the story of Noah and the ark that God told him to build. There are hundreds and hundreds of animals that God told Noah to take with him in his boat, because there was going to be a big flood. Now Jochim is

making the elephants! Lots of the animals I've never seen before, but of course, there are horses and cows and goats and sheep—that's why we still have them today."

Clearly he would have gone on and on, but I finally stopped him. "Isaac, why don't you wait until Jehmi can see the figures? Then you can play with them together," I offered.

"Yes," he agreed.

"Besides, dear, it's getting late, and we need to head off to bed," Sarah added.

It had been a long night for our bodies, but mostly for our spirits. We did not wish to impose on Ahran and Ulyina's hospitality more than was needed, and since we felt in our hearts that God had completed His purpose for the evening, we wished to excuse ourselves and allow us all to find rest. After a warm farewell, our little family set off for our tent, accompanied by Ahran, who walked us to our door, but not without first expressing in his own way his thanks and gratitude more than once. Before he turned to leave, I laid my hand on his head and blessed him.

Once Sarah and I lay down, we recounted the marvelous thing which the Lord had done that night. How grateful I was for the word of admonition to not be alarmed, nor to despair. At various moments, the evening had indeed been tense and awkward, yet because we had remained calm and held to the Words of the Lord, the victory had been won. I hadn't realized just how dark the night had been for Ahran, but God knew.



The next morning the sun dawned exceptionally bright. I couldn't help but remark to Sarah that it must have been symbolic of Ahran's change of heart. How God would see fit to answer Isaac's prayer for Jehmi's health remained to be seen.

"I do earnestly pray that God will answer speedily, and will restore Jehmi in an outward fashion. It would so encourage Ahran and Ulyina, and would provide a clear testimony for all his people," Sarah said wistfully.

"I share your feelings, my dear. But I believe that God will work in speed equal to Ahran's acceptance of His ways. He requires much of this man, much more than I would. Yet that is not for us to question, but rather only to aid Him, and Ahran also, in whatever way we are able."

"So we shall," Sarah affirmed. "Come, let us take our morning meal outside."

We headed out and sat under the shade of a caravan's awning, sheltered from the relatively cool winds that this day provided, and the dust that inevitably came along with it. Soon we were lost in our conversation, until two young men walked by the other side of the caravan which we sat near. We overheard their conversation, which centered around Sabit and his approaching band. Their words were colorful and piercing, tinged with anger and youthful idealism as to how they would confound this people who would soon be upon us.

Sarah placed her hand on mine, knowing that our conversation had ended, and that my mind was now turning toward the nearing danger which approached our camp. "You must go seek for guidance, Abraham," she offered.

"Yes, I must, my dear. I must find a word from the Lord on what we are to do. How are we to prepare for Sabit's men?" I paused for a moment, searching the possibilities to further fortify or plan strategy, then sighed. "Hear me now! Only yesterday I silenced Ahran's concerns, which were just the same as those I now speak. What am I to do?" I questioned myself.

"Perhaps it seems so, but I would rather believe that God had a series of plans which had to be effected in order to bring Ahran to his present state. Your strong words at the council meeting were no doubt part of His plan. Now if God should reveal to you that we are to prepare, so be it. We should not question His workings," Sarah answered, trying to encourage me.

"For you and me, these things can be understood and believed, but it will be difficult to explain such a thing to Ahran," I argued.

"Well then, God may have to explain it to him," Sarah countered. "Then again, perchance He would wish for Ahran to see His leading firsthand.... I know this is not a privilege given to most men—even those who are of our camp and of our faith—yet God has not led in an ordinary manner with this man. What if he were to join with you and a few of the elders to receive the words of the Almighty on this matter? Then the weight of responsibility in his eyes would be taken off of you; it would rest on God's shoulders—where it belongs."

Sarah's words certainly struck me as a new concept, yet they had a familiar sound to them—the voice of the One Who had daily guided us these many, many years.

"I think you are right, my sweet," I said, as I leaned over and kissed her. "I feel the leading of the Lord to do just as you have put into words. Pray that all goes well, and that we are prepared in heart, mind and spirit to do whatever it is that the Lord will require of us. For I feel that there will be some reckoning to be had."

"I will, my lord," Sarah said respectfully.



Eliezer, Kerah, Korel, Ahran and myself were scheduled to meet together in the tent of counsel. I wondered how Ahran would conduct himself in

front of Korel, but soon enough we were all gathered together and our meeting began.

“Brothers, many times we have sought the Lord for His Divine guidance and wisdom when we have found ourselves in great peril; this time is no different. You have been used to relying on me to receive the messages from the Lord at His hand, then passing them on to you. Yet this time He would have us all come before Him together, rather than myself alone to hear His Words. You need not fear; all our God requires is faith,” I assured them.

Ahran did not seem taken aback. Korel remained gracious, and we were all soon seated in the tent of prayer, settling our spirits and waiting for the Lord to speak. I wondered who the Lord would choose as His Voice and messenger, and if any of the others would be bold enough to give a message in my presence, or with so many others in attendance. But the word of the Lord came through my person, and as the message progressed, I soon understood why.

*My counselors, My people, I am pleased that you have taken this time to hearken unto My voice, to hear My Words. Indeed, I have things to say unto you that you would not have otherwise imagined yourselves. With My Words you will have it by your side to prepare for the battle that will come upon you. Verily a battle it shall be, in diverse ways. Each man, woman and child shall play a part; each one equally important. Yet there shall be battle, though not for many.*

*I shall not reveal all My plan to you at this time, but at the time appointed it shall be made known to you what you must do, and how you must do it. In the meantime, I will tell you exactly how you must prepare yourselves, and your fighting men for the battle which is coming. It will arrive at your doorsteps only two*

*sundowns from this day, and you must be prepared and armed in spirit and in body.*

*I am a God of peace, a God of mercy, a God of compassion. Yet I am also a God of war, a God of judgement, and a God of great defense. I will not have My children laid out as sheep before the wolves—defenseless and helpless. Therefore let the strong men arm themselves, that they may have wherewith to conduct battle if they must. Summon a group of fifty fighting men, valiant warriors of the faith, strong in body and skilled in warfare, to contest the enemy that shall come.*

*Let not your people fear the advances of the approaching host. Not only am I with you to protect you, but you will have done your part in placing strong men, steadfast and armed about your borders, that you let not this band of rioters enter your camp without confrontation.*

*I give unto you My promise that there shall be no war, but there shall be a confrontation. For these men understand only the ways of a sword and spear, therefore I must show them My power demonstrated through these means also. Am I not the God of all power, strength and might? Were not the legs of a man, and the force which he wields created by My hand? Would I shirk from using this power also, which is Mine Own? Nay, I would not.*

*Though it is preferable for man to live with man in peace and prosperity, when those who do not understand peace attack those who abide in it, I will not remain silent. I will speak to them in words which they understand. I tell you this that you may prepare your hearts, for news of this clashing shall be noised far abroad.*

*At the heart of this conflict will stand the two brothers—Ahran and Sabit. The strife between their people runs deep, and the wounds are old and grievous. Prepare therefore, for you will not escape the conflict which shall come in two days time. Yet as you manifest*

*the flickering flame of faith which burns in your heart, I will shine down upon you My glorious light from the heavens, and you will not be dismayed.*

*Prepare also your fighting men, for twenty-five of the fifty are to come from your warriors, Ahran. They are skilled in fighting, more so than Abraham's people. Allow them to train and prepare the others, that your warriors might be well fortified.*

*All the elders will stand by in the ministry of prayer and supplication. The women and children will gather together to sing and praise in the center of the camp. They will rejoice in My mercies and goodness, for I would not have My little ones fearful or concerned. The remaining men of the camp will also stand by, to watch and observe. Begin these preparations now.*

*See to it that the evening before Sabit encamps about you, all are right in heart and spirit. One thing will I require of the warriors who are to represent your people—the camp of God. They are to all acknowledge My power and might, else I will not be able to work through them. So seek out among Ahran's men those who are willing to place their faith in Me, to at least acknowledge My hand and power, and follow the instruction of My servant, Abraham. They must not lean unto their own understanding.*

*If you do all these things, you will have no need of fear, though the terror come exceeding close.*

When the message had ended, I fell to the floor, with my head resting on my clasped hands. *My God, my God!* I cried out inside. There was no denying this message was from the Almighty, for I would have not put forth the command to make such preparations. I was not a man of war, though necessity had pushed me into it several times, and God had granted victory over our enemies. This would have sorely grieved my spirit had not the Lord spoken it.

When all our heads were lifted, we exchanged

silence. Korel spoke first. “Your God is indeed able to speak unto you in a most amazing fashion. I would also have to say that He chooses an unconventional means of defense.” His comment reflected upon the low number of fighting men that God had instructed us to put forth. Then he quickly added, as if not wishing to incur His wrath, “Nonetheless, He is most certainly given that right. We will presently search out twenty-five of our most skilled men—those who will acknowledge your God—and will set them to the training and preparation of yours.”

“Indeed we will,” Ahran confirmed.

*Is it that I have less faith than these, or is it that they are simply more used to these methods of approaching conflict?* I wondered. Eliezer and Kerah, though admittedly in wonder at the Lord's instruction, were also supportive and acted toward fulfilling the tasks that lay before us.

Soon the responsibilities had been divided between those present, and we dispersed to prepare. It had been decided that Eliezer would gather all the elders together to explain the Lord's Words and our plan of action. Then each elder would gather their smaller camp together at a convenient time to relay the news in brief. Then preparations would begin in earnest. Meanwhile, Korel and Kerah would search for the appropriate warriors to represent our camp. A number of large tents located in the center of our camp were designated for the women and children to remain in on the appointed day.

Once the entire camp had been generally informed, people began to be notified as to their station. A handful of men were appointed to remain guard around the tents which would hold the women and children. Musicians were assigned to provide the music. Soon the fighting men had been chosen, and they turned over their



daily chores and duties to other men, in order to begin training immediately, and to fit themselves with weapons.

Ranin and Bemar led Ahran's twenty five troops. They could have put forth more fighting men than this, for there were not many old men among their tribe, and all their young men were skilled and apt to fight. Ahran's fighting group would gather this night with select elders to receive more instruction in the ways of our God. They had all agreed to hearken to the voice of their commanders, Ranin and Bemar, who had in turn, pledged to obey my instructions.

As I observed these two fine men organizing their troop, I thought a moment on their personal lives. Ranin was married to a charming young woman, and they had two children. Bemar, however, was not married, and from my observations, had not seemed to be taken with any of their own young women. I had asked Korel about this once, as we walked together to inspect the herds and how the herdsmen were faring together. He confirmed my suspicions. He explained that it is difficult for the young men who do not find a wife within their small group, for they are at great difficulty to find another woman from the surrounding lands. Their customs are different, their religion is different, and the parents are not inclined to let their daughter go with an Egyptian wanderer, whose tribe is small and dwelling in lands other than their own.

Most of the men in their tribe were married, and Bemar was one of the few exceptions. His loyalty, Korel explained, had kept him by Ahran's side, coupled with his hatred for Sabit. The notion of having to return to his homeland, and dwelling on the same soil as he, had pushed him onward, despite the lack of love in his life.

"But I do worry for him," I recalled Korel saying. "In time there will come a parting of the ways, and though he may wish it not, he must find a woman with whom he wishes to share his life, else he will become closed and dissatisfied. That is his nature, and I have seen it already affecting him."

Unlike their camp, ours jostled with young and pretty women—many of them single. We were not given to haste in marriage, for as our people were like a greatly extended family, there was no need to rush into these things. Granted, many married young, but Jochim and Leah's decision to wait was not entirely uncommon, and that sort of liberty was extended throughout the camp. Parents and elders alike knew that the inevitable would soon come. Living always together and having so much contact was basis enough for a marriage before either party was past their youth.

I had not always given so much attention to these matters. They appeared trivial and of little importance to me, and I kept my eyes focused on the greater task at hand, the one which I felt was my duty, as a husband and man, to attend to, and those responsibilities which God had entrusted me to, as a ruler over my people. But Sarah had enlightened me to what I came to call the "unseen world."

This was the world of slight gestures, hidden smiles, chance meetings, and longings and desires cloaked under seemingly unfeeling stances and stolid countenances. This was the world of romance and emotion, a markedly different world from the one I lived in—that of trade and discussion, survival and progress.

Perhaps it was because I possessed the blessing of having glimpses of a more precious world, and this world fulfilled any desire I felt to go further

than the routine and normalcy of life. This was the realm of God, and the joy of hearing His Words meant more to me than any price one could name. Or perhaps I had not understood simply because I was a man, full of my own thoughts and not apt to pause for long enough to observe the inner workings of another's life. But in my quest to understand Sarah, this had all changed.

It took years before I fully grasped what she tried, on repeated occasions, to explain to me in what I perceived to be a very complex manner. But over time, as I began to understand her reasoning and personality, I began to see similarities in others as well. All of a sudden, it was as if a new dimension had been opened up to me, and everything that someone said bore a little more meaning than what their words had literally meant.

## THE WORLD OF WOMEN

I found women to be the most elaborate living things I have ever set eyes on, though I came to determine that men also mask feelings and true hopes. Within time, I learned to naturally observe these more hidden signals and meanings, and I found this talent to be of great benefit to understanding my people, and helping them to find what it was that they exactly wanted or were searching for.

All these observations, though now scores of years later, I hardly noticed myself making; they came to my mind naturally. It was for this reason that I made a slight effort in wondering how Bemar's future would settle itself. *Perhaps he will find among our people a good natured woman to love and care for*, I mused. *Would that even be acceptable?* was my next question. It having not happened yet, I resolved not to worry about it, until Jessha came walking toward where Ranin and Bemar were standing discussing matters. This crossing rekindled my interest in the topic.

Jessha was a veritable beauty. She stood tall and elegant, even when dressed in her working garments. She now wore a dark tan dress, which

reached clear to her ankles, barely revealing a dainty string of sparkling beads which hung around her left ankle, and her presently bare feet. The dress was worn and old, and she had just come from the wash area, for in her arms she bore a rough twine basket, heavy laden with wet garments. The water from the dripping clothes had made their way through the openings in the basket and had soaked through parts of her dress, leaving the dress clinging to parts of her slender body.

As she made her way toward the open area where the women hung wet garments to dry, she cut across a portion of path, and stepped over two large rocks. To do so, she had grasped her dress with her free hand and pulled it up a ways, so as to not catch it on the rocks. It was at this moment that Bemar chanced to look up and caught sight of her.

*So that's what he's seeing, is he?* I observed, noting what a young man would have observed in this pretty child. Jessha was like a niece to me, or rather I should say, a great-niece. She was Kaboth's granddaughter, and I had given her my blessing at birth. Whatever blessing that had been, and I have given many, she took to it rather well. God had graced her with exceptional beauty and charm, and for a mind she did not lack merit either. Her father had taught her the basic arts of reading and writing—what limited and primitive script we used among ourselves—for as a young adolescent, she could hardly be kept out of trouble, so inquisitive was she. Her parents finally agreed to allow Kaboth to tutor her further, that she might give them reprieve during her times of laborious study.

This notion had indeed flourished. Not only was her intellect satisfied, but she became a great

asset to the camp also. Her many hours of study under Kaboth—which all centered around God and the ancient stories of His workings—settled her spirits and nurtured her faith in God. When she emerged from adolescence as a young woman, she was steadfast and longed to serve God.

Kaboth sought to find her a place where she might fulfil her ambitions, but any such services were performed by men. After many months, the council of elders allowed Jessha to act as an assistant to her uncle, who was one of the three scribes. He taught her much, and allowed her to perform all the duties which he was afforded, and she had now gained a solid reputation for her diligence and propriety.

The scribes were not in full time employment, and Jessha found plenty of time surrounding to teach the children, to tend to her family's washing, and most recently, to make friendly acquaintances with the young women of Ahran's tribe. She was very artful, and I noticed that her anklet was fashioned after the Egyptian style which had taken over our camp as of late.

*This should be interesting,* I said to myself, pausing on the path so as not to cause any interruption to what was about to take place.

Ranin had continued talking to Bemar, and as Jessha found her footing on the marked path, she let her dress drop over her bare legs again, and looked up, catching Bemar's gaze.

Since Ahran and his company had joined our encampment, his men had ceased from wearing their turbans as practice, unless they chose to because of the heat or windswept sands. There Bemar stood, tall and swarthy, his dark hair blowing over his shoulders in the wind. Around his waist was fastened a dark brown wrap of sorts, on which hung a large sword, which he had taken

out for training purposes, I imagine, since they had not until this point walked about the camp armed.

Bemar straightened with the return of Jessha's gaze, and as she walked by them, she responded with a slight nod and a hint of a smile. She kept her face turned away as she passed them, and upon longer observing Jessha, I concluded the reason. Once she was out of their sight, she swept the light brown curls out of her face, and pulled her hair out from the inside of her dress where she had had it twisted and kept. It fell clear down to the length of her back, and she shook it this way and that, and then proceeded on.

*Well, there might be something there*, I chuckled. I continued walking and as I passed Ranin and Bemar myself, I noted that Ranin seemed to have not noticed the exchange himself; he was still absorbed in his discourse. *I could have missed it all as well, had not that lovely woman changed my life*, I thought, as I caught a glimpse of Sarah a ways off talking to Isaac.

The day passed too quickly. In the evening, when we often had some type of mild festivity, when there was no announcement to that effect this night, no one even inquired about it. Everyone was fully occupied. The men had committed to rising early—some to train, and the others to fortify the camp.



We were awakened the next morning by Isaac's voice urging us to get up. He alternated sleeping with Sarah and me, and with Leah. This allowed Sarah and me time for private discussion, and also afforded him more time with his friends in the evenings.

"What is it, Isaac?" I mumbled as I rolled over to face him.

"Papa, Papa! Can we go see Jehmi this morning? Can we see how he's doing? Maybe he's all better now and can come and play with me!"

I turned to look at Sarah, not knowing quite what to say, or what plans she had already made for his day.

"Well dear, if their family is not too busy this morning perhaps we could stop by to say hello. But I don't think you should count on Jehmi coming out to play with you. It might be a short while before he is strong enough to run around the camp with you, big boy!" Sarah answered.

"All right, but if he can't play outside with me, do you think that at least he can come to the story tent, and I can show him our wooden figures, and we can have some story time together with Leah?" Isaac asked hopefully.

"We'll see, dear. If it's all right with his parents, then it's all right with me."

Isaac turned his gaze toward me, then pulled the covers off of me. "Come on, Papa! I'll help you dress!"

There went our quiet morning. I was soon up and getting dressed with the help of my young son. What a joy he was! For any of the small inconveniences or adjustments that having a child around brought me, one look at him melted them all away. We were truly blessed!

After our morning meal, Isaac reminded us of our promise to take him to see Jehmi. "Sarah, I don't think we're going to get out of this one. Shall we go?" I asked.

"Does Isaac ever forget about anything?" she returned the question.

"I suppose not. In any case, it will be good to see Ahran. Yesterday was so busy that I did not see him much."

"Certainly ... and I have not seen Ulyina since

our dinner with them. If you wait one minute, I'll fetch her dishes, so that I can return them to her."

Once Sarah returned, we headed off to their tent. In passing the many other tents which surrounded theirs, which was placed nearly in the middle of their gathering, we both noticed a similar string of beads hanging across the opening of each tent.

"I wonder what that symbolizes?" Sarah wondered aloud. They certainly weren't there yesterday. It must have something to do with their custom—perhaps a token offering for protection or safekeeping."

Isaac arrived at the tent before we did, and boldly announced his presence. "Hello! Good morning!"

Ulyina peeked her head outside the tent and returned his greeting. Just then she saw us round the pathway and approach. She nodded toward us.

"I see my son has already introduced our visit," I said apologetically. "One can never hide their true intentions when accompanied by children."

"Isn't it a wonderful thing? Were there no children in the world, the art of honesty would be lost throughout the generations," she replied wisely.

Ulyina stepped outside the tent and we exchanged customary embraces. Again Isaac interrupted, "I came to see Jehmi. Is he feeling better? Can I talk to him?"

Ulyina knelt down in front of Isaac, and took his little hands in hers, and said, "Of course you can talk to him. Go around the back way and you'll find him in his section of the tent." As soon as she released his hands, he had disappeared.

She rose slowly and said, "Do come in, please. Ahran has just stepped out. He will return in a moment."

"Ulyina, what is the significance of the string of beads across your doorway? I noticed that all of those in your company have hung them today, and your doorway bears one also," Sarah inquired.

"It is a custom of ours—well, not a true custom," she confessed. "Let me explain. A number of years ago, we found ourselves in a place of peril. We were journeying through a desolate area, and were forced to stop and take up camp for a number of days, due to not having sufficient supplies to sustain us in our traveling, as we did not know whether we could acquire more on our way. We sent one scouting team ahead, and another to the nearest village we had left in the distance to procure more goods for our journey.

"In the meantime, however, we were left with few men in the camp to protect the women and children. Rumor was that this location in which we were camped was rife with bands of thieves and bandits because of its desolate location. We were fearful for our lives, and the lives of our children.

"As Ahran has probably explained to you, we have never held a faith as a tribe. In leaving our country and our own people, we have seen in our journeys how religion has divided brothers. There are also so many gods to choose from. We resolved not to choose for ourselves one god to rule over us, therefore we have had none.

"Yet at this time of danger, I must confess that we felt the need to offer some token of our graciousness for the protection and goodwill of a god—whatever god that might be. We did not know of a true god, and we had little to offer, being only women and children.

“At the time, we had no lands to cultivate, no crops of our own, and our herds had dwindled throughout our long journey, due to trading and our need for sustenance. We women worked beaded necklaces and other handcrafts which we sold for profit at whatever village we passed by. This craft became a most profitable one, therefore it was our most prized possession to offer. One of the women suggested we hang them as a goodwill offering on the coverings of our tents, and having nothing else better to do, we all did.

“When both of our scouting teams returned to camp safe, and we remained unharmed, we were grateful, though we knew not what the cause. The men thought that the hanging beads had been to welcome their return. Indeed, our safety did welcome their return. Now this ornament serves a twofold purpose: that of requesting peace and safety from whatever god truly rules the Earth, and to welcome home in safety our men. I pray that they will serve both purposes on the morrow.”

“So do I,” I agreed.

Just then Ahran entered and seemed pleased to see us. “What brings us the honor of your presence?”

“Isaac woke us this morning with his request to see Jehmi, and well, here we are!”

“Yes, yes, I understand how that is. Although, since Jehmi has been ill, he has been much less demanding.... But I would wish it all back upon me for his health,” he thought aloud.

“How is Jehmi doing?” Sarah asked with concern.

“He is ... the same,” Ulyina answered hesitantly.

“You must hold faith,” I encouraged them. “God has heard your prayers and the cries of your heart, and He will answer. I cannot say what His answer

will be, but if He wills to heal your son, then it will come, in His good time.”

“It is so,” Ahran confirmed, and I had to marvel at his faith, or at least the peace which he displayed in his simple answer.

“Isaac had another request,” Sarah added. “He, of course, wants Jehmi to come play with him outside, but would also like for him to come to the story tent. If at any point you feel that Jehmi is well enough to, let me know, and I’ll arrange for it.”

“I think that would be good for him,” Ahran responded. “It will take his mind off of himself, and give him something to do.”

Ulyina looked at Ahran intently. Her gaze was kind, but it was clear that there was a question on her mind, which Ahran must have understood, for he answered it aloud. “The stories will be good for him also. I have been in the presence of their God, and I have found all of His Words—those which I have been privileged to hear—able to make one wise and strong. Jehmi will benefit from this, and perhaps he will garner some faith also for himself.”

Ulyina, who had no personal experience along these lines, seemed satisfied with her husband’s explanation. Smiling, she said to Sarah, “Jehmi will be very happy to go.”

“I will send Leah and Isaac to fetch him then.”

“Very well. It has been nice to have you visit, but do not let us keep you if there are other matters you must attend to. I imagine there must be a multitude of details to sort out this day,” Ulyina offered graciously.

“Indeed there are, and we had best get back to them.” Sarah went to fetch Isaac and we bid them farewell for the time being.

Our last day of preparation held a number of meetings and council sessions. I met with Kerah and Korel to discuss the status of our fighting men.



I still did not know what they would be called upon to do, for we were following the instructions of our God one step at a time, as they were given unto us.

Women prepared the tents within the center of the camp for the following day. They brought food and water and various supplies close by, should they have to remain there for a number of days.

What was most comforting to me, however, was to see the incessant flow of elders entering and leaving the tent of worship. I had encouraged them all to spend as much time as they were able in the presence of God. Though God could be sought out anywhere, there was a certain quiet and blessing within this tent of prayer. Now as the time approached and the weight of responsibility fell heavy on their shoulders, they were availing themselves of the peace which could be found in the stillness.

In the afternoon, as promised, Jehmi joined Isaac for a few hours in the story tent, with Jochim and Leah. They listened to stories, sang songs and Leah said that Jehmi nearly cried when it was time to return to his tent. They had enjoyed themselves so completely.

*Isn't it marvelous how children can, in the midst of serious troubles, still enjoy themselves and the simple wonders of God's creation?* I thought to myself.

Just before the evening meal, Ulyina's voice was heard at the door of our tent. Excitedly she called out, "Abraham! Sarah!"

"Come in, Ulyina!" I called out.

The tent flaps flung open and a breathless Ulyina stood before us. "Jehmi! He is looking so much better. The color is returning to his face. His cheeks are red and he ... he is so happy!" Her eyes were glistening with tears of happiness.

Sarah had already risen to her feet and hugged

her warmly, rejoicing with her. "God is so wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"He still is weak, but since we have seen no improvement of his condition for so many months, this is a complete ... miracle!" she exclaimed, then added, "I learned that word from Jehmi just now. He was telling me about the miracle stories he had heard from Jochim and Leah. He was so happy with his time there, and begged me to let him go back every day. If you would allow him to join the other children, I would be so grateful."

"He is more than welcome," I assured her, "more than welcome!"

"I am sorry to have disturbed you," she apologized. "I just had to come and tell you the news, and share my gratefulness to you ... and to your God. Ahran has not seen Jehmi yet, but he will be happy beyond words. Now I must go prepare for the evening ceremony which you have called this day. I will see you there."

Sarah and I smiled at each other. What perfect timing God had chosen. Ahran and all those closest to him would have a token sign of our God's power—through Jehmi.

That evening every man, woman and child in our camp gathered together for the space of an hour. During my time of prayer that afternoon, I had received instruction to hold a ceremony, the details of which were made known to me. Word had been sent through the camp before the evening meal, and when the stars hung brightly over our camp, contrasting the dark night, all gathered together. But the stars had no need to provide our light, for our camp was aglow with intense brightness.

A circle of high torches was set around our large gathering. As I looked on, I realized just how many people were in our camp. The dancing flickers of

light seemed to stretch on and on, in rows and rows. The amber glows played on the children's faces and radiated their smiles and excitement. When nearly all had arrived, the sound of a flute gave forth its melodious tune. The notes seemed to sing out from torch to torch as its soothing strain calmed the wind.

We all sat in a very large circle of several rows in depth. I opened with a blessing upon the evening, after which we spent half an hour singing praises together. For the most part the children stayed quite still, happy to be up past their bedtime. Once the singing had ended, all joined with me in prayer for our camp, and for all that the morrow would hold. I beseeched God for faith, courage and grace, and that most of all, His Divine will would be accomplished.

I held Sarah and Isaac both close by my sides the entire night. Not knowing what the morrow held put within me a sense of appreciation and gratitude for the wonderful life we had shared together, and a desire to let them both know how much I loved them.

## THE CONFRONTATION

As the morn lifted her face over the barren plains, she brought with her a dark band of riders. They were followed in the distance by a larger cloud of dust and motion, an assembly we could not clearly make out. But the first group of riders was nearing steadily, and the skies, gray and lowering, seemed to announce Sabit's arrival.

The women and children, as planned, were safely tucked away in the inner camp. The camp borders which faced Sabit's approach were lined with our men. Half of the elders stayed within the immediate camp borders on vigilant guard in prayer. The other half were to accompany Eliezer and myself as the entourage to meet Sabit. Ahran and Korel stood with us also, representing their people and the bitter tribal feud that was the source of this conflict.

I remained in my tent as long as possible with Sarah. We had already sent Isaac off to the safety of the inner camp with Leah earlier, and we now spent the last several minutes in silent prayer. Lacking words, we embraced tightly. With a kiss, I then bid Sarah hurry to the inner camp, while I picked up my staff and headed to meet up with the others.

Sarah cast a last glance and smile my way before a tent hid her from my view. Now all my attention was directed toward the matter at hand.

As Sabit and his men approached, they slowed their horses to a walk and fanned out into a single line of a dozen armed men on magnificent horses. Sabit rode in the middle of the group and scrutinized each one of us from the left to the right. When his eyes met with Ahran, his gaze locked and his face formed a scowl. Ahran returned his piercing look, but with a confidence that Sabit did not seem to possess. His only strength seemed to lie in his anger and vengeance.

Sabit gave a harsh command and the men pulled their horses to a stop. Sabit continued advancing toward us, and turned his horse to walk alongside our line, glancing down at us occasionally with disdain. After he had walked the distance of our entire line, he returned to his original position at the center of his men, dismounted and announced, "I will speak now with my younger brother!"

*Younger brother! Now that is an interesting piece of knowledge,* I thought, as I stored it with the other facts I had learned of Ahran and his people. I had always assumed Ahran to be the elder, since his father had left his people in his hands.

I turned to look at Ahran, where he stood still for a moment, not wishing to indulge his elder brother's request so instantly. A moment later he stepped forward and walked toward where Sabit stood.

"Over there!" Sabit pointed a ways off in the distance.

I observed Sabit's features and manner the best I could, but he wore a turban about his head which covered most of his face also, as did the dozen men who remained, glowering in front of us. We returned their stares.

Sabit's attire was completely black. His dark turban offset his complexion, which appeared light by comparison. His eyes squinted from facing the morning sunlight, and they darted around like a frightened animal's. On his waistband rested a majestic sword which he kept one hand on at all times. As they turned their backs toward us, the wind caught his cloak and threw it to the side, revealing a large dagger resting along the right side of his back.

The brothers walked side by side, keeping a space between them. It could not be called walking *together*, for both of their shoulders were raised and tense, and they rarely turned their heads to face one another, though we could hear a conversation.

Once they were altogether out of our hearing, they turned to face each other. I assume this is when their contentions began in earnest, for their gestures betrayed them. Sabit wildly motioned toward our camp a number of times, bringing his arm down with such force and fury that I could only imagine that he was describing the way in which we would all meet our deaths.

I thought of little Isaac and all the young children in our camp. *Dear God, You must deliver us from the hands of this evil one who would seek to destroy us. Make my lips as Your lips. Empower my tongue to speak forth Your Words—as You would have them spoken, not as I would have them spoken.* I felt such desperation at that moment, and eagerly gave over any of my own hesitations, that I might do just as God would have me do, in order that our camp be spared.

Then I saw Ahran pointing me out to his brother as he explained something. A moment later they were both returning, and we could only await the outcome with bated breath. As they neared us, they split; Ahran returned to his former place, and

Sabit mounted his horse. He seemed more angry than before. He walked his horse up a few paces, then pulled on its reins so that it reared onto its hind legs, letting it fall directly in front of where I stood. He then inched it back and turned his animal to the side, so that he could get a better look at my face.

“So you are the great Abraham, the ‘man of faith,’ are you?” he taunted.

“I am Abraham,” I responded, “but any greatness you have heard of can only be credited to my God.”

“I will not hear of your God!” he interrupted before I was quite done speaking. “I hear you have corrupted even my young brother’s heart. There is much rivalry between us, and for that he will pay, but you will pay for your adulteration of his mind and faith. That he could think your God would empower him to stand against his mighty elder brother! Is he not a heathen to your God?”

My heart began to explode with a fiery heat and rage against this man who would think so lightly of taking the name of our God in vain. I wished to let out all my thoughts upon him, but no words came just yet.

He seemed to only gloat in my silence. “Well then, let us see what match we have here to fight against. Or do we find ourselves set against a peaceful people that will not resist our wrath?”

Kerah’s eyes glared out at him, but he too held his tongue, as did the other elders, supposing that if a message was to be relayed, that I would be the one to do so. Furiously, my mind searched for something to say back to this man. *My God, if there is something to be said, I need to know what it is right now!* I demanded desperately. I glanced over to Ahran whose eyes were cast down to the ground. His fists were clenched. I imagined that it was all he could do to endure this tirade.

Sabit again guided his horse along our line, as if he were sizing up our forces mentally. “There are not many fighting men among you here, at least not many *young* ones,” he remarked. “But I have observed your camp, and it is large. There must be more men within, but they will pose no threat to us, for my warriors have not yet arrived.” He turned his horse around to face his men, and pointed off in the distance behind them to the approaching force, “See! They come even now!” He let out an evil laugh as he turned to face us again.

“It seems your God has provided you with one last hour to live. As a tribute to my good nature, I will allow you all to return to your camp and bid your loved ones farewell.” Then riding close to Ahran, he grasped his horse’s mane, leaned over and said in a loud whisper, “But that is where my generosity will end, poor brother! Your ‘friends of faith’ will be the first to feel the edge of my sword. I will allow your people the pleasure of observing this spectacle. Then the sun shall set upon you and your people, Ahran. It will almost be a pity to see this day pass, for then you will be no more. Alas!”

Sabit made his way back to his place in the middle of his armed line and announced, “Once the rest of my men arrive, we will encircle your camp and the carnage will begin. Off with you all, now! Enjoy your last moments!—And instruct all your people to not even think of escaping, for my men here will surround the borders of your camp, and there will be a cruel death for any man who would attempt to flee.”

“Do not turn away so quickly, for I have somewhat to say unto you!” My voice thundered out.

Eliezer and Kerah at once recognized the spirit of the Lord and sighed with relief. Ahran turned his face up to meet with his brother’s amazed look. *Had he expected no man to challenge him?*

“Who speaks to me with such disrespect?” Sabit snarled, turning his horse about.

“The Almighty Lord God, for whom you would do well to have respect. Your words have incensed His dwelling place with vile odors, and now He will dictate unto you what you will do!”

Sabit’s face registered his astonishment at my powerful words, but still he laughed in the face of God. “Perhaps one hour of life is too generous for this old fool! He shall be the first to die,” he stated, with an icy grin on his face.

I closed my eyes and opened my mouth in preparation for God’s response, but I was bypassed all together. God had no patience for such irreverence. There was no storm on the horizon, no lightning, no rain, yet the heavens let out a clap of thunder so loud that it nearly deafened us all. But the next manifestation of God’s power was reserved for Sabit alone to experience.

A fierce and biting gale of wind whipped itself into a frenzy, and moved rapidly toward Sabit. The line that our people formed, and the line created by his armed men stood only a few paces away from Sabit in either direction, yet none of us felt even a breath of the wind that we could see blowing wildly right before our eyes.

Sabit, caught entirely off guard, turned his horse into the wind to face it head on. His horse reared and neighed wildly, but even his strong beast was no match for this unearthly force. His animal soon turned sideways and within an instant, the wind knocked Sabit off his horse and onto the ground. His horse galloped off and out of the windy slice of earth, leaving Sabit to raise himself from the dusty ground alone.

I looked on with wonder and praise. “Now if you will listen to my words, and the Words of our God, I will speak them unto you,” I said loudly over the

wind which still raged about him.

His face covering had been blown off, and we now saw his features in full. In complexion he bore a resemblance to Ahran, yet his face was hardened and bore a scar across the right side. His eyes looked up at me with resentment, and as he rose to his feet, God quieted the wind.

“You have mocked God and have scorned His children. You call for vengeance by the sword and spear; verily, God shall allow you to attempt your vengeance, but you must do battle against His Own anointed warriors.” I motioned with my arm to Kerah, who stepped back a few paces and yelled out an order.

Within moments our band of fifty fighters had emerged from within the camp, where they had until this time remained hidden from view. They stood tall and straight, our men dressed after our custom, and Ahran’s men after theirs, with dark turbans about their heads. They stood in two lines spaced evenly apart, one of Ahran’s men next to each of our men. Even I was taken aback. They looked as a force to be reckoned with, and Sabit was evidently not expecting this either.

Sabit had by now regained control of himself, and one of his men had brought his horse back to him. He motioned to him to take it to the line; he would remain on foot for the duration of our meeting. He looked over our men, then back at his own, and shook his head. “Fools. One way or the other, there will be slaughter. Your men are no match for my warriors. And are you not a peaceful people? How is it that so rapidly you pick up the swords and weapons of the nations you condemn? Will your God look kindly on this?” he cackled.

“If you were wise, you would hold your tongue until you have the outcome before you, young man,”

I instructed him. “We are a peaceful people and are not given over unto war. But our God is the judge of righteousness and truth, and He exacts vengeance on those whom he deems worthy. Apparently He has found qualities to loathe in you, and we have been chosen as His instruments of judgement.

“Now, pick the number of men whom you wish to do battle, and we will match it. As God favors the victor, so shall follow the spoils of battle. Until then, all hands remain off their weapons.”

Having completely forgotten the display of displeasure he had just witnessed at the hand of our God, he strode toward me haughtily, setting his face only inches away from mine. “Old man, do you think that your faith will overcome our swords? I will give you but one chance, for sport’s sake, to die in greater humiliation and terror. I will not waste the strength of my men upon yours. One man will I put forth, and you may try with all that is in you to match his skill. They will fight to the death, and then ... your generations will come to a swift end.” He spat on the ground to illustrate his words.

His glare remained in front of my face, but I closed my eyes for a moment. *It is well*, the words sounded within my mind. “Very well, choose your man and we will do likewise,” I responded. We both turned from facing each other, and the elders, along with Korel and Ahran surrounded me. I motioned for them to follow me, and we walked a short distance away from the others to discuss the matter.

“What does this mean?” Kerah asked. “We have fifty men! If they fight in unison, we have a greater chance of overcoming them. With one man, we place all our faith upon a single mistake!”

“We cannot allow him to dictate the terms of battle; he is at an advantage,” Ahran confirmed.

“God has approved this plan, my brothers. If any of you would but pause for a moment long enough to ponder my feelings on this matter, you need not worry. These are not my own words, but the words of God. He has a vengeance to deliver unto Sabit and his men, and I pray that we are all strong enough to do as He commands. Now, we must choose our man to represent us. What say you all?”

The discussion went around for just a moment when Sabit’s voice interrupted us. “My man stands ready to fight. Where is your man?”

“He will be ready shortly,” I replied curtly, turning again to face the elders and the others around me.

I was reminded of the Words of the Lord when I had questioned him about the wisdom of Ahran’s company joining our camp, and had referred to them as a weight to be borne. *As for this weight, it shall prove to be a strength unto you and your people*, were the Lord’s very Words. This indicated to me that one of Ahran’s men was the chosen vessel for this task. Soon enough we had decided: Assir would represent our people.

He was a large man, taller than most, and well built from years of hard labor and skilled in the art of combat. He had served as an armed guard for Sabit and Ahran’s father in the days of his glory. His skin was dark, contrasting his light eyes.

“He has no difficulty killing,” Ahran informed us. “He was hard to corral when our tribe initially split apart, for he sought to use violence as a means to resolve all conflicts. It took much persuasion and reason for him to pursue the path of peace, but now he has done so, and is not inclined to violence, though I would imagine that it still lies dormant within him. Despite our quest for peace, I was never more happy to have him by my side when fate did call upon us to resolve some bloody struggles.”



“What is the difference here?” one of the elders demanded to know. “We have standing before us a certain death. These men are from the same tribe, from the same people, from the same line of descent. Both are men of war, who have used at one time or another, their cruel skills to harm and hurt. How can one be blessed and the other cursed? I do not understand the reasoning of this.”

“You are right—in part,” I explained. “It seems that God has chosen, in this instance, to use these two men with much in common—brothers of kin and country—to show a greater difference. It is not the *outer* man that will fight today, but the *inner* man. It will ultimately be the *spirit* of these two warriors, and that which they represent, that will do battle, not their physical strength. The strength of their spirit will sustain them. I believe this is the reason why God has chosen these men.”

Korel interjected, “I wish not to hurry anyone along, however, I do feel it wise to summon Assir and make certain that he will accept this commission.”

“At once,” I agreed, adding, “It would be wiser still to be certain that he will rest his strength and life in the hands of God, for He is our only hope. We are grateful for Assir’s natural skill, but it will not be enough to save us this day.”

“I will see to it personally,” Ahran assured us, and therewith he and Korel set off to speak with Assir. I watched out of the corner of my eye as they approached Assir, who was standing in the second line as a fighting man. They motioned to him to step back from the line as they began speaking with him. After some moments, he nodded his head solemnly, which I took to be in acceptance of the request.

“Abraham, shall we inform the rest of the camp of what is going on?” Eliezer asked.

“Yes, let us send a messenger about the camp to tell the elders who have stayed within all that has happened, and what is soon to come. The men within the camp may also hear word, that they may seek God on our behalf. But spare the women and mothers from this, for their concern will be too great, and they must attend to the young ones during this time.”

Assir then approached me, with Ahran walking alongside him. “Abraham, I request your blessing and the prayers of your people upon me,” the strong man asked humbly.

“With great joy, my son,” I answered. Sabit and his men looked on, some ridiculing and sneering, as Assir knelt before me. I laid my hand on his head and gave an offering of prayer and thanksgiving to God. When I had finished, Assir lifted his head and looked into my eyes and thanked me.

“Look at their strong man, bowing down before the old fool!” Mescha taunted. He was Sabit’s choice, and the reason was indisputable. When he dismounted from his horse, he stood like a giant boulder upon the earth; his limbs strong enough to crush a man between them. He carried the air of a seasoned warrior.

“Your humility will be blessed by God,” I said to Assir, my hand resting on his shoulder. “I know that you do not know Him well, but rest assured that He knows you very well.” With that, he rose to his feet and prepared himself for battle.

During the time in which each side chose their man to represent their side in battle, the rest of Sabit’s forces arrived. Their entire host numbered nearly one hundred and fifty—all fighting men. When their leading officer inquired of Sabit where they should place themselves, he instructed that a total of forty men remain with him, and the rest tarry on a ways and set camp at the foot of the

rocky hills in the distance. "We will have no need of all our men this day," he confidently spoke. "Let them rest! Let them be merry! They may return tomorrow to enjoy the spoils with us." Once forty had been selected to remain, mostly youths, further stressing Sabit's confident assertion that even the least experienced of his men could easily defeat their opponents, the officer in command led the rest of the men off into the distance, and they soon were out of our thoughts.

## CRY OF DEATH

The appointed moment had come. All the men without our camp's borders had moved a hundred or more paces away from the edge of camp, and markings had been set out to determine the area of combat. On either side stood a wall of men forming a semi-circle—their men on one side, and our men on the other.

On our side of the open expanse, tension was in the air. Men fingered their swords nervously, as if that would help Assir fight harder or more skillfully. The eyes that peered out of the turbans on the other side of the fighters appeared nervous also, with the exception of Sabit. He had taken a seat on the dusty ground, and having sprawled himself out as comfortably as was possible, he contented himself with food and drink. He appeared relaxed and confident, laughing and joking to those around him.

When both opponents were ready and all were attentive, I stepped forward and gestured to Sabit for the commencing motion. Without even rising to his feet, he raised his hand in the air, as did I. At the nod of our heads, we both brought our hands down to our sides, signaling the beginning of the duel.

Mescha and Assir did not take their eyes off each other. Beginning a ways apart, they took their time in approaching one another. They each held a sword, and a shield or guard of some type. Assir's shield was long and rectangular in shape, beginning at his shoulder and ending above his knee. Mescha chose an oval shaped shield, the greater part of it covering his chest area, the width being greater than the length. Their swords, though different, appeared equal in length, and both men began to wield theirs with great skill. There were many other weapons that could have been used in this man-to-man fight, but neither side wished to prolong the ordeal. Sabit wanted to get on with his revenge, and we wanted a secure and safe camp as soon as possible.

As their swords first clashed together, I felt the hit within my bones, but it was only the beginning of many more to come. Both were experienced fighters, and at the onset, both having full reserves of strength, they lunged at each other with vigor, swerving, dodging blows, and deflecting the edge of their adversary's sword with their shields. It was as if this was the sport, and the true conflict was yet to come.

In time, as they both wearied, the air grew more tense. I noted Eliezer's lips moving in silent prayer. I looked down at the ground, sensing that the outcome was about to be made known to us. Mescha's eyes darted about as he sought for an opportunity to strike Assir. Similarly, Assir surveyed Mescha's form and manner, looking for some weakness to assault. Though Mescha was a large man, in appearance almost cumbersome, he consistently deflected Assir's swift blows from the left or right with his shield. When Assir wielded his sword toward his lower body, where his shield did not afford him direct protection,

Mescha deftly jumped back or to the side, dodging the blow.

Moments later, while my eyes had turned away from the fighting, a roar came from the crowds. Assir's left shoulder had been struck by Mescha's blade. It was only a matter of time now. From our distance, the wound did not appear to be threatening. However, Mescha preyed fully on his advantage, striking hard at Assir's left side, where he would have to increase his efforts to maneuver his shield in order to retain his life.

Assir stepped back a few paces, which afforded some distance between the two men, and a chance for all to catch their breath. Mescha now had his back toward us, and as I studied Assir's face, I saw a flush of red rise through it. His eyes squinted and they seemed to burn fire within them. His form straightened and his grip tightened. Where there used to be a calm steadfastness and surety, a look of wrath and animosity had now crept over his face. I turned to look at Ahran, who had also been intently focusing on our warrior. My eyes questioned his appearance.

"Perhaps he is regaining some of his former manner in battle," Ahran said hopefully. "That youthful zeal seems to be taking hold of him once again. It does look so familiar."

As the clashing of sword against shield resumed, I silently prayed, hoping that God was the One casting this mantle over him, and not his own anger. Assir did seem to have received renewed vigor and attacked Mescha more furiously and cleverly. He raised his sword high in the air, bringing it down upon Mescha's shield, which he covered the side of his head and shoulder with. Then without warning, and with the element of surprise on his side, he swung his sword low, striking Mescha's right leg.

Now they were both injured, but death lay still a ways off. Mescha growled in pain, but did not allow it to affect his performance. He lunged forward, forcing Assir backward as he swung his sword wildly about without rhyme or reason. Mescha now had the offensive advantage, and used unpredictable thrusts and charges to keep Assir on the defensive. Assir attempted to break out of the pattern, but his opponent continued to strike at him relentlessly. The second time he struck Assir, he began to gloat, the gleam of victory in his eyes.

Suddenly he drew back, apparently startled by something, and looked up quickly at the sky. We all did likewise, Assir included. This was so unusual that for a split second all commotion ceased on the battlefield. There was nothing in the sky. There had been no noise. There was no lightning, no thunder.

Reality flooded his senses a moment later and the fight continued, but everyone remained puzzled. Sabit's men murmured among themselves in concern. Sabit, staying true to his strong display of confidence, stated loudly, "Behold my warrior! Your challenge bores him! He even finds within himself time to admire the heavens!"

Before those bold words had hardly left Sabit's mouth, the occurrence repeated itself. This time it was more pronounced, but there was still no outward cause. Mescha jolted backward, raising his shield above his head as if trying to protect himself from some unseen terror in the sky.

Sabit's boastful tone of voice instantly turned to a merciless order as he rose to his feet. "Up, you fool! Regain your composure at once! Fight! Make an end of this easy prey—now!" The familiar sound once again restored Mescha to his surroundings, but because of this temporary

pause, Assir had gained the advantage. He now pressed hard on Mescha, who appeared at first somewhat disoriented, as though he did not possess his former presence of mind. He soon regained it, however, and as he did, I was again left to wonder what would become of Assir. It appeared certain that Mescha would endure longer than Assir.

*You cannot allow yourself to think this way!* I was reprimanded from within. I struggled to shake the feeling and turned my wondering into a fervent prayer which I requested be speedily brought before the throne of God.

As my focus returned to the battle at hand, without warning, Mescha put forth a blow with all his strength. In Assir's attempt to keep his enemy's blade from entering his own flesh, he raised his shield to withstand the impact. But his shield had been risen too late. It did deflect the sword's edge, but the angle at which it struck the shield and the force of the blow knocked Assir's shield from his hand. The battle was nearing to a close.

*Oh God!* I prayed, as I bit my lip anxiously. My hands began to sweat and my knees shook. I leaned hard on my staff and began to mentally review the promises which God had given us. *I hold You to Your Words, my God. This is the hour of deliverance. Spare Your children!* I commanded.

Seeing the end of his opponent before his eyes, Mescha's mouth twisted into an evil grin as he swung his sword about more wildly, leaving Assir to defend his life with only his sword, and with every ounce of courage and skill that he possessed. Cries of mockery and jeers erupted from Sabit's man, as they pressed Mescha on to put a swift end to Assir.

Without his shield, Assir was subject to the full

force of Mescha's sword. He did well and fought valiantly, but at this disadvantage, he was no match for Mescha's fury. The final blow struck Assir's sword from his hand to the ground. He hastened to retrieve it, but Mescha was upon him before he could reach down. The sword lay at Assir's feet, while Mescha, as if he were playing with an animal, moved his sword dangerously close to Assir's neck. Then he swung his sword at the height of his chest, and as Assir jumped back to dodge the blade, he lost his footing, and ended on the floor. He reached out again to try to grasp his sword, but felt the tip of Mescha's blade preventing him.

"Not so fast, my enemy!" Mescha snarled. He then moved his sword down to meet Assir's chest, where he began to move it closer to Assir, forcing him to lean backward, until he lay flat on the ground.

Ahran looked down at the ground. Assir was a good man, not one that he would like to lose. He could not watch the death of one of his men. Korel's brow was wrinkled. As our eyes met, I could feel the questions in his mind penetrating into my very soul. But how could I answer them? I had no answers myself. I had the Word of our God, but things were not supposed to end this way.

"Go on, end him—that we may get on with the rest of our business!" Sabit ordered, turning his proud gaze toward Ahran to insinuate his soon-coming fate.

Assir's end was in sight. He reached his right hand across the dirt in a desperate search for his sword. He soon found it, but Mescha's foot lay heavy on the blade, and it remained solidly in its place.

"You're too slow," Mescha jeered. "Your life is mine now, or rather ... your death!" In possession

of the victory, Mescha threw his shield to the ground, and grasped his sword in both of his hands. He raised it slowly and deliberately till his arms were stretched high above his head. Everyone grew still and the air was silent. The tip of his blade pointed down toward Assir's heart, and no man dared imagine the force with which his thrust would end the poor life which lay before him.

Mescha turned to Sabit, who gave a firm nod, indicating that he was to proceed. There was time for few words. A desperate cry tore out of Assir's lips: "God of Abraham, save us!" My heart slowed greatly upon hearing his words, and I felt as if it would break in two. What could I do? I closed my eyes and prayed for his soul and God's will.

As Mescha's sword began its descent, God entered the battlefield. How exactly to describe what occurred I know not. From the heavens sounded the loudest clap of thunder any of us had ever witnessed. The earth beneath us echoed the blast, and the force caused our knees to buckle under us. Every man was lurched from where they stood, and all fell to the ground. Only two men remained standing—Sabit and myself.

As the others shook the dust off their garments and rose to their feet, they had not seen the half of the Lord's power. The fight was over. One man was dead, and the other was left to claim the title of victor. For reasons unknown to us, only Sabit and I had witnessed the swift end to this struggle with our own eyes.

The initial clap of thunder that so startled us all caused Mescha to lose his grasp on his sword, and as the jolts that followed caused him to lurch backward, the sword fell harmlessly next to Assir. Assir instinctively had raised his now freed sword from his side. Mescha, quick to react, was already back on his feet, holding a dagger that had been

previously hidden at his side as he set himself to finish Assir speedily. But God had not finished His display. The second jolt hurled Mescha and his dagger directly towards Assir, whose sword was already pointed in Mescha's direction. Thus, Mescha was brought to his dreadful end as he fell, and his own weight forced Assir's sword through his body.

The settling dust gave way to a bloody mess—Mescha's lifeless body, pierced through, draped over Assir. Ahran and a number of our men rushed at once to drag Mescha off of Assir, and to see whether he was still alive. He was wounded, but his spirit was very much alive. A few of Sabit's men stumbled over, in near shock, to see for themselves that their mighty hero had indeed perished. Sabit stood stone-still.

Once Assir had retrieved his sword from Mescha's body, he placed his foot upon his head, lifted the blood-stained sword high in the air, and cried aloud, "The God of Abraham is the victor!" A cheer sounded alongside our camp as almost unbelievably we looked on at the great miracle we had just witnessed.

Sabit then caught my attention. I wondered, *How will he step down? How will he take defeat?* I did not have to wonder long. This man, so used to having his own way by the use of force and brutality, began to lash out like a wounded creature.

"Take Ahran! Spare not his life!" were his words. Perhaps he would not see his desired evil upon our entire camp, but he was determined to fell his own brother. At once a group of ten or more men rushed across the expanse of space that divided us, coming toward Ahran.

"Men! To his defense!" I cried out, spurring an equal number of our fighting men toward Sabit's

band. Our men met Sabit's men, and prevented them from advancing further. The field had not lain quiet for but a few minutes after the shedding of Mescha's blood, and already more men had taken up the battle. Ranin pulled Ahran to safety, fearing for his captain's life.

Sabit continued raging, and ordered the rest of his men to join in the fight, to "kill as many as possible." But no other men moved. They were too shaken and afraid of the power of our God, and refused to fight, lest they too should suffer the wrath of an angry God.

As this score of men fought before us, God gave unto us greater victory. Four of Sabit's men soon fell by the sword, and as others were wounded, the skirmish quietly ended. While Sabit's men retreated, and our men cleared the field of the wounded, my eyes searched for Sabit.

I saw a small huddle of men surrounding a man lying bent over on the ground, a short ways off from their line of men, and I set off to see who it was. As I approached, the men who stood about moved aside, with a terrible look of fear in their eyes, as if fearing that my presence would bring yet more terror upon them. I looked down to see Sabit's body, eyes wide open. The men had turned him on his back, revealing his end. The large dagger which I had observed resting alongside his back earlier that day was buried deep inside his stomach. His own, now pale, lifeless hands were loosely clasped around the handle, though I could not tell whether he had taken his own life, or whether it had been one of his own men who had turned upon him.

*He would not face defeat in life; now he will have to face defeat in his death. I don't suppose he would have ever imagined it would be more difficult, I thought to myself as I leaned over and closed his eyes with my hands.*



One would have imagined that the following moments would be ones of great triumph; we had conquered our enemy and had secured our safety. But somehow the air was much too somber for any display of joy or gladness. The conquest had come at the price of lives lost, and I was certain that no man in our camp was glad for that. *Perhaps Ahran and his company will feel the exultation that I lack*, I thought, looking toward Ahran from where I stood at the side of Sabit's body. I confirmed Ahran's suspicions, and even then was surprised to see Ahran lower his head. There was no delight felt even by the man most tormented by Sabit.

With a wave of my hand, I summoned Ranin to my side. I instructed him to organize the rest of our fighting men. We would group together Sabit's remaining force, collect their weapons and post guards about them until we had made further plans. Two men dragged Sabit's body and the other dead off a ways, and covered their bodies. When the evening fell, they would be buried.

As the situation was in control, I left Ranin and began walking across what had been a battleground only moments earlier. There were weapons strewn about, blood stains on the ground, and portions of clothing and other evidences of the day's battle. I walked up to Korel, who was bent over a number of men lying on the ground. They were our wounded. One look at their injuries nearly caused my head to spin. Korel seemed used to such sights and a moment later raised himself to his feet.

"Gratefully, they aren't wounds which will take lives," then he added soberly, "however, one must be attended to immediately, else it may." He directed my attention to a man lying the furthest from where we stood. I walked over to see a familiar face; it was Bemar.

"Bemar!" I turned to Korel and whispered, "He is one of your own! Is Ahran aware of this?"

"No, not yet," Korel sighed. "He will find this most grievous."

"How can you speak of Bemar as if he were only another wounded man, the same as any other? This is your friend, your counselor! Have you not more regard or concern for his life yourself?" I took care to speak to Korel quietly, for though he seemed hardly coherent, I did not wish to push Bemar further into the clutches of death.

"I have the greatest concern for Bemar. He is as a son to me," Korel stated. "Yet all who fight on the battlefield are men, and are worthy of care. The wounded must be observed and valued for their lives, not for their rank or personal importance to me. It is not given to me to tend to a friend, and to leave another more severely wounded to die because he falls under my ignorance. I have now surveyed all our wounded, and Bemar is in most need of immediate assistance. It does not reflect on my regard for his life."

"Forgive my false assumption," I apologized. "I have not seen such wounds for a great while, and it has shaken my reasoning. I will summon one to attend to him at once. And who sees to the wounded of Sabit's men?" I added, spurred in my convictions by his explanation.

"Ranin will do the same for their men," Korel assured me.

"Very well." I turned and caught Kerah's eye, and he walked forward to meet me. "Kerah, please send someone at once to fetch Sarah. Once they have brought her away from the children and the other women, tell her that we have wounded men. Allow her to bring one handmaiden skilled in dressing and tending, and bring all the supplies they will need. A man's life lies in the balances. Bid them haste."

Kerah turned to leave, and as he was a few paces from me, I called him back. I whispered something in his ear and he hurried off. He slipped within the borders of our camp, then conveyed the message to a young man who stood guard. I then returned to our wounded, where now Eliezer and others of the elders had gathered.

Ranin and our fighting force had by this time unarmed all of Sabit's men. Their weapons were brought back to our camp, to be kept in Ranin's care. The dead had been loaded into a bare wagon, awaiting the setting of the sun, at which time they would be laid to rest. Sabit's men all sat silently on the ground in two lines, awaiting further instructions. It could only be imagined what they were thinking. Perhaps some felt rage within, anger at having been defeated; others showed signs of fear and remorse.

Sarah and her handmaiden soon arrived, with a young man trailing behind them carrying a box of potions and bandages. "Abraham, my dear, are you all right?" she asked, flinging her arms around me.

"I am, my dear. God has won us the victory. Now we must see to the wounded."

"Have we ... did we ..." she couldn't make out the words.

"No, my dear. We did not lose a man, glory to God, and there are not many wounded." I led her over to Bemar, whose face was partially covered with a wet cloth. As she saw the wound, she let out a sigh. He had sustained a severe laceration to his chest. She knelt down beside him and bid the young man to open the trunk.

"All of you, take what potions and bandages you need and tend to those whose wounds are less serious. We will tend them more thoroughly later," Sarah instructed the men standing about her. "And

take some for the wounded of the other side," she added, casting a glance toward the rows of men seated on the ground, and the several bodies that lay beside them.

She then turned back to the wounded man in front of her, and moved the cloth from his face. "Oh my God," she gasped. She turned to look at me, and her eyes filled with tears.

"I know, my darling," I said, in an effort to comfort her. I lacked words to say. My heart too felt the grief.

She closed her eyes for a moment, then resolutely turned to her work. Soon Bemar's upper garments were removed, and she and her handmaiden set to cleaning and binding his wound.

Sarah had much experience with the wounded. As delicate a soul as she was, and as tender as her hands appeared, somehow in our journeys, we had often found ourselves near areas of warfare. While God had mostly kept us removed from actual conflict, Sarah had found much opportunity to assist in healing men's bodies. Her skill, coupled with her faith, made her a veritable physician. She had no real training, yet when a serious illness was discovered in our camp, the sick would often call for Sarah's presence and expertise.

Sarah had finished the worst of her work when I heard Eliezer's voice in the distance. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Abraham sent for me," the response came.

Eliezer looked toward me with a question in his eyes, and I nodded and motioned that I had indeed done so. Jessha walked past the group of elders and made her way toward Sarah and me. She looked out toward the men seated on the ground and then turned her gaze quickly back toward our people, and I saw her eyes widen when they set

upon our wounded. Her pretty face looked worried and she clutched her hands together nervously.

“She has not seen sights like this, Abraham. Take care with her,” Sarah whispered.

I walked a few paces to meet her and she buried her head against my chest. I stood still, holding her in my arms, then quietly said, “Jessha, I know this is an awful sight, but you must stand firm and strong. God has given us the victory, but some of our men have suffered to bring it to us. One of Ahran’s men is seriously wounded, and I believe that he needs your comfort.”

Jessha raised her head and looked searchingly into my eyes. “Bemar?” she whispered.

“I’m afraid so, my dear. But he will live. Encourage his will. Strengthen his heart.” With those words I sent her off to Bemar’s side, where she remained for the next several hours.

After Sarah had finished with Bemar, he was taken within the camp to rest in his tent. The other wounded from both sides had already been moved to camp earlier. Ranin’s prisoners were now clearing the grounds from the debris of the battle, and were covering the bloodstained ground with unsoiled dirt.

I conferred with the elders briefly, as how to best inform the camp of the happenings of the day, and how to pass the evening. Ahran approached me briefly to express his concern regarding Sabit’s remaining force of one hundred men who being camped in the distance, were as of yet unaware of what had happened.

As I listened to him speak, God put within my heart an overwhelming feeling of security and assurance that we were hedged in safety. Had He not miraculously delivered us from Sabit’s wrath thus far? Could not, therefore, these matters be left safely in His hands as well? I knew however,

that by the morn, the matter would need to be addressed more fully, for I knew that the others, and especially those of Ahran’s camp, would be filled with concern. Yet I took care to assure Ahran that God had revealed to me that we would be safe this even. He accepted this word in good faith, and retired to his abode.

Soon our camp’s surroundings had returned to their normal state, and all were back inside camp. Eliezer brought word to the tents holding the women and children that God had won the victory. All were granted leave and the children returned to their parent’s tents. Our captives were split into smaller groups, and finding leather thongs to bind them with, Ranin placed three guards to ten of Sabit’s men. Those of their number who were wounded we tended in another tent, also guarded. Meanwhile, the camp gathered for the evening meal, and the announcement of the events of the day.

After all had eaten, I briefly explained to all what had taken place, sparing the description of violence. Nearly all the men in our camp had witnessed the confrontation, or had heard the news by word of mouth, thus I chose my words carefully on account of the women and children. The women could learn more from their husbands if they wished, but the children did require some explanation, for they too had heard much talk of the coming danger. That evening, we sang praises to God for granting us the victory, and one member of each family held vigil for our six wounded men, and especially Bemar, whose life was most threatened.

The evening passed without so much as a sound heard in the distance. All the commotion that the day had granted us had long been had, and for that we were grateful. I lay down with my dear Sarah

and Isaac, hugging them both tightly. “How good our God is to us,” I said aloud. Sarah returned my praise with a squeeze and a gentle kiss.

“We children were praying today, Father,” Isaac chimed in, “and we were praising, for we knew that God would give us the victory.”

“Certainly, my son. Your prayers and praises were well used. God heard every one of them, and because of them, He gave us strength and power and might to defeat the enemy.” Within myself I thought, *Oh to have the faith of a little child.*

“Goodnight, Father. Goodnight, Mother.”

“Goodnight, my darling son,” Sarah whispered.

I patted Isaac’s head and kissed his forehead. Then he turned around, snuggled his head contentedly into his pillow and sighed. Still holding Sarah in my arms, I fell fast asleep.

## THE MORNING AFTER

The morning sun smiled kindly on us and shone softly, as if trying not to wake us. Sarah and I slept late, and when we woke, we saw Isaac playing to the side of the tent quietly. Shortly he looked over, and finding us awake, let all his quietness go and jumped in between us.

“Finally you’re awake!” he said with a start.

I took him into my arms and snuggled him close.

“How long have you been up, Isaac?” Sarah asked.

“Forever and ever,” came the exasperated reply.

“Well, you certainly were quiet. Thank you, darling,” she said, smoothing his ruffled hair.

He beamed back a smile of satisfaction. “Can I go have breakfast with Leah, please?” he asked.

Looking at our present state, we wouldn’t be up and out of the tent yet for several minutes—a length of time much too long for little Isaac to wait, especially after all the patience he’d had in allowing us to sleep late.

“That’s fine, son. Off you go!” I said.

“Wait one minute,” Sarah stopped me. “Isaac, there’s a basin of water near the door of the tent.

Wash your face clean before you leave.”

“Yes, Mother,” came the dutiful reply, as he did so, and then bounded off for the day.

Sarah and I lay in each other’s arms another few minutes. It felt so good to not have to hurry out of bed, needing to attend to a camp crisis. We were expecting no visitors, no dissent within our own camp. Life felt wonderful. Granted, there were still some minor matters to be sorted out, such as what to do with our prisoners. And what would Ahran’s people choose to do now that the danger which threatened them had dissipated?

But now my foremost thought was that of the one hundred men whom Sabit had sent off to eat, drink and be merry. Seeing that they would obviously not have heard word from Sabit the previous night, they were most likely becoming anxious, wondering what had happened, and what they were to do. They would be a formidable force should they hear that their captain’s life had ended in the humiliation of defeat, and decide to plot revenge. However, if God had been able to take the victory out of the hands of Mescha, and place it in Assir’s hand, I needed not fear much about the potential danger of the remainder of Sabit’s men. As before, I felt the presence of God urging me to trust. We would hear word soon enough, I supposed.

After I had dressed and eaten, I set about to walk through the camp. I had not had much leisure time of late, and wished to see how our people and Ahran’s were integrating. My previous concerns of how the faith of our people would be affected by the heathen practices which our guests would bring with them had abated through the assurance that God gave of their presence proving to be a strength. Indeed it had, and the courage and humility of one of their strong men, Assir, had allowed God to give us the victory.

*A mighty brave man he was*, I thought, pondering on the moment that he had imagined to be his last on this earth, when he cried out to God. I made note in my mind to see how he was faring, and if his recovery was good, as I had not seen him since he was carried off the field, as one of the first wounded tended to.

I turned to walk through the portion of camp given to our visitors first. I noticed that the ornate beaded decorations which just a day earlier hung on each tent had now been removed. Just then Ulyina and another woman I had not yet met turned onto the path that I was walking on. Holding the hand of the woman who accompanied Ulyina was little Jehmi. His face had certainly gained color and his steps were keeping up with the pace of the two women.

“Good morning, Ulyina,” I said with a smile, slowing as we approached each other.

“Good morning, Father Abraham,” she returned, with a respectful lowering of her head and a shallow curtsy.

“I have not met your companion as of yet,” I said, nodding toward the woman who stood to her left.

“This is Geshara—my friend,” she introduced. Geshara gave a slight smile and, following Ulyina’s gesture, politely nodded and curtsied.

“And how is Jehmi today?” I asked, bending over so that my eyes met his.

“He is much improved,” Ulyina answered quickly. “Ahran is greatly comforted with his progress.”

Before she could quite finish her sentence, Jehmi tugged on my robe and added, “Much better, Father Abraham. My mother said I could play with Isaac today, so I’m going to go to the story tent again!” His face glowed with a smile that seemed

to cover the remaining paleness which hung over his little body.

“Ah, that should be great fun,” I said, smiling.

“It is not quite as he said, Abraham,” Ulyina stammered.

“I understand. I have a little boy also. It is fine with Sarah and myself. Leah will come to fetch Jehmi later.”

“You are most understanding and kind,” Ulyina said, blushing. “I hope we do not inconvenience you too greatly. I will send my handmaiden with Jehmi, so that he causes no burden on Leah. Thank you again.”

“Until then,” I said, patting Jehmi’s head.

I continued toward the heart of their temporary homes. I passed several of their people, most of whom I did not know by name, and had not seen until this time. They all seemed to recognize me, and knew who I was. Some of the older children called out, “Father Abraham” in their cheery but thickly accented voices. The women nodded and the men raised their hand as a sign of acknowledgment and respect.

It was then that I noticed that all the women I had seen thus far were wearing around their necks the beaded ornaments that had previously hung across the tent openings. Some ornaments were short and encircled their necks once; others were long and had to be wrapped around the neck several times. *Interesting*, I thought. *There must be a reason behind this also, that I will perhaps find out.*

Then I saw a familiar face, rather a head of hair. I watched her from a short distance off. She was bent over fetching water, and once she had set the large basin to rest upon her hip, she flung her head back, sending her curls flying through the air to rest on her back.

Curious, I followed her from a distance. She

entered a tent that I had never been in before, and I did not know whose it was. *I am here to see how our people are doing, so I had better check on this happening*, I thought.

I reached the door of the tent just in time to hear Jessha set down the basin of water, which I could hear sloshing about. “I’m back!” her breezy voice rang out.

“My beauty—only away for a basin of water and I miss you,” came the deep response.

*I’d better enter while I still am able*, I chuckled to myself, and prepared to make my entrance.

“Excuse the disturbance,” I said, as I opened the tent door and stepped within. Fairly sure that Bemar was the man held captive by Jessha’s spirit, I explained my reason before even ensuring that it was indeed he, “I’ve come to see the injured.”

They both looked up, startled for a moment, perhaps wondering if I had heard their last exchange. “Of course, Father Abraham,” Jessha quickly sputtered, “it ... it’s wonderful to have your company.” She stood to her feet and pushed her hair out of her face and straightened her dress. “Please sit here,” she said, offering me her low seat by Bemar’s side.

I scooted it back just a ways, for if I had sat where it had originally been placed, I would have found it much too close to the man for my comfort. As I did so, Jessha, now mildly embarrassed, turned to get a cloth and began rummaging through a nearby stack of linens.

“Bemar, how are you?” I inquired.

“I am well, Abraham. I am well,” came the answer.

“Indeed, your voice sounds strong, and not as the voice of a man who is at risk of losing his spirit.”

“I am hardly at risk of losing my spirit, Abraham. I fear I am rather gaining more spirit than I had



previous to this encounter.” Raising his head slightly, he lowered his voice to a whisper, “This lovely lady of your people has poured into me more spirit and life than I had expended in battle,” he confided. “My only worry is for the loss of my heart, not the loss of my life or health.”

Bemar’s whisper had not been so quiet as to escape Jessha’s ears. By this time she sat on the tent floor by the foot of his bed across from where I was seated. Her head dropped slightly and I saw her blush at these words, but Bemar bore no shame.

*Again the nature of man and woman separates itself from the other. I mused in an instant. Jessha, so timid and bashful, rushes to conceal her feelings still. Bemar, a man I hardly know, and not one of our own people, boldly states his heart and love. Are not men the easier to understand?*

Then I remembered a wise word Sarah had once given me: *Men do appear simpler to understand, that is true. Yet God has evenly distributed all that both a man and woman must bear according to their ability. Men are given to much outward responsibility—protecting their family, providing for them, caring for the physical aspects of dwelling in safety. To a woman it has been given to nurture, love and care for her man, her young ones, and her home. All the complexities within women lie all together; men have diverse demands in which to spread out their difficulties. It is unfair to expect women to respond the same as men do.*

“Ah, those worries are the easier ones to deal with,” I said after a moment. “Let us be thankful that God has kept us all. He preserved your life in battle; will He not preserve all else that you entrust into His care?”

Bemar’s eyes seemed to brighten. My response had not been harsh. As a man I would have

expected him to do thus: to state his feelings before his heart was lost entirely, for he had no way to know whether or not the mixing of love between our people would be permissible or not. In truth, I knew not myself. This was not something we often encountered, for our young men and women found their partners from within our own camp, and the choices that lay before them were not bad nor few. But as this scenario had been posed to me, it seemed not entirely bad, and I let Bemar know I was inclined this way.

I turned to Jessha. “Take proper care of this man, Jessha. His life is valuable. See to it that he finds sufficient opportunity to also rest alone.”

“I will do so gladly,” she responded with a gentle smile.

“And that necklace, it’s lovely,” I complimented her, hoping that I might find out why all of our guest women were wearing them today.

She raised her hand to her neck and lightly touched the beautiful adornment. “Oh this ... Bemar’s sister, Kelia, lent it to me. Their women wear them as a sign of victory. It dates back to a custom from years back ...”

“I have heard how the custom began, but I was unaware of what the symbolism of the women wearing them meant. Most interesting,” I noted aloud, as I excused myself from the tent and continued on my way.

As I approached Ahran’s tent, I wondered if I would find him there. I wished to see how he had fared through the events of yesterday, and to share some of his joy at Jehmi’s progress. The tent flap which formed his doorway was pulled back, and as I paused for a minute, I saw a group of men seated within. Not wishing to disturb, I resolved to continue on.

Approaching one of Ahran’s guards outside the

tent, I inquired simply, “Assir?” Finding ourselves unable to communicate in the local tongue, the man stepped up a few paces away from his post and motioned to me toward a tent a ways off.

“Thank you,” I said, with a nod of my head and a smile, trying to convey my appreciation. I was grateful for Ahran and Korel’s ability to converse with us, as well as Ranin and Bemar, and a few others who served as interpreters and relayed our messages to those who could not speak our tongue.

The tent flap was closed, so I softly tapped the two wooden rough carvings together which hung from the center of the doorway, announcing myself as a visitor awaiting entry. Different families had contrived various devices for this purpose. Some strung together heavy chimes which one could jostle to announce their presence; this was good enough as long as there were no nasty gales in the vicinity, else the chimes had the potential to render one nearly deaf. Others put long strings of beads hanging down their doorway, providing a second doorway, and their rustle also alerted one to guests.

Generally, among our families, tradition had lent itself to furnishing tent doorways with rather loud and noisy trinkets. Perhaps it was the men of the camp who disliked the chimes ringing at irregular hours and for no purpose; or having to push aside a wall of clamorous beads while struggling to bring a heavy pail of water inside the tent, that led many to remove them all together. At least this was the case for our family. Sarah’s makeshift wall of handcrafted beads now adorned one side of our tent, rather than the doorway, and life was much quieter for it.

I noticed that our resident guests, on the other hand, seemed to have put more skilled thought

into the making of their devices. Nearly all were made out of somewhat hollow and dried wood pieces, which gave them a light and quieter quality. Each appeared to have been carved by a youngster, for the workmanship was such that a man would not have dared display it. *Perhaps as each son reaches a certain age, they are given this task*, I thought.

A delicate hand opened the tent flap, and I was met with the pretty eyes of a woman. She seemed slightly taken aback, and quickly lowered her eyes and curtsied, while whispering something in her native tongue to another occupant of the room.

“Enter, enter!” a masculine voice called out, which I recognized as belonging to Assir. I had not spoken with him much, but those few moments I spent conversing with him before he stepped out onto the battlefield, and hearing his cry to God in the face of death had forever burned the sound of his voice into my mind.

I stepped inside the tent, and was courteously directed to a comfortable low seat which I gratefully took. A cool cup of refreshment was also brought to me by the woman. “Thank you,” I acknowledged.

“Abraham, it is good to see you,” Assir smiled, raising himself to sit up.

“No, no, please do not rise on my account. You must recover first,” I said, with a note of concern in my voice.

“I am doing well,” he assured me. “My wounds have been well tended to, and soon I will be back to my regular duties.... Oh, forgive me! I failed to introduce to you Siesha. She is my ... my caregiver and nurse.”

“I see,” I said, with a hint of disbelief, at which Assir smiled slightly. “It has been a pleasure to meet you, Siesha.”

With a demure smile, she again said something

that I could not understand, though it sounded like something lovely for the tone of her voice, and departed from the tent.

“She will return at our convenience,” Assir interpreted.

“How have you been?” I inquired. “I have not seen much of you, any in fact, since you were taken off the battlefield. You fought valiantly, Assir, and both our people and yours have much to thank you for.”

“Abraham, I have been a great man in my day, but those days have faded. This battle was not one to call my own, and my body would have been laid to rest in the earth with the others had not your God rescued me and slain Mescha with His Own hand. There is no man called Assir whom any man should thank,” he replied humbly.

“Indeed it was God Who wrought the victory; I argue not with you, my good man. But for the vessel, He had chosen you, and your humility and willingness gave Him opportunity to do His works. For this, He will reward and honor you, as we will.”

“I am humbled by this, Abraham. Every man who stood there that day knows that I was weak and faltering. I cannot ... there cannot be ...”

Placing my hand on his shoulder, I interrupted him, “Assir, God often chooses the weak or a moment of weakness in which to declare His strength. Fret not. Put your energies into recovering. I rejoice to see that you are doing well. May God be with you and restore you.”

“Thank you,” he said, as he laid down to rest again, and I excused myself.

As I rounded the last section of their camp, I came across a wall of men facing away from me. I soon realized that these were our captives, and it appeared that Ranin had put them to good work, for they were divided into a few groups, each posted

with guards, and were laboring to create a large sheltered area in the open for recreational gatherings. *Wise man, that Ranin!* I thought to myself. *Perhaps our elders should draw up a listing of labor we would have done in our camp by these rebels!* Then I stopped myself, or rather a prick inside my heart stopped me.

Convicted, my heart made silent communion with God: *You are right, as always, My God. I will come before You before the sun sets to find what You would have done with these men. They are not ours to treat as slaves; they, too, have purpose in their lives. We will not take into our own hands the responsibility of deciding what their fate shall be. This we will leave in Your hands.*

I had now made the full tour of Ahran’s camp, and moved into those of our own people. Somehow, in the past several days, our spirits had melted together and blended in such a way that it did not seem that their people and ours were so different, or so removed. As far as I could tell, no strife or great difficulties ran amongst the greater camp, and wherever one turned, they would find a mixture of people and cultures enjoying the same goodness of the one true God together.

I stopped at the water dispenser, where young men filled up barrels of water from the well for the surrounding families to retrieve for daily use. To the left side, on a table, sat a large basin. I bent over it and splashed the cool water on my face, bathing in the refreshment it provided on this hot day. Then I felt a set of hands slipping around my sides, and a head resting against my back.

“Sarah, darling?” I quietly asked.

“Yes, my love.”

I turned to face her, and cupped her face in my wet hands. “I love you,” I said, placing a tender kiss on her lips.

“I love you, too! And where have you been off to this fine morning?”

After I had recounted my morning to her, she sighed in pretended tiredness for all that I had done, and then said, “You must be ready for a meal by now. Come, I have something prepared!”

“But I had planned to tour the rest of the camp; I’m not even half way done.”

“Later, darling, later. You must eat and rest first. When the sun has let out a few more of its rays, then you can go out again. Aren’t you going to rest with me?” she asked, with a playful look twinkling in her eyes. Sarah had never outgrown her sense of fun.

“Why certainly! I would never turn down such an invitation!” I responded, and as she headed off, I followed.

After a light meal and a delightful time of rest, I again set off to complete my survey of the camp. It was rather uneventful, being that all things seemed to be going along as they should, but I was not disappointed for that. I met Eliezer along the way and mentioned to him the need God had impressed upon me to seek Him regarding what we were to do with our captives.

“Has there been any word on the remainder of Sabit’s band?” I queried.

“None yet. A small search party of Ahran’s men are due to return to camp tonight or tomorrow; they are seeking out word of some sort. It would be hard for such a large group of men to have gone unnoticed.”

## THE RETURN

Quickly enough came the appointed time for myself and a few of the elders to meet in prayer concerning our prisoners. After discussing the matter, we committed our thoughts and reasoning to God in supplication, and awaited His instruction, which He gave in full detailed abundance. It was to be not as we had thought. Nonetheless, the plan had now been laid before us, and we determined to fulfill it.

Ahram had been present for the small council session, but Korel had been otherwise engaged. Eliezer at once set off to locate Korel and Ranin, to inform them of the developments. Conveniently, he was able to immediately relay the message to the two together.

“As you know, Korel, we met to seek the Lord for guidance as to the lives of our captives,” Eliezer began.

Korel nodded for Eliezer to continue on, but Ranin spoke his mind bluntly, “A few plans have I for these miserable men’s lives! There is plenty of labor to be done around this camp, which would only begin their repayment for all the misery they have caused our people, and for the innocent lives they have taken.

There are not enough hours of sunlight in a day to provide them with tasks for."

"Ranin, hold your peace," Korel stepped in. "This camp possesses a working which is most unlike the manners we are accustomed to. Their God has spared us all, has He not?" Ranin nodded in agreement, and Korel continued, "Therefore the lives of these men are held captive in His hand, not ours. We are only their guardians. Whatever plan the Almighty has for their lives is what we will seek to carry out, not the revenge that we may inwardly feel. And it would do us all good to remove any such feelings from our hearts, for what I have experienced thus far of this God is that He is not inclined to pattern His dealings after our preferences."

Ranin shut his lips and clasped his hands tightly together in front of his body.

"I understand how these things can be difficult to adjust to," Eliezer offered sympathetically. "Each of us have had to deal with these same feelings, but we have learned over the years that God's planning and leading looks much further in the future than we are able to, and all that He does is done for our good."

"Go on, then. Tell us what has been decided," Korel encouraged.

"As soon as their wounded are able to travel, we are to provide them with food and drink sufficient to sustain them to the next village, and send them on their way. They are to return to their native land, to build and to settle there."

The words had hardly finished leaving Eliezer's mouth when Ranin, seeming to have forgotten the admonishment he had just received, burst forth again, "Return to Egypt!—This band of men! They will never do so! This is inconceivable. Are we to set them free and send them forth, merely instructing them as to where they are to go? They

would face such shame and humility if they were to return; this alone would make it impossible. Yet they have not had their minds and hearts corrected; still lying within them is hate and vengeance. To think that they will obey and begin to live lives of peace and service to their fellowman is wild fancy!"

Korel remained silent, perhaps wishing for Ranin's own words to sink deeper within his soul and prick his heart.

"If you would allow me to finish," Eliezer said firmly, directing his gaze toward Ranin, "perhaps the rest of my speech would conclude the matter.

"Our God," he continued with emphasis, "has chosen this path for these men. He has said that their hearts are known unto Him, and that He has prepared their own course of redemption. No doubt their return will be difficult, and they will be met with much opposition, for all the evil they have brought upon others, but this is required of them.

"As to whether or not they will return, this seemingly impossible task we are being asked to leave in the hands of God—the same God Who knocked Sabit from his horse, and Who gave us the victory in the face of certain defeat. I do not suppose that leading these men back to Egypt can be all that laborious for Him." Eliezer motioned with his arm out toward the vast expanses of barren ground and open air, "Do remember that somewhere out there are one hundred more of Sabit's men. Our continued protection and safekeeping still rests in the hands of God—the same God Who asks this of us. Shall we choose our own way, or oblige what He asks?"

Eliezer rested the weighty question upon Ranin, without waiting for an answer. He only nodded silently, at which Korel resumed the conversation by inquiring of Ranin how the wounded fared.

"They shall be well enough to make the journey tomorrow," Ranin replied, his voice taking on a more supportive tone. "We will have to begin preparations at once, but this can most certainly be done."

"Very well, then let us prepare for their departure tomorrow. I will inform the others, and if all deem it well, they shall leave camp before noon," Eliezer stated. He shortly excused himself to go, leaving Korel and Ranin alone to further discuss necessary preparations.

A few hours later, as supper was about to commence, Korel approached me, a smile on his face and a liveliness in his gait. "Word has come to us of Sabit's remaining band. It is amazing!"

"Where are they located? What has become of them?" I asked eagerly.

"They are half a day's journey off, just about where we placed them from Sabit's instructions. We were perplexed as to why they had not returned to seek out their captain, but they have been afflicted with a dreadful plague of some sort, and no man will venture near them. Their intentions to 'eat, drink and be merry' have lamely ended; they now appear as a heap of plauged bodies, awaiting a miraculous recovery or their eventual end." Korel appeared incredulous.

"Again, the hand of our God at work!" I proclaimed, marveling at the wide testimony He was causing this incident to be.

"The hand of your God is indeed placed on a very lengthy arm," Korel responded, jokingly.

"Have all heard this news?" I queried.

"Most of our people have, for indeed, they have held with them this cause for fear for many years. They are all greatly relieved, and have taken into their bosom a greater faith for the release of the captives on the morrow.... None of which has taken

courage more greatly than Ranin," he added.

"Ah, some may think of it as a release, yet when one is placed into the protection of God, at times there cannot be a more secure bondage," I said thoughtfully, reminiscing on times past when I had in some fashion or another tried to escape the will of God, and had been led back to it by His invisible hand—one which I felt heavy upon my being.

"Very well. A message will be sent throughout our camp this even, that all our people may be aware of the departure in the morn. And at last our camp will return to a more normal state," I said, looking off into the distance.

Korel's mind was apparently trying to discern what my last statement had meant, so I clarified my words, "I do not speak of your people departing. I do not know what plans God has for your people. He has brought us together for this time, and no more has been revealed to me on this matter. I suppose your council must discuss these matters, at which time we will do likewise. Until then, I will not concern myself with thoughts for the future, for there have been burdens sufficient during these last several days. Enjoy the evening, my friend!"

And enjoy the evening we did. Musical instruments were brought out as we sat around the fire after eating, and the children played and danced in between the crowds. With the threat of Sabit's remaining force now removed, we all slept a sweeter and deeper sleep.



I did have one duty to attend to the following morning. Ranin and a number of men had undertaken the task of preparing our captives for departure. A team of women had prepared foodstuffs for their initial journey, and some water skins had been set aside for their use. All that



remained was for someone to inform them of what was going on, and where they were going to be sent off to. I was that someone.

As I approached them, some stood, some sat on the ground, and all waited for any word of what would become of them. Having seen the power of our God displayed so mightily, they were understandably anxious as to what would become of them, and whether at last their time had come to be ushered off to their fate. Looking into their eyes, I saw many fearful and uncertain young men within the captive fighters before me, and God's mercy and kindness began to unfold upon me.

"Men!" I called out to them, and soon had their rapt attention. "The time has come to leave our camp; your day of release has come." I paused while Ranin began translating my message to see a mixture of astonishment and wonder creep across the faces of several, as they no doubt pondered whether there was a hidden meaning of the word "release."

"You have heard me correctly," I affirmed. "The day of your release has come. To whom do we release you?—Into the hands of God, Who will accompany you back to the land of Egypt, from whence you have come." Despite their fright and anxiety, mutters of shock escaped from their lips, and their countenances betrayed their feelings with looks of despair.

"No man of ours will accompany you; you will travel alone," I continued, my voice taking on a more serious tone. "You may see this as an opportune moment to escape, and indeed, we shall not be there to stop you. Yet I should bring to your remembrance that although you may not see about you an earthly captor, our God is more than able to manifest Himself should the need arise."

One could nearly feel the shivers run through

the group of men, as all reflected for a moment on the manner in which they had seen God silence their former captain in the height of his pride. "I am also certain that by this time you have heard news of the hundred men that you once counted yourselves brothers with, and the plague that has befallen them. I guarantee that this was not a chance illness, men. The man who dares God to set him in his place shall indeed find God happy to oblige him in his challenge.

"A meager portion of supplies have been prepared; these you will use until you reach the nearest village, from where you may acquire more, and straightway continue on your journey. Ranin will show you the route you are to take. That is all."

I turned to leave, but felt an inward nudge prodding me to wait a moment longer. I did so, and the voice of mercy and truth came flooding into my heart, and burst forth through my lips. "Surely you wonder why it is that you have been spared from death and disease. Why are you now being made to return to your land, where you will be greeted with scorn, and made to sit with shame? I have not all the answers to your questions, but for some reason which lies deep in your heart, God, in His mercy, has given each of you another life to live.

"You are to rebuild your lives, to serve your people, to return that which has been lost through your ruthless destruction of land and lives, to find within yourselves the humility to now pay, through a converted heart and soul, the debt which you owe to mankind. There is none among you too far from God's side, if you will only remain near." With those words of hope and explanation, I stretched out my arms towards them and said, "Now, go in peace."

As we saw them trudge off into the distance, I wondered what was going through their minds at this time. Ahran broke the silence, "I wonder how they will do?"

"There is only One Who knows," I said, "but I do hope they took my warning seriously, lest they find themselves in a worse state than they thought possible." Turning to the others who stood around, I added, "Let no man worry for them. They are out of our hands now, and in much more capable ones. Yet we still must answer to God for the hundreds of lives in our care. Let us be off to enjoy the goodness of the Lord and tend to our tasks."

"Let us!" Ahran echoed. He had changed a great deal in such a short time. Ever since the night that God had required him to bend his will and pride, Ahran had chosen to see his commitment through till the end, and God had clearly blessed him for it. It no longer became a matter of proving or testing God for the sole purpose of seeing his son healed. It had turned into something much greater than that.

God had again required him to trust in the more demanding dangers, and he had done well. Somewhere in the midst of all those unsettling days and wearying nights, God had done a miracle for his family, and we were now beginning to notice it in earnest.

Jehmi had made dramatic progress. It had only dawned on me, and upon all of us, I believe, in full when we saw Jehmi and Isaac scampering through the camp. Yes! Jehmi was running, leaping and hopping about. There was color in his face and his lips were set in a beaming smile. Ahran looked on with the contentment of a proud father, and the gratitude overflowed from his countenance.

"Praise be to God!" I said aloud, and was joined

with a hearty "Amen!" from Ahran. There was no physical cause for his recovery, other than the hand of a loving God rewarding a man who had struggled to place his faith in that which was foreign to him. At the onset, Sarah and I had hoped that God would grant him an immediate answer to his petition, as we felt that Ahran would need the increase of faith in order to sustain his spirit during the days that were to come. But God knew he was capable of waiting longer for the blessing, and He strengthened him during the time when Jehmi's condition had seen no improvement.

A moment later Sarah and Ulyina leisurely walked up the same path that the two boys had raced on earlier. They were deeply engrossed in conversation, but each paused to look up and around, presumably trying to catch sight of their sons.

"They are long gone!" Ahran called out to them, with a wave to Ulyina.

"Yes, I'm afraid you've lost them for the morning!" I added with a slight laugh.

The next several days passed by in a blend of happiness, festivities, and camp organization. All the goods, caravans and tents that had been moved in preparation for the arrival of Sabit's forces had to be moved back to their proper places. One of the large tents that had been used to hold the women and children on that day was disassembled and returned to its usual place by our communal dining area.

Oddly enough, the question of whether or not Ahran's people would remain or be departing did not arise in conversation throughout the camp. I was not about to bring it up just yet, and reasoned that it would only be courteous to allow their counselors to discuss the matter and formulate their own thoughts and wait for them

to present them to us, rather than putting them in an awkward position by asking about their plans.

Besides, since the first day of their arrival, our camp had been thrown into a defensive mode due to the oncoming threat of Sabit's attack. Anxiety had hung over our camp, even on days when the level of faith was running high. There had been no time to relax, to enjoy one another's company, or to converse about smaller goings-on without having the looming danger overshadow our discussions. I was glad for this opportunity now, and found myself daily engaged in lengthy discussions with Korel.

He carried within him the entire history of his people, and I was interested to learn of these things. I was always eager to acquire knowledge of the customs and peoples of a land, and of most interest to me were their habits of reasoning and reaction. As a result of the many events that their extended family had gone through during their years of journeying, he had much insight to bestow unto me, not only in regard to the land of Egypt, but touching many peoples, for in an attempt to preserve their lives, they had found cause to move often.

Ahran could have furnished me with much of this information, but Korel being closer to my age afforded us a greater sense of understanding. I also noted from our conversations that while Ahran had related some of the same events, it seemed he had lost all but the recounting of the happening. Whereas Korel's practice was to delve deeply into the cause, discerning the motive and purpose. Lastly, he would not leave the matter until he had garnered out of it some bit of wisdom or edification that would be of use to him in the future. Such were the qualities that I so admired in Korel.

Korel never lacked for inquiry into our lifestyle, and the many turns which our God had taken us on never ceased to amaze him. In recounting, in a brief version, the story of my life, I often found myself more wearied than usual, though always grateful to God for His divine assistance and intervention in so many situations.

During the last two days, Jessha's grandfather, Kaboth, had requested to join our times of conference, as he rightly observed that they were indeed becoming quite a habit for both of us. We were happy to have him join, for as he plainly told us the reason for his interest, we could only both shake our heads and offer knowing smiles.

Bemar and Jessha had taken well to each other, and soon it was no longer a secret kept behind the walls of a tent. Rather it became a new topic of chatter and giggling for the young women of the camp, and somber observation for the young men, a few of whom had their eyes set on the lovely Jessha. Nonetheless, Bemar was a man too large to be tampered with, and there were few young men in the camp who had the nerve to play the mating game with Jessha, for her sharp intellect and manner had thus far unraveled most who dared.

Since Jessha had entered training as an assistant scribe, Jessha's parents had fairly left the responsibility of her care in the hands of Kaboth, her grandfather, who saw more of her than they did. Now that he had seen the extent of Bemar and Jessha's acquaintance, he had much to inquire of Korel, and desired to learn all that he could of Bemar, in the hopes of staving off a bad relation should he learn it to be such. Having me there was likewise convenient, for there was also the question of whether or not such interaction would be permitted by our customs.

Korel assured us that Bemar was a good man. "One of our best," he exclaimed proudly, almost as if he had taken on the father figure role. "And he seems quite taken with your ways also."

"With one of our women, at least," Kaboth retorted.

"Have no fear, good man," Korel assured him. "Bemar does not seek prey; he is in truth a man with a kind heart, and has long looked for a woman to fill the role of an intimate companion. He seems to have found this in Jessha, and from my humble observations, she in him likewise."

"Well, we shall keep a close watch on this situation, and ensure that it does not spring up too quickly," Kaboth said, shuffling around somewhat nervously.

"Brother," I said, resting my hand on Kaboth's shoulder. "Remember the days of your youth. The impulse and liveliness that makes up the half of Jessha's good nature may have very well come from you. She is nearly a grown woman now. Her decisions and choices will not be imposed by you, and most surely you are aware of that, are you not?"

"She is *nearly* a woman, but not quite yet," he countered defensively, but let a small smile through as he mused on his younger impulsive years. "Ah, how we grow so possessive of our young ones! Indeed, all will be well, but I must still keep guard for her safety." He paused, then questioned warily, "This Bemar is an upstanding young man, is he not?"

Korel understood the meaning of the question half way through the sentence. "On him I would stake my honor. He is trustworthy. Furthermore, the love that I see in his eyes will of a surety manifest itself with great prudence toward the woman who holds his affection."

"There," I exclaimed, "no need to worry, Kaboth. The situation is under control. Let us hear more from Korel; it may be that you will garner insight as to how Bemar's mind works," I offered, trying to tempt Kaboth to leave our former discussion and return to our original conversation. But he would not be dissuaded so quickly; another thought had come to his mind and it fast made its way to his lips.

"What of our faith? I will not allow Jessha to be led from her beliefs into the way of another—even if it belongs to the path of the man that she loves," Kaboth said firmly.

A sober hush stole upon us, and I quickly spoke, in the hope that Korel would not have to, knowing that this question, though understandably valid, put him in an awkward position. "I will have to consider that matter in private," I said. "But do not fret. Jessha is God's servant, and I have no doubt that He intends to keep her as such." Kaboth seemed fairly put at rest by my response, and thus excused himself from our presence.

## THE PARCHMENTS

Another few weeks had now passed. The press of time had vanished from our camp, and all were going about their business and enjoying life to the full. Our two peoples had found ways in most every facet of daily living to integrate and to improve our quality of life. Ahran's men accompanied our own into the surrounding villages for trading purposes, and we learned some of their bargaining methods which proved most helpful.

During the days that followed the defeat of Sabit's forces, the camp had been alive with rumors of God's intervention, and many questions as to how it had all happened. Among Ahran's quarters, basic questions about our God and His power became more prevalent, now that they had witnessed His strength firsthand. While we had initially addressed the entire camp, outlining the events that had taken place, and giving glory to God, we soon saw the need for more instruction and explanation to be given those of Ahran's people who wished to hear more about our faith, and the power of our God.

God had not led us to foist our customs or beliefs upon these people. They were not being called to

enter into the same covenant which God had given unto me nearly seven years earlier—that of circumcision—for they were not joining our people. He had, however, chosen to solicit their faith and dependence upon Him, which He then rewarded by providing them with protection and safety. Though they had not been obligated to worship our God, none could deny His power. The miracles which had happened had sparked their curiosity about the workings of our God, and their openness increased toward the faith which we held.

I at first wondered how it could be that God saw fit to so greatly bless these people who had come running to Him only for the shelter of safety. But the Words that He spoke to my heart once again reminded me to trust that the ways of the Almighty were beyond our own.

*Some labor a whole day and some labor an hour, and I will bless those whom I choose to bless. I will protect those whom I choose to protect, for I see the heart and intent of this people.*

The elders established groups of men and women from our camp who offered their time to meet with small groups who wished to learn more about our God, our history, and our faith. These informal meetings were held at various hours of the day or night, depending on what hour was best suited for all. As the days wore into weeks, more small groups seemed to be springing up, and after nearly two weeks, the elders suggested that we hold a full assembly with all, to join all the believers together and strengthen those who were still young in faith.

After prayer and consultation with Ahran, Korel and some of the elders, I agreed to do so. When the time had arrived, I was truthfully surprised—but pleasantly so—to see the number of people who attended. Nearly one hundred of Ahran’s people

sat before me. Mothers had brought many of their young children who were old enough to sit still for a short while.

I marveled at how God had directed this entire scenario. In our first discussion of Ahran’s people finding shelter within our camp borders, someone had made mention of our faith influencing their own. I had never dreamed that it would to this great an extent. *Only how long will it last*, I wondered. Within a week, the answer was brought to me.



Ranin approached the door of my tent, and as I was not present, he left a message with Sarah to convey to me. Ahran and Korel had requested an audience with me.

The normalcy of camp life had returned. Though joy was plenteous throughout the camp, difficulties began resurfacing, and the people found themselves in need of counsel and assistance from the elders. Everyone had, in good faith and out of necessity, held back from troubling myself and the elders with what could at that time have been rightly perceived as petty troubles, as our very lives were threatened. Yet now the elders again made themselves available for the questions and judgment of the people, and I also found myself increasingly occupied with matters pertaining to the camp.

By the time we met, it was late afternoon. I had spoken a word with God prior to our meeting, and had received the short, but clear impression to my soul that He would lead and guide the words of their lips. I was not to take into my own hands the matters which God had placed in their care. In this frame of mind, I sat down in Korel’s tent with the two men.

“Korel and I have been deliberating the future of our people, and where we are to be,” Ahran explained. “It is something we have put off for



many weeks, for we have enjoyed the hospitality of your people for a good while now, and by no means of our own would desire to depart.”

“And by all means, you have been welcome to stay,” I offered.

“We are most grateful for your kindness. Without the mercies of your God and the openness of your people to our humble family, we would have certainly perished. Yet a strong feeling has been placed on my heart, and on Korel’s likewise, that we are to again raise the stakes of our tents and move on in search of a more permanent dwelling place.”

My eyes fell to the floor and I searched for words. The company of these two men had come to mean a great deal to me; it felt as if we were going to be losing an integral part of our camp.

“I understand,” I said, remembering the solace which God had given me earlier. “I am certain God will lead you in the way of His choosing. It will be a loss for us to see you depart, for the lines of difference have vanished, and we see you only as brothers and sisters of our faith.”

“Believe me when I say that it is with no great relish that we take upon ourselves the charge to depart,” Korel said heavily. “For all of the strain and virtue that has gone forth from us all during the moments in which we were pressed sore, still I must consider these weeks the most contented I have had in many a year.”

“What is more,” Ahran continued, “we have had the privilege of understanding your God and His workings.” Realizing perhaps that wasn’t the correct way to have put it, he rephrased his statement. “Rather, we have come to understand that God smiles upon us also, and during this time we have found a faith that we have lacked our entire lives. And in choosing this faith of our own

free will, we have received inestimable blessings. Could it not be that we have crossed paths with you for this purpose?”

Ahnan’s eyes sparkled, and we both knew that the joy of Jehmi’s total recovery was dancing in his heart. I had never had to speak to him more about it, or explain to him the ways in which God occasionally chooses to delay His answers; he understood it all, it seemed, almost more clearly than others.

“Indeed, your faith has pleased Him greatly,” I assured Ahnan, “and He will continue to be your shield and protector through the remainder of your years, if you keep your heart close to His side, and your ears open to His voice.” I knew that they often faltered at this mention of hearing the voice of the Lord, therefore I continued, “Remember, you need not be one who is deemed a prophet, nor one who has long learned the ways of God. An open heart and a willing spirit that desires the truth is more than sufficient to call down the leading of the Lord. He will give you an assurance in your heart. You must only have faith.”

“I have felt a strong urging toward this matter of our departure,” Ahnan confided. “However, being that it was not what I would have wished, I put it out of my mind and heart many a time. It was only when Korel made a similar remark to me that I took more careful notice to the voice that I heard speaking to my heart.”

“Indeed,” I agreed. “This is the working of the Lord, for He has prepared my heart for these words also. Have you made plans as to when your departure will be, or to where you will go?”

Ahnan turned toward Korel, who answered my question. “If we were able to remain another two weeks yet, we would be better prepared for our journey. We have yet to establish exactly where

we will pitch our tents to call our own land, but to begin with, we will join up with the others of our people who departed from us when we learned of Sabit's intentions. We have received word from them, and they have heard of the mighty works which God has done. They are our brothers, and though they had not the courage to remain through the testing, yet they deserve our companionship. And we would tell them of all that we have experienced, and of the true God, Whose power we have seen. This is how we are inclined."

"It sounds as if you have a great task ahead of you. No doubt all of your people will find great joy at reuniting."

"Indeed," Ahran agreed, "for loved ones and even some family members were torn from one another as our camp divided. Our people are all as one family, and we continue to bear the burden for their safety."

"Need I tell you that you are more than welcome to stay on until such a time as you find that you are prepared to depart?" I exclaimed. "You are brothers, and my camp is your camp. But tell me one thing, and in saying so, I do not mean to be arrogant. Do you perceive that all of your people will desire to depart? I do not say this with any particular knowledge of one who would not; I only inquire."

Again Korel answered, "Indeed our people have taken a great fondness to yours. I should say that they would all be happy here for an eternity. Yet if I know our people to the half of what I assume, I do believe they will all find it within themselves to regroup and settle elsewhere."

"I am glad to hear that," I said, tossing around in the back of my mind thoughts about Bemar. *Would he happily leave Jessha?* Musing again for a

moment on Korel's words and the great wisdom which I now knew him to possess, I brushed the thoughts aside. *Bemar is Ahran's close friend and protector. He is one of their people, and surely he will follow in their footsteps. Perhaps I have allowed my interests in love to steal my better judgement,* I concluded.

"Our people do not know of these plans as of yet. We will gather and explain these things to them on the morrow, if this seems well to you," Ahran suggested.

"Well indeed," I affirmed. "And until you depart from our midst, we must enjoy one another's company, and delight ourselves with singing, dancing and merriment. We will help you to the best of our ability, should you require any assistance."

"We are grateful. And indeed we shall give thanks and revel in each day of peace that we are blessed to partake of, from now until the end of our days!" Korel exclaimed enthusiastically.

The evening meal chime then sounded loudly, and we all rose to make our way to the evening meal.

That night as I lay in bed with Sarah, I told her of my meeting with Ahran and Korel. She too, upon hearing the news of their departure, was sad that they would be leaving. "I know this is a little matter, but Isaac and Jehmi have grown to become such wonderful friends. Isaac has been such a wonderful influence on Jehmi, and he will be so sad to see him go."

"I know, my dear, but Isaac will be all right. He has many other friends, and he will have to learn to understand," I said, squeezing her closely to my side. "I must tell the elders of this development in the morning. It will be a most interesting day."



The following day, after Ahran's camp had finished their assembly, I sought to detect the feelings of the men and women who had now heard the news that they were to leave our camp. Try as I did, they all somehow managed to project an appearance of normalcy, and all seemed well enough. *Bemar might be my clue!* I thought.

However, when I finally stumbled upon him—and Jessha, naturally—he too appeared fairly contained. They were a ways outside of the camp border, and were walking about, talking. *All right, I said to myself, I'll let it go now.*

The following evening, however, brought the news that I had just resolved to put out of my mind. The meal had ended and I was in my tent, not quite certain of what I was going to do next, when a voice sounded at my tent door. I bid my unknown guest enter, and was greeted by Bemar, Ahran and Korel.

"Delighted to have your company," I said, extending my arm towards the corner of my tent that provided a comfortable sitting area. "Make yourselves comfortable. Sarah should return in a moment, and I will offer you refreshments."

"No need for all of that," Ahran said. "It is a matter of a more ... driving nature that we bring before you this even."

"Please, speak your minds," I said, looking from one to the other, wondering who it was that planned to speak.

"Bemar, this is your matter. Explain what you would," Korel sympathetically urged.

Bemar straightened and looked resolutely into my eyes. "Abraham, I have talked with you somewhat of this before. It concerns one of the women of your camp, Jessha."

A slight smile was struggling to place itself on my face, but for the seriousness of his voice, I withheld it.

"I love this woman, and she loves me," he put forth without hesitation. "Yesterday I learned of our plans to depart. These I understand, and were it not for this binding passion which grips my heart and has captured my very soul, I would go gladly. I bear a firm loyalty to Ahran and to my people, and it is for this purpose that I have placed my life in their hands. Yet struggle as I would, this thing will not depart from me. I have come to find such rest and happiness in her presence. It is for this reason that I have requested, even begged for this audience with you."

He paused for a moment, as if summoning together all the strength and courage within him to utter his next words, but it did not take long. "I wish for nothing more than to have Jessha's hand in marriage. I would give my heart, my life, my faith, my all to this woman—and to her God—if she and He would have me."

My eyebrows raised on their own. Not wishing to be cut short of his plea, he continued rapidly. "I know not whether such mixing of peoples can find their way into your faith, but I implore you to see if there could not be allowance for this love. She is ... she is ..." he struggled to get the words out. "She is the perfection of all that I have ever dreamed." It seemed as if he would go on, but he felt that he had adequately stated his position, and with a sigh said, "There speaks my heart. As a man, I now rest my case in your wise hands."

Ahran and Korel looked on silently. For all his earnestness, I felt welling up within me the desire to answer him at that very moment. I longed to give him some assurance that the love which he so longed after would remain within his reach, but I could not be certain of this. His plea had pulled out of my heart sympathies that I had not known rested so deeply.

Many other questions concerning the details of his proposal flooded into my mind, and had Bemar been less nervous, I might have spoken them. Yet because I knew not in the least what the answer would be, I chose to rather wait until I had communed with the Almighty regarding the matter; then if need be, I could be given further answers, and inquire as to his plans.

“Thank you, Bemar. It is with great care and respect that I will meditate on your petitions. I imagine that this weighs heavily on you, therefore I shall urge myself to make haste. I hope to have word sent to you by the late morrow.” At that, the three men rose and gave themselves leave, not wishing to occupy any more of my time.

Sarah shortly returned to the tent, and I told her what had just transpired. “We cannot lose Jessha!” was her first response. Then her countenance changed, softened by the thought of love, and with a woman’s compassion in her eyes, she said, “Well, there does seem to be an element of true love there. I have observed them for some time now ... but it is a dilemma. Ah, it is in moments like these that I am reminded of how grateful I am that God has given these burdens unto you, and not unto me.”

“You are right. God has given these burdens unto me, but He has given you to me, to help me carry them!” Sarah looked at me with mock astonishment, her eyes wide open, as if she couldn’t believe what I was asking of her.

“Yes, yes! Come now. We must find the answer to this problem this evening. The poor boy is sick with love, and will not find health until he has an answer. I promised him one by late morrow. Since we never can know what a day will hold, I think it wisest to quench our own wondering as well as

his. If the answer suits him, then he will be restored.” Sarah’s look sobered, and with trepidation I added, “and should the answer be one that wounds him, then he will know the sooner of the need to begin his recovery.”

“Oh darling ... ” Sarah began, but I wrapped my arms around her, silencing the words which I felt might incline me to one side or the other.

“Will you join me?” I whispered in her ear.

“Of course—with gladness,” came the gentle reply.

We moved toward the corner of the tent. We knelt down together, resting our hands on the floor, and our heads upon them. The words poured out of our lips as water running over a rocky surface. I felt lacking in grace and capability, and I soon knew that Sarah shared my sentiments, as she released one of her hands from their locked clasp, and held my hand tightly.

She then began to pour out her heart before God. Sarah and I often prayed together, but our habit had greatly increased upon Isaac’s arrival. Perhaps it was because we were of so great an age before Isaac was given to us that we found ourselves more protective than younger parents, or more determined to raise him properly, knowing in our hearts that Isaac was to be our one and only child.

Sarah’s strong but often quiet faith showed up brilliantly during times of prayer. Whatever the situation and regardless of how her personal feelings may have tossed her about or concerned her, she somehow knew the secret of availing herself of instant peace in prayer. It took me longer to acquire this peace than her; she seemed to get it at once. And never were her prayers more beautiful than when she beseeched God for another. So it was now.

*How could God withstand such a plea?—The sweet waters of love and concern overflowing from the vessel of a broken heart for another,* I thought during her prayer. I found myself lost in what seemed to be the scented words of her petition, and only came slightly out of my reverie when nudged from within. Sarah's prayer had come to a close, and the voice of the Lord hovered in the air above us, waiting for an avenue to translate its presence into words. I raised myself from my bent over position, and lifted my hands, praying with a quiet fervor that I would deliver the message correctly—for two lives and hearts depended on it.

A sweet strain of music began wafting through the air before the words came. I believe that it was sent to calm my spirit, as a sign of grace that the words I was hearing were indeed the Words of our God. I sometimes felt the Spirit of God rushing through my chest, as if it were to burst forth through my lips, and I opened my mouth in anticipation of the Words which I knew were to come. And come they did, but not through the passage of my lips. The sensation was different, one I had never felt before.

I opened my eyes and looked about the tent which was dimly lit, being that it was already even, and we had not taken care to light all our lamps. Sarah sensed the difference by this time, and our eyes met.

"What is it that you require, my lord?" she asked, as if addressing the spirit within me, rather than my own self.

"A parchment ... I must ... write." I could barely get out the words.

As unusual as this request was, Sarah quickly found the necessary items. Bringing over the lamp which sat at the other side of the tent, she raised the wick and provided me with a firm

substance to write upon.

Normally, and in the limited instances in which writing was used among our peoples, it was done upon tablets of clay or wax. Writing on parchment, or the cleaned skins of animals, was most uncommon, though the art was not unknown among our people.

I held my stylus in hand firmly, the sharp piece of bone I would use to etch the characters onto the parchment. My whole body trembled slightly from the unfamiliarity of both the feelings that were rippling through it, and of what I was doing. Then I heard Sarah's voice echoing through the air, "Relax, Abraham. Relax." I did so, and as I did, I felt an unearthly feeling float into my arm, possessing control of my stylus. My hand began to write.

I looked at the characters forming on the page almost incredulously, yet giving silent thanks to God in my heart, as I did not wish to interrupt the Spirit by voicing my wonder aloud. Try as I did, I could not make out what my hand was inscribing upon the parchment; it seemed that my eyes had been blurred, for it was not too dim in our tent to read what was being written. I concluded that it was not for me to know at that moment. Sarah looked on from time to time, but being seated on the opposite side of the parchment, it seemed that she could not make out what was being written either.

The first message was short, filling up the space of half a parchment. Then without even thinking, I observed my hand moving that parchment over to the side, and finding a new piece. My hand again began writing. When it had finished, I found that the parchment was again nearly half filled. Then my stylus fell to the floor. We continued to watch as my hands rolled each of the parchments tightly.

I held both small scrolls in my left hand, as my right hand ran its fingers over the surface of the thick tapestry on the wall beside us. Finding a long and frayed edge hanging off the border, I pulled it off and used it to tie about the first parchment, and did the same with the second also.

The goal having now been completed, the presence left my body, leaving my frame a little more slumped over than I had been a moment earlier. The air in the tent lightened, and Sarah and I raised our eyes to meet each other.

“Abraham, how did it happen? What was it like?” she asked half out of curiosity, and half out of awe.

“You saw the same thing I did, darling. Once I heard your words telling me to relax, and I did, then the Spirit just took over ...”

Sarah cut me short. “I never told you to relax, darling. I didn’t say a word.”

Her words sent a chill down my spine, as yet another unseen happening ever etched itself in my old memory. It was too much to talk about or try to describe all over again, and Sarah seemed to understand that the experience had been one that could never be accurately conveyed to another through our limited human vocabulary. We spoke no more of it.

“Do you know what the parchments say?” she then asked.

“I have not been given the understanding of them,” I confessed.

“Then have we received our answer in full? What will you say to Bemar? Are these parchments to be given to him, and is he meant to understand?”

“You ask too many questions, Sarah. I know not the answer to them all. I do know that these are meant to be kept safely, and I suppose that in time, what we are to do with them will be revealed to us. In the meantime, I do believe that we have our

answer.” She looked up at me with expectant eyes, but I could see her half cringing underneath.

“This union is permissible. This impression God has strongly implanted in my heart. As for the parchments, if I were to give more thought to them, I am certain I would find myself in utter bewilderment. Yet God is always several steps ahead of us, is He not? I imagine that in due time they will fit in to our lives rather nicely.”

Sarah’s eyes closed for a brief moment in relief, as a smile spread across her face. “They will be happy, the both of them,” she said quietly. “Very happy.”

“Ah yes, and this is only the beginning. You have not forgotten that their people are leaving shortly,” I reminded her. “There are more questions that Bemar must first answer. I do not feel that God wills it for Jessha to leave the camp. And Kaboth will himself be a force to reckon with. I must reason that he has not yet heard of their intentions, else he would be sitting within the walls of this tent presently.”

Sarah’s eyes fluttered around the room, and I could tell she was piecing together all that would need to be done in preparation for this word getting out. “I will think of each matter this evening, and we will discuss it in the morning,” she offered, hoping to save my time and energies.

“Thank you, my love,” I said, accepting her offer. Not only would my time and energy be saved through her masterminding this affair, but nature had not given unto me half of the organizational abilities that it had showered upon her. I was a wise man to avail myself of what God had given her.

I rose then and walked over to the side of the tent directly above our bed. Hanging high on the tent wall was a tiered pouch of sorts. When Isaac



was younger, it became the only safe location in our tent for belongings which we wished to keep out of his chubby little hands. As custom, it had remained there though he was now older and could be trusted to keep to his own things. We still kept a few possessions in there, but it was not often utilized.

“This is where the parchments will remain, Sarah,” I said, carefully inserting them both into one opening. As we laid down to sleep, the parchments hanging above us served as a reminder of the unusual and unpredictable powers of our God. In a mixture of reverence and wonder over what the morrow would bring, we fell asleep.

## NEWS AND PREPARATIONS

The next morning Sarah and I took some time to discuss how exactly we would go about informing various ones of the answer we had received the night before. We both seemed to instinctively know that the mysterious parchments were to be reserved solely for our knowledge at this time; when they were to be used, then they could be made known to others.

While Sarah went to Leah’s tent to visit Isaac before going about her duties of the day, I set out to find Bemar, knowing within me that I would not have to search hard. As I had suspected, he had taken care to make himself available, and stood not a great distance from the center of camp, posted on what appeared to be guard duty, though there seemed no need of a guard at this place.

Seeing me, he gave a calm greeting, “Good morning, Abraham. I trust you have slept well.” His eyes shifted off to the left side, as he made a noble effort to not press me in the matter which I knew sat soundly on both of our minds.

“Good morning to you, Bemar. I am well, thank you. Did your night pass in rest and peace?” I inquired.

“Yes,” he replied, slightly less confidently.

Not wishing for him to have to endure anguish of heart any longer, I broached the subject. “Bemar, if you are able to leave your post and accompany me without, to the borders of the camp, I would speak to you concerning the matter you brought before me yesterday even.”

His eyes brightened slightly, and he swallowed, “I am able to accompany you at present, or whenever you wish.”

“Very well, let us go now then. I am sure you do not relish the wait.” We walked in silence until we had reached the outside of the camp, and then we continued on a ways.

I was pondering on how to word myself, when Bemar spoke up. “Abraham, I do not wish to make this difficult for you. Speak now whatever you must. I have endeavored to prepare myself in heart and spirit for disappointment, though I know not how well I have done so.”

“Very well,” I said slowly. “Bemar, I have communed with God regarding the matter, for truthfully, I knew not what should be considered right.” He looked down toward the ground as we walked on, then raised his head as if to bravely bear whatever the judgment was to be.

“However, I must first inquire of you further concerning some matters.”

“Indeed,” his reply came quickly.

“To begin with ... have you made known your feelings and intentions to Jessha? And has she given you her own free consent?”

“In truth, we have talked about the matter, yet I have not so clearly laid out my request before her. I have not directly asked for her hand in marriage, for I did not wish to do so until I had first obtained your permission. But concerning the matter, I do know her feelings, and believe that she will gladly oblige me my request.”

“Does she know then of the departure of your people?”

“Yes, she does. And I fear this has chipped a portion out of her heart. She has developed such an affinity with my sister, Kelia, and there are many others whom she has also befriended. Did you know that she has taken up learning our tongue?”

“I did not, but that does not surprise me. Jessha is eager to learn anything that she does not know.” I stopped walking for a moment as I considered how to word the matter most important to me. “Bemar, if your people depart, should Jessha become your wife, there would be a parting of the ways. With which people would the both of you remain?”

He had clearly thought this over, and though it appeared that his choice had been already made, it had plainly been a difficult one. “I would not expect Jessha, at such a young age, to leave her people. Nor would I want to remove her from the faith which has made her into the lovely woman—both in heart and spirit—that I have found her to be. I would remain ... that is, if your people would have me.”

“Bemar, God would require a great deal more of you should you choose to remain as one of us. You would be called upon to enter into the covenant which God gave to us. Have you meditated on all these matters, for they are not to be taken lightly.”

Bemar drew in a deep breath and answered with a firm conviction in his voice. “I have indeed, Abraham. I have learned much of your ways and customs, and of that which your God requires of you. Should I be allowed, I am prepared to meet every condition, and in good faith and desire embrace your ways, and His ways.”

“Have you Ahran’s agreement on your request?”

"I do. However, he may wish to speak to you at greater length on the matter."

"That is acceptable."

Having received the answers to all the questions I had been left with, it was time to answer his request. I stopped walking and remained silent for a moment.

"The word that God has given is ... that He has put this love and desire within your heart, and you may marry with His blessing," I said at last, as I reached my arm across his shoulder and gave him a hearty slap on the back.

Wreaths of smiles broke out across his face, and he closed his eyes for a moment, taking in all the air about him. "Well?" I asked.

"I ... I am overjoyed! What can I say? The requests of my heart have been answered. I must find Jessha at once!"

"Not so quickly, young man," I said, motioning him to continue walking with me. "God has made allowance for this, but as far as I am aware, He has not mentioned anything to the others yet." I looked into his eyes, hoping he would grasp my point.

"I see," he pondered thoughtfully. "There is yet more to be worked out ... well, this I realize. For her parents and family must consent, and ..."

"Indeed, Bemar. Receiving God's blessing is only the first step. Be not hasty, for there is much to be sorted out yet. Perhaps Jessha has told you this already, but her parents have left her in the care of her grandfather, Kaboth. Have you had a word with him?"

"I was honored to meet him once, but circumstances cut our acquaintance short. I was called upon to attend to some matter," he explained.

"Ah, then you may not know that he tends to

his granddaughter with as much pride and concern as any doting father or mother would. He has taken notice of you and your affection for his granddaughter, and has made known his due concerns. Perhaps Jessha can find a better way into his heart than you are able. Nevertheless, despise not his age; his spirit is fierce and not to be tampered with."

"Thank you for your advice," Bemar said gratefully. His face now took on a more serious look, as he began pondering how to obtain the good graces of Jessha's keepers. "I suppose until a few days ago I did not think in earnest that I would obtain Jessha's hand, therefore I did not seek out the proper route in all instances," he confessed. "I now regret this, yet I shall begin at once. Have you any further counsel for me?"

"Tell me what you plan to do this day."

"I will first find Jessha and tell her of my love for her and my intentions, and learn her response. Then I will approach Kaboth and, should he be favorable, I will then request her hand in marriage."

"It sounds well, Bemar. While you meet with Jessha, I will have a word with Kaboth. It may prove helpful to you."

"I am grateful," he said, nodding his head in respect.



Once back inside the camp, we parted ways and I headed toward Kaboth's quarters. As I approached, I saw a familiar female form depart from his tent.

"Sarah? Is that you?" I called out.

The figure twirled around to reveal itself as being my lovely wife. "Ah," she said, "I was just going to search you out."

"I have just finished speaking with Bemar." I gave her a short review of how our conversation

had transpired, and told her of my thought to speak with Kaboth. Her eyes lit up with that charming smile.

"I've just left off speaking with him for you, dear."

"Have you truly?" I asked, happy to hear that I had been spared an emotionally charged discussion with Kaboth.

"I have. I told you last night that I would think on all these things, did I not? I am now on my way to visit Jessha's parents. It has been awhile since I have seen them. I do not intend to reveal much to them just yet, for it would be best that Bemar approaches Kaboth first, but I can at least find out where their thoughts and feelings lie on the matter, which will be a help in itself."

"My sweet!" I exclaimed, giving her a hug. "And how was Kaboth about the matter?" I queried.

"For all his feisty ways, he is a wise man, and ... he is well." Sarah's smile assured me that all was indeed well. "Now that you are out of a job," she quipped, "go visit little Isaac. He will be so glad to see you. And I hear they are reenacting the story of Noah and the ark. You know, it is Jehmi's birthday in a few days, and ever since Isaac told him this story with such vigor, it has been his favorite. For his festivities, he has chosen for the children to perform this story for the entire camp. I think if you go just now you'll be there in time to see the beginning."

"Excellent. I'll be on my way at once," I said, happy for the opportunity to return to the world of children, where all things were much less complex, and where I received unending encouragement and overflowing love.

Isaac was indeed happy to see me, and all the other young ones rushed over to my side also. There were so many of them that I had to find myself a chair quickly, lest I be knocked over by

the force of their energy and excitement. All too joyful that I was going to observe their play, one of the young girls, playing the role of serving hostess, brought me a pillow for my back, and in between her girlish giggles, politely offered me a cup of fresh squeezed fruit juice which the children had just finished making. I graciously accepted, and soon found myself sipping their morning snack, while the children prepared, somewhat nervously, to put on a truly good performance.

I felt I could not clap loudly enough at the end, in order to satisfy the twenty or more pairs of bright and expectant eyes who looked upon me to receive affirmation that they had done well.

"You have all done marvelously!" I commended them, and their pleased smiles beamed around the large tent. "And where is the birthday boy?" I asked.

From the back of the line, Jehmi stepped forward, eyes aglow and cheeks red from the jumping and dancing they had all been engaged in just a moment earlier. "Here I am!" came the cheerful response.

"Well," I said, sitting him up on my lap, "your birthday will indeed be a memorable occasion! You chose an excellent story!" He laughed with glee, hopped off my lap, and joined the rest of his friends, while I chatted for a moment with Leah and Jochim, the creators of this spectacular performance.

"How have you two put this together? It is absolutely amazing!" I congratulated them. I was truly amazed at the skill with which the children performed, but not only that, I figured that they must need the encouragement. I was hardly able to convince Isaac and one or two of his friends to do something in an orderly fashion, much less coordinate the lively bodies of more than twenty

young children, so I imagined this must have taken considerable work.

“They are so excited about it,” Leah bubbled over, “and we are as well! They have done so perfectly.”

“Of course,” the voice of Jochim’s reason chimed into the conversation, “it has taken a great deal of work and perseverance—hours and hours of practice, to be more precise. But we have always left the choice with them as to whether or not they want to do the performance; as long as they do, they have to continue preparing for it.”

“And we encourage them greatly,” Leah’s spirit remained still high and bright.

“Then I see that the two perfect caretakers are standing in front of me, and I must give gracious thanks to God for providing the both of you, for I should be quite beside myself were I to have this task.”

“And we would be likewise should we have yours,” Jochim added.

With a last smile and look at the children, who were now playing happily together, I turned to leave.



By the time the sun had set, most who dwelled within the inner camp had heard word of Bemar and Jessha’s love-swept intentions. Jessha had joyously accepted Bemar’s offer of marriage, and Kaboth, seeing the radiance and happiness of his lovable granddaughter scarcely had words to say against the matter, or so it was noised throughout the camp. And it must have truly happened in this fashion, for when I next met Kaboth, he said with a twinkle in his eye, “Within a year I should be a great grandfather!”

Likewise her parents were pleased, as were Ahran’s people, who were glad to see Bemar at last

secure a wife. Thankfully, along with the rumor of the intended marriage, the Word from God which had sanctioned the union was also scattered about, as well as Bemar’s decision to join my people, to partake of our faith and lifestyle fully and in every sense, including God’s covenant to us, requiring every man to be circumcised. This part he was naturally anxious to get over with as soon as possible. Soon the chatter abated, and the news seemed to settle upon everyone as if it had been planned for many years.



The weeks passed by, and what at first had only lodged itself in my mind as the knowledge that Ahran and his host would soon depart from our midst, turned into an ever increasing awareness that the day of departure was nearly upon us. The men repaired their caravans and restocked supplies, sending a number of small teams to the closest villages and trading centers, to acquire more provisions, weapons and other commodities through the trade of their handicrafts and tools. The women stripped their immediate dwelling places of all but the barest essentials, and began packing the rest within the caravans. Their herds were carefully inspected; the weaker animals were marked to be slaughtered for food, leaving only the hardy to remain.

By this time all knew that Bemar was to remain with our people, and each family gave him a token of their gratefulness for his loyal protection during the many years that he had spent with them. Bemar moved his tent within the quarters of our portion of the camp, perhaps to hasten the realization that he would not again be a part of the people and culture he had known his entire life.

I observed that whenever he went among the

tents of his own people, he never failed to bring Jessha with him by the hand. She later confided to Kaboth that the grief that welled up in his heart at the thought of never seeing these people who were as family to him was great; therefore he ever had Jessha by his side, so that he could remind himself of the treasure that he was obtaining in choosing to remain.

All the while quiet preparations were taking place for the wedding, which all had agreed must be held before our guests made their departure. It was as much of a memorable occasion for them as it would be for our people; so it was determined that it would also serve as a farewell gathering. The day was therefore set; the wedding would take place two days prior to Ahran's departure.



The appointed day arrived too quickly for all of us, but by this time, a scouting team had located the rest of Ahran's people whom we had never met, and had arranged a place where they would reunite. They had to be on their way if they were to make their journey onward within the season best for travel.

There had been many questions as to how the wedding would be conducted. Both sides had their own customs, which on their own would serve as a complete and full procession, but over our time together we had learned how to weave the beauty from both of our peoples together into a single event. This took no small amount of planning, however, and all the more so in this case, for it was a wedding, the knitting of two hearts together, and the joining of two peoples in symbolism. A committee was elected to arrange the events, of which Sarah was a part, and I left all these matters in their hands.

In the late afternoon the festivities began. The

young men had further cleared out the main gathering area, for not only would every man, woman and child be in attendance, but there would be dancing, games and entertainment. Open space was essential. A host of women had spent the previous three days preparing the foodstuffs for the occasion, and no effort or creativity had been spared. The light sustenance which was offered at the onset of the gathering proved tasty and the drinks refreshing.

In our own fashion, one tent had been set up, capable of holding twenty or more people milling about comfortably, placed as the centerpiece of the area. In front of the tent, in a rectangular shape, was the large expanse where everyone was free to roam about or could be seated. To the left of the centerpiece tent stood the rows of tables, over which hung light awnings flapping in the breeze, shielding the victuals and tasty delights from the rays of the sun.

The furthestmost point directly opposite the centerpiece would soon be filled with a single file line of men, dressed in guard uniform and carefully maintaining their position. This was one custom that both our people seemed to have in common and which intersected conveniently. In our tradition, our men of honor standing guard symbolized a vigilance and commitment to the stand of faith and belief that God had given us. We gave God reverence, and showed our gratefulness to Him for the freedom and peace which we possessed whereby we could celebrate a joyous occasion, such as a marriage.

After the customs of their people, being that Bemar was a fighting man, his comrades were expected to stand by his side, bearing witness that he was a defender of family, culture and freedom. He had indeed done all this, not only



for his family, culture and freedom, but for that of our people also.

Directly to the right lay an open space, which was kept thus by a long line of stakes which had been driven into the ground, along which a long rope had been strung. This portion of ground would provide ample room for processions, dances and other such customs, both in the nature of Jessha's customs, as well as Bemar's.

From the time the sun had risen, Jessha had not been seen about the camp. She remained within the centerpiece tent, so as not to see her husband-to-be before the appointed time. Her immediate family, and any elders who wished to enter were permitted to do so. As our more ancient tradition was held, the man and woman who were to be married were separated from one another on the appointed day, at which time they would each have a portion of time with an elder, who would read to them the laws and principles of marriage which governed our people, along with some testimonials which had been passed down to us from Adam, Noah and others. More recently, I had made opportunity for those who wished to have a segment of silent exchange with God, to commune with their own hearts in prayer, that they might be more fully prepared in heart and spirit for the vows which they were to take that evening.

Jessha, having been more accustomed than many in our camp with the ways of the Lord, having observed some of the elders' discussions as an assistant scribe, felt quite comfortable with the time alone. She spent the morning in prayer and communion with God, and when she had completed these hours, Sarah and Ulyina both commented on how radiant her face was, and how her beauty seemed even more perfect and lustrous than before.

We granted Ulyina permission to enter the centerpiece tent, although she was not immediate family, as she was so curious as to how our wedding customs worked. Sarah likewise was granted a personal glimpse into their inner-camp preparations for the event, and learned a great deal which she was very pleased with.

Bemar, meanwhile, had gotten up a great while earlier than the rest of the camp, to make a solitary journey which would last nearly half the day, as Korel had explained it to me. "These will be his last hours of solitude. Once he commits his hand to welcome Jessha's, his protection and care of his wife and children, and the need to provide for them will occupy his every waking moment. Even at times when he finds himself alone in body, he will carry them ever in his heart and mind. And I also think," he added after a moment of thought, "that Bemar will use the silent opportunity to speak a word to your God, to ask His blessing upon his new life."

By the time the flurry of activity began to intensify around the centerpiece tent, Jessha had long been finished with her hours of prayer and was now beginning her own preparations; during the morning all had taken great care to avoid the area and to afford her peace and quiet. Bemar should have also returned by this time, for it was now heading into the late afternoon, and I imagined that he sat in a tent somewhere, preparing for the ceremony.

## SEALING OF TWO PEOPLES

The customary appearance for our women was a simple one. The beauty was to be reflected in the woman's countenance and expression, the sparkle of her eyes and the liveliness of her spirit. Jessha did adorn her face with a powdered mixture made from naturally colored sands which brought out her already striking green eyes, and lightly colored rose cheeks. Her lips remained their natural color, only coated with a scented oil which glistened in the sun and twinkled when she smiled.

Her dress varied quite from the traditional wedding garments our women wore, for she was not only representing one people, but two. Leah gave Jessha a part of her bridal dress, which had been given to her by her mother before she had died. It was ivory in color, rich and creamy. It began at the shoulders—two thin straps which fell over Jessha's slender shoulders; the dress reached clear down to her ankles. On either side, a cut had been made in the garment which reached up to the knee. Around Jessha's ankle rested an anklet which Ulyina had taught her to make.

Normally, another light vesture would have been placed over this first one, in length falling past the knees. Then a delicate scarf would be set across the woman's shoulders, allowing her to wear it as she pleased. However, Jessha, being the inventive and seeking young woman that she was, had sought out something that would please Bemar's fancy. Bemar's sister, Kelia had just the perfect overgarment.

Sarah tried to describe it to me. "I've never seen something quite like it, Abraham. It's absolutely lovely. It is made out of the sheerest and most delicate weave I have ever observed. Even more slight than the passing veils of the king's outer court."

For a moment, that brought my mind back many years to Gerar, King Abimelech's realm. Upon our entrance to the kings outer courtyard, when passing through a low arch, I had stumbled into a sheer piece of fabric than hung down in the doorway. I later learned that since the arch led into an outside courtyard, this fabric was put up to keep out unwanted pests of the air. However, as I was not accustomed to the habit of placing my hands slightly in front of my person, in order to push aside the filmy cloth, I had walked quite into this nearly transparent hanging which I had not paid enough attention to, and had been rather surprised by it. Sarah at the time found that cause for humor, and now brought it back to my mind.

"It hangs close about her neck, cut in a circular shape, then loosely falls about her arms and down halfway to her knees. The cut of the material is large, giving the shape of the arms an unrestricted and flowing look about it. The bottom is lined with an ever delicately woven mixture of flat jeweled ornaments, which keep this truly free attire from

floating right off of her. Yet it is not so heavy that it weighs any portion of the garment down.

"The color is light, and barely visible to the observant eye are softly faded flowers sunken within its folds. As she turns, they seem to be wafting along in the air. While it covers all, what it reveals is enhanced by its sheer splendor. I have never seen anything like it, and Jessha is certainly fit to wear it." Sarah was lost in her description. While I held no penchant for sewing nor artistic design, I had to marvel at the dreamy look in Sarah's eyes, and the excitement that a mere overgarment had created in her.

"I will have to see it," I responded with effortful interest.

"Oh, indeed you will have to see it, dear," Sarah sighed, once again retreating into the portion of her mind that was busily figuring out how to create a similar vesture.

Then the horn sounded throughout the camp. The festivities were officially beginning. Sarah and I made our way to the centerpiece tent to check that all was ready to commence. There Jessha stood, her mother behind her, and her sisters about her, eyes all aglow. They chattered among themselves, clearly pleased and proud of their older sister. Jessha's mother was putting the last touches on her hair—a hardy ivory desert flower, which oddly enough, when placed deep within Jessha's curls and surrounded by six smaller purple flowerets, gave off the appearance of elegant grace.

The much famed overgarment was indeed beautiful, although I had to strain my eyes to make out the disguised flowers Sarah had so vividly described. But the true beauty of the occasion was found in Jessha's sparkling eyes and her radiant smile. She looked up at me for my approval, which

I conveyed with a smile. Our brief exchange was soon interrupted by one of Jessha's younger sisters tugging on her hand.

"Put on your sandals, Jessha! It's almost time!"

Jessha sat down on a nearby stool, raised her garments slightly so that she could see what she was doing, and began fastening on a pair of delicate sandals. They were made out of braided leather, and two golden rings held them clasped together in the center. She arranged her ankle bracelet nervously, then stood up.

"Your bracelets!" her other sister sounded, holding them toward her in her hands. Soon her bracelets were on as well, timidly peeking through the open sleeves of her overgarment every now and then.

The scurry outside had by now increased, and wanting to enjoy the merriment taking place outside, I made my way closer to Jessha and said, "I shall take my leave now. At the time of your joining together in prayer, I will stand by your side." She smiled and nodded, biting her lip slightly.

Having left the planning of this evening's event to others, I could enjoy most of the revelry along with the crowds. I was, however, responsible to conduct the final joining together of the young couple. No doubt there were customs for engagement and marriage which our guests held, and for the most part we had striven to incorporate a mixture into the evening. Yet being that they were guests upon our soil, the final ceremony had been left in my hands, to perform as I wished. I had not thought on the ceremony much, for as our tradition held, it was a simple ceremony that required no preparation on my part other than a grateful prayer, and a hopeful wish given up to the Almighty.

I made my way into the open square which already seemed to be holding hundreds of people,

talking and speculating about the evening. Children skipped excitedly through the crowds in play with their friends, and every now and then a small child's cry would alert a parent to their whereabouts. There was no division among their people and ours; all mixed freely in the audience, and the children in particular knew no dividing lines.

After some moments, Eliezer moved in front of the awaiting crowds, who faced the centerpiece tent. He was soon joined by Ahran, who sported a festively decorated cloak over a light colored vestment. Immediately upon arriving before the crowds, Ahran raised his hands high and began to clap them together, in an effort to bring together the attention of all. He addressed the children first, urging them to come to the front and be seated. While the young ones rearranged themselves, Ahran briefly outlined the events of the evening, his eyes glinting and his speech expressive.

This was not the Ahran I had known, but as the evening ran its course, I concluded that upon his arrival to our camp, God had brought out a side of Ahran not often seen. He was truly a natural leader, and had the entire gathering in the palm of his hand after only a moment. As I watched him, I was tempted. *My words are dull and spiritless. Watch this man! For with flare and display he has even the young ones laughing and captivated.*

My mind was elsewhere and I did not follow his words; I only saw his form leaping about, as he dramatically swirled his colored cloak over the heads of some young children. He was stalling for time, but he was good at it. An outburst of loud laughter from one of the children brought me back to reality and I discarded my previous thoughts and instead thanked God for the skills He had given others.

As soon as he received the cue that all was ready, he wrapped up his introduction, and motioned to Eliezer, saying, "Now we shall all bow our heads and dedicate this evening to God's pleasure." Eliezer led out in a prayer of thanks and blessing, and when his last word was uttered, the festivities commenced.

Fifteen dark figures took the floor as Eliezer and Ahran retreated into the centerpiece tent. Each was covered over by a black cloak of some sort, and they entered as a close circle, which shape they kept until more was revealed to us. This spectacle kept even the children quiet, wondering what was under the black cloaks. Then from around both sides of the centerpiece tent emerged a line of musicians and singers. Within a moment they had situated themselves, and at the prompting of no audible cue they began in unison.

The music began rumbling from the depths, finding a more lively beat once the drums had introduced their presence. I scanned the line of musicians. There must have been seven or eight on either side, and they stood in a broken line, affording the audience better sound. Some of their instruments appeared familiar to me, but others I had never seen before, and some gave off the most unusual sounds, yet when blended together with the others, they provided a happy and festive melody.

Then the signal was given, and the black figures all at once began swaying to the beat, though no part of their bodies were visible to the onlookers. Their arms followed, as they raised one, then the other, keeping up the alternating movement, which sent their black mantles flapping in the air, sending waves through their circle.

The music paused again, returning to the deepening rumble of drums. All watched the dark figures moving slightly under their coverings.

Then as the music returned to its fullness, the black concealments were lifted. In unison, the figures were now revealed to us as being female dancers, and they raised their hands above their heads, throwing off their cloaks. As they did so, they ran up a few paces, thus spreading out into a wide circle.

So taken was everyone with the eventual unveiling of the mystery dancers, that I imagine everyone else also missed observing that their black cloaks had been knotted together, each one at one of the four corners. When the cloaks had been thrown into the air, each woman kept a corner of it in her hand. As they spread out, pulling the large basin of their garments taut, the breeze caught it, filling it with living air, and creating a most unusual spectacle. The children gasped with awe, watching the large black mass move up and down, as the dancers lifted and lowered their arms in unison. Then they let it sink to the ground, and one by one, they swirled toward the center of their circle, laying to rest their portion of material, forming a giant heap on the floor which served as a marking for the center of their performance.

Then the dance began in earnest, now that each one was free to move about. In perfect synchronization they spun this way, then that way, allowing their flowing scarves and garments to blow about in the gentle breeze. Each woman wore the same attire, yet each bore a different variety of colors. Their skirts seemed to be made of several strips of a light and airy linen, overlapped one on top of the next, yet not stitched together at any place but the top. Chains and beads hung low about their waists, and jostled about with their lively movements. Their upper vesture fell long to the knees, yet without sleeves, and unattached in the front. The opening in the front was kept loosely in

place by a set of small beaded strings which laced together, starting above the waist, and reaching barely above the breast. Behind this opening could be seen a covering of some type which covered the chest area. The women's long and dark hair hung down unhindered, contrasting the golden colored headpieces and earrings they wore.

The music gently slowed, and the dancers dropped to their knees one by one, creating a circle where they faced inward. The crowd began to cheer, but the music did not come to a stop. One by one the women raised their arms high above their heads, and again on the prompt of a noiseless cue, they began tapping their fingers together, alerting all to the presence of finger timbrels. Soon they were on their feet again, dancing about, all their movements matching the sound of the music their fingers made. They were indeed skilled, for as their musical accompaniment dimmed, they managed to not only dance about, but to also maintain the music and rhythm through only their finger timbrels, which are a shrill instrument, at a level that was pleasant to the ears. When their performance came to a close, it was evident that all had found it extremely enjoyable.

Before the performers had found their way off our makeshift stage, Ahran had returned. "People!" he called out, pausing for a moment to be sure he held the attention of all. "This night is not only a celebration of the joy and happiness our people have found at the hand of your hospitality, but it will also serve as occasion to grant a young man and a young woman the desires of love!" The crowd cheered and whistled in jubilee. "Shall we not allow them out of their confinement, that they too may enjoy the celebrations?"

The crowd was naturally in agreement, and while all looked on, Bemar, straight faced and

collected, made his way onto the open square and stood next to Ahran. "Look at this fine young man!" Ahran called out, greeting him. The crowd gave forth a festive uproar. Bemar let out a pleased smile, and looked every bit the part of a worthy young man, anxious to meet his bride.

Everyone knew who was to emerge next. All eyes turned to the center tent, and two soft white hands soon appeared, gently opening the folds of the tent. She stepped out into the open air, and the remaining rays of the sun reflected off her lengthy curls. For an instant I thought I had caught Jessha in a timid moment. But no, as soon as the drapes behind her had fallen shut again, she regained her composure and gave the audience a charming smile. The air hushed as everyone took in the beauty that stood before them. Young voices could be heard calling out, "Jessha! Jessha!" Her eyes quickly searched them out, and she responded with a wink. Instinctively, Bemar walked up to Jessha and extended his arm. She put her arm in his, and he escorted her off to the right of the tent.

"Now that our guests of honor have surfaced, let us begin the procession!" Ahran called out, and the onlookers turned slightly to the left to view the procession that was to make its way down the open aisle to the right, behind the stakes that marked out their path.

This was our custom. A group of family and friends would gather into three lines and, with musicians in the front and back of the procession, would move along down a length of ground, singing and dancing about. The bride and groom found themselves somewhere in the middle of this happy gathering. At length the lines would dissipate and break into a circle, in the middle of which the young couple and groups of children would dance. It was a simple demonstration of happiness and joy on the part of



the young couple's immediate family members. Happily, Bemar joined in the procession, along with two or three of his friends.

After the song and dance had ended, there was some movement amidst the crowds as many made their way toward the covered refreshment stalls. Meanwhile, family and friends all greeted and gave their well-wishes to the young couple. When everyone had fairly settled again, Ahran's voice rang out above the hustle of the throng.

"Now before this lovely pair unites as man and wife, we will set before you the last wish of this beautiful unmarried woman. She has requested a performance which will be granted her this night. Let Jessha's young friends entertain us all!"

Several young children rose to their feet and scampered off to the left of the center tent. Bemar and Jessha were given a place to sit at the front of the crowd, and not more than a minute later, the performance began. It was the story of Noah, which the children had labored so diligently to prepare. It had been performed once before, but Jessha, who so loved children and was so grateful of their efforts, had requested it again, to the delight of the audience.

It was during the children's performance that my heart began to prepare itself for the ceremony that was next to come. I discreetly made my way around the outskirts of the crowd toward the front. When the children's performance had ended and all had returned to their seats, I stepped forward and stood before all the people.

"My friends," I said, with my arms outstretched, "God has blessed us with a great blessing. He has given unto us protection and health, and joy abundant. Now He will give unto these two, Bemar and Jessha, also great peace and blessing, and He has granted each one here to be a witness to this

event." With those words, I motioned for Bemar and Jessha to approach where I stood, directly in front of the people—the hundreds of bright and expectant eyes—the children first, seated on the ground, then the young men and women, the mothers and their babes, and the men.

As they stepped forward, I placed one on either side of me, facing the other. I placed my hand on each of their shoulders, and as they both bowed their heads, I gave forth a prayer of gratitude and commitment to God. Even the children were still. A calming spirit had descended, and when I opened my eyes, I saw before me another sign descending. Just above the level of my eyes, resting in thin air, but entirely visible to my naked eyes, hung the two parchments, slowly descending. I followed them with my eyes, and as they reached the waist level, they altogether vanished from my sight.

Jessha looked up at me, patiently waiting for my word to end the simple ceremony. I whispered to both of them, "God has yet something to add to this moment." I turned my head to catch Sarah's eye, knowing that whenever I spoke in public, if she was present, her attention was ever focused on me. Should I need something, I only had to look in her direction, and she would wait on me with the utmost diligence and care that the most loving handmaiden could afford. I motioned to her with my lips: "The parchments. Bring the parchments." Her slight nod indicated that she had understood my request, and she swiftly took to our tent to fetch them.

I lifted my eyes up to the beautiful sky overhead, in which the stars were just beginning to become visible, and silently prayed, *Dear God, grant me faith.* Immediately I felt an inner strength, and spoke to the people, "There is a message that God has given us for this occasion." The words etched them-

selves strongly in my mind, but I had to speak them, and for this, I found I had to put forth great effort. The crowd hushed at these words and sat attentively; mothers quieted their children and bid them to sit still.

Just then Sarah returned and made her way to me, bearing in her hands the two parchments, tied with string, and containing an unknown message. I took them from her, and reasoned that I was to open them, and that now, the mystery would be revealed to me. But the Spirit of God moved my hands, and I found myself handing one of the parchments to Bemar, and the other to Jessha. They took them from me, but not without looks of bewilderment and wonder, as the silent crowd looked on. This was most unusual, for the words of God were always read by the prophet of God.

Not knowing where to go from here, I followed the obvious course of action. "Open the parchments and read what God has said to you," I said to the two of them. Slowly, and with hands nearly trembling, they untied the string and opened the parchments before them.

Still following the hint of leading I felt within my soul, I turned to Bemar. "I believe you are to begin," I said, inside not knowing what that could possibly mean.

He swallowed and began to read aloud, clear and with emotion. But I could not understand it. In truth, few of our people could understand it, for the reading was in his native tongue. That shock alone was enough to distract my mind entirely. *Had my own hand been moved by God's Spirit to write a message in a language that I did not speak?* My eyes fixed themselves blankly on the mass of faces before me, and it was not until the close of Bemar's reading that I recognized Ulyina in the crowd. She was wiping a tear from her eye.

I then turned to Jessha, still marveling. I could not get one word out from my lips, but she seemed to know what to do. She took a deep breath, collected her wits, and began:

*To all who sit before the presence of My anointed, My servant Abraham, I say to you that you have witnessed a mighty token of My power. My very Own hand has brought you within the safety of this camp, and has kept you from harm and danger. I have set your two peoples within the borders of one camp, that you might learn two things: to find the true God, and to find true family from those not among your own people. Retain this remembrance.*

*Before you stand a man and woman who have committed to seal their love in the stones of eternity. Their hearts and spirits represent each of you. As I bless their union, so I bless you. Though you now part, yet as brothers you will remain—ever in each other's prayers, and always in My gracious care.*

I now understood Ulyina's tears, for tears streamed down my face, and that of many others in the crowd. I turned to look at Jessha, and found her moist eyes bearing a calm peace within them. "It is wonderful," she said with a contented smile. Bemar's countenance echoed her sentiments.

I turned back to address the crowd, taking Bemar's left hand and Jessha's right hand within mine. I placed them together in front of me, and lifted them up toward the heavens. "Give forth the blessing, O God! As the hands of these unite, so unite our hearts—every one of us!"

With those words, I released my grasp from their hands and stepped back. This was the

moment all had been waiting for. The union had been sealed and the two lost no time. They held each other in a passionate embrace, and kissed to the cheers of all gathered.

From this moment, the night erupted into a joyous celebration. Bemar and Jessha headed off into the crowds, where they were thronged about by countless children, and anxious friends wishing to greet and hug them. Musicians took up their places, and all prepared for the evening meal, throughout which there was entertainment of all sorts.

I sunk down into the nearest chair, in an effort to collect my thoughts. Sarah found me quickly enough and began to massage my weary shoulders. She was marvelously enlivened by what had just taken place. "Do you realize, darling, that you wrote that message in their tongue? It's astounding!" Not pausing for an answer, she went on, "And to think that God had prepared the message so many days prior to this night!" She sighed and brought her head down to rest on my shoulder, giving me a gentle kiss. "Wait here, my love, I will bring you food and drink."

Though I was quite tired by this point, the festivities were only beginning. The crowds broke up into various groups, some choosing to join in the variety of games that were being hosted, others feasting, and yet others dancing. As the night progressed, the young children slowly tired and disappeared from our gathering, awaiting happy and playful dreams in the contentment of their cozy beds. That sounded well enough to me, so I searched out Bemar and Jessha, who were engaged in games, and bid them my wishes and blessing. Having done so, I retired for the night, leaving the few hundred people remaining to spend the night under the stars in happy revelry.

That evening, as custom had it, Bemar and Jessha would slip away before the night's festivities wound to a complete close. As our traditions were, opportunity was provided for the newlyweds to hasten off immediately to a place of solitude, and enjoy a few days of uninterrupted bliss and intimacy, but it would not be so for Bemar and Jessha.

Under normal circumstances, the couple that was to be wed observed what was called a "silent week" prior to their wedding ceremony. This week was spent apart from the other, and with the natural family of the bride or groom. Family and relatives always stood high on our measure of important matters. When a child was married, it was no different. There were obligations that the soon-to-be-wed couple had to tend to, not the least of which was gleaned from the experience and wisdom that parents, grandparents, and relatives wished to bestow upon the young couple.

Bemar and Jessha, however, had chosen to proceed ahead with the wedding ceremony, and spend their "silent week" after, in order for Bemar's people to be able to attend the ceremony. Their wedding night was to be their first taste of marital happiness, but since, according to their own choice, it would not come again for seven days, therefore no doubt they had it set in their minds to enjoy it to the full.

A splendid tent had been prepared for the occasion, providing every available comfort and delight. It was set a ways off from other tents in the most secluded portion of the camp in order to allow them some appearance of privacy. And as Ahran did inform me the following morning, Bemar and Jessha had indeed excused themselves a good while earlier than all had quieted.

## BECKONED ONWARD

Young children inched their way toward the newlyweds' tent, giggling, pointing and whispering among themselves, until their mothers discovered their antics and pulled them away, reprimanding them. The sun was now high in the sky, but there had been no sign of the young couple's emergence from their tent. Of course, no one truly expected them out early, for there was food and drink sufficient for an entire day stored within the tent; water also, and all necessary commodities.

And indeed, once they showed their faces, they would each be swept away from each other, and on into a week apart from one another. Finally the two lovers emerged, and word spread quickly throughout the camp that the bonds had been forged. No sooner had they had a chance to drink in a few of the sun's rays, but Jessha's mother and sisters stood before them. Kaboth followed a short ways behind them, walking at a slower pace. Jessha's smile seemed brighter than the sun. She ducked into the tent for a moment and retrieved a small bag of her belongings. Turning to Bemar, she looked adoringly into his eyes and said softly,

“Darling, when seven days have passed, I will lie in your arms once more.”

“Until then, my love,” Bemar responded, though his countenance betrayed his wonder at this week-long custom, which seemed unusual to him.

Jessha’s sisters were soon on either side of her, and pulled her along the pathway toward the inner camp, leaving Bemar standing alone next to the tent where he had just spent the first night of his life with the woman of his dreams. Jessha turned her head to glance back at him with a smile, and he returned the gesture with a wave.

“Oh mother!” Jessha exclaimed, sounding nearly out of breath with excitement, “Isn’t he the most wonderful man?”

“He does seem perfect for you, my darling girl,” she responded gently. “But do remember, Jessha, this time is not for meditating on Bemar. You must put him out of your mind, at least as much as you are able to do so. Now is the time to concentrate on your responsibilities. There is much to learn as a wife. You must find what is required of you, and you must learn how to conduct yourself, no more as a playful and spirited young woman dancing and prancing about in the dresses of a maiden, but rather as a woman, mature and responsible, given to goodness, and honoring her husband.”

Jessha closed her lips and wrinkled her brow, thinking on her mother’s words. Surely she had been all those things; yet now, from one day to the next, she was not to be. *I see*, she thought to herself, *there is more to this than simply the love of a man. Though*, she added to herself, after a moment more of thought, *I don’t suppose that Bemar would mind in the least if I remained a fanciful young maiden, gamboling about with delight!*

Mother brought her mind back to reality as she continued, “And you must uphold not only your own

honor and dignity, but that of your parents, of your family, of your elder. Jessha turned her head slightly to the right, to see Kaboth walking just a pace behind her. His eyes met hers and he nodded slightly. She thought for a moment on all that Kaboth had done for her, all that he had given her, all the opportunities that he had afforded her. Now that she had been joined in marriage, she would have to be an example of a prudent young woman in return.

“I will do all that you say, Mother,” came a reply from Jessha’s lips at long last. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a contented look spread across Kaboth’s face, and she felt a peace in her heart.

Now she turned her mind away from Bemar, hoping to aid the quick passing of the days. *I will put all my energies and thoughts into my learning, into my reading, and into obtaining all the wisdom that I am supposed to have. And*, she thought, as she looked down at her younger sisters who still were clinging tightly to her hands, *I will enjoy my family that I have not spent much time with. I will hear the words of my parents, and make them proud of me.* Thus determined, she hardly noticed the small groups of women who came out of their tents to see her walk by, hoping for some tidbit of chatter or news to give them something to talk about.

The remainder of the day for Jessha was spent talking with her mother. Prominence was given at this point to the woman of the family, as she gave her daughter whatever counsel and advice she deemed useful for her transit into life as a married woman. Jessha found that she enjoyed this time more than she thought she would. Having not spent much time with her mother during the past few years, there was much to talk about that concerned men, women and marriage. Their time extended past the usual allotment, but when they were finished, Jessha had not only

gained a measure of wisdom and insight, but also a bond and attachment to her mother that she greatly valued.

Bemar meanwhile kept busy until night fell. Ahran's entire camp had dismantled everything except for the now bare tents. No ornaments hung about their portion of the camp, and it looked strangely barren and deserted. Most of Ahran's people found their last evening spent in the tent of another family, amidst our people. Small fires dotted our camp, as groups of two or three families joined together for the evening meal. Many gifts exchanged hands, and some tears were shed at the parting of friends and newly made acquaintances.

Before too much of the night had been spent, Korel walked about the camp, graciously apologizing for his intrusion, yet wisely suggesting that his people retire for the evening as early as they were able. The morn would come early, and with the rising of the sun, their people would depart. Thus was spent our last evening joined together.



Early the morn did come. I resolved to wake at the dawn's first light, in order to bid farewell to Ahran and Korel, and to see that all went well. Yet even as early as I rose, I found Ahran's entire camp dismantled and, for all purposes of appearance, ready to depart. I quickly sought out Ahran.

"Is all ready? Tell me, my good friend, if there is anything our people can do to aid you further, for we shall be glad to do so."

"No, Abraham. I believe we have just about everything in order." Noting my amazement at their quick assembly, he added, "My people are used to moving on short demand; this is not a great strain on them."

"Very well then, how much longer will it be before you depart?"

"Yet a few hours," came the reply. "Many of your people have not yet risen, and we cannot depart until all have bid a final farewell to your people. Is this acceptable?"

"Indeed," I smiled. "They will be glad for your thoughtfulness."

Korel then approached. "Perhaps you would be willing to bid us part your camp with a prayer of safekeeping. I realize that we will soon have to take upon ourselves the task of offering prayer and praise to God. Yet while we have you within our midst, would it not be wise to avail ourselves of your skill?" Ahran nodded agreeably, and I consented.

"Nevertheless," I added, "do remember that your words are just as able to reach God's ears as are mine. Do not let the thought that you have only shortly come to know Him keep you from approaching Him, for no doubt in your travels you will require His assistance."

"And so with all that we have learned and observed, we shall indeed call upon His assistance, and endeavor to obey His instructions as we have seen you do, Abraham," Ahran concluded. "If you will excuse me, Ranin beckons me, and I must go."

I turned to see Ranin standing without the borders of the camp, waving his arms, as the full grouping of their herds fell a ways behind him. "It appears that you have somewhat to deal with," I said, patting Ahran on the back with a chuckle. "How glad I am that I have aged, and am no longer called upon to manage the placing of the herds and other such tasks." Korel agreed with a smile as Ahran strode off to organize the unwieldy group of their herds which had been brought together for the departure.

"Ah, there is the lovely bride!" Korel called out, and I turned to see Jessha and one of her sisters



making her way down a pathway coming toward us. Jessha saw us and came over to where we stood.

“It is so barren, so empty now! How are we to fill up this empty space that you have left in our camp and in our lives?” she wondered aloud, directing her wonder toward Korel.

“Well, my dear, fortunately for you, I don’t believe we have left an empty spot in *your* heart. And as for the extra space that our departure will leave, perhaps your children will be able to make good use of it!” he said with a grin.

Jessha was silent, and could only return a smile. “Indeed, I have taken a wonderful man, and I do thank you for bringing him to me.”

“You are most welcome, dear,” came the fatherly response. “If you are seeking his sister, Kelia, and the other women, I believe you will find them just over there,” Korel offered, pointing toward a makeshift tent—the only one in fact that was left standing.

“Thank you,” she said graciously, as she made her way off toward the tent, with her little sister still trailing at her arm.



Soon enough the entire camp had risen, and all were fondly embracing and exchanging final farewells. The moment finally arrived, and Ahran called together all who stood about, announcing that the time had come. Once he had made certain that every man, woman and child in his host was present, he called upon me to send off their gathering with a prayer. I stood before them, and with all the emotion in my heart, poured out my words as incense before the Lord, pleading with Him aloud to bless and protect their journey.

When my words ceased, their company quietly and calmly gathered themselves together. The

young ones and mothers were placed in the caravans, and goods in the open-air wagons, and those who would travel on foot summoned themselves into orderly lines. At Ahran’s word they set forth, walking out from the borders of our camp. Many of our people stood at the edges to see them off, and until they were too distant to be seen anymore, we waved to one another and gave up silent prayers to the Lord.



It took some weeks for our camp to readjust to Ahran’s people having departed. Our numbers had now decreased, and we missed their lively spirits and the friendship we had gained through their company. Yet we soon settled back into our routine. The press of daily living surged about us, and there were great occurrences—or what seemed so at the time—to keep our minds busy and our hearts praying.

Bemar and Jessha put their efforts into securing their dwelling place. One had been provided for them, given to Bemar by Korel as a parting gift for his new life. It was large and provided all the space a young couple would need, with room to spare for children. Now Bemar worked on providing furnishings, and Jessha on decorating their new abode. By this time, some months had passed, and one could hardly remember when Bemar and Jessha had not been together—so joined were they in their love and happiness.

Should time wear on our memory and cause us to forget all that God had done for us during that time, Bemar’s presence in our camp served as a constant reminder that indeed those marvelous doings of our God had occurred, and were not only a fancy of our imaginations.

Often as the even fell, my thoughts drifted back to the weeks that our guests had spent with us. A

*most unusual time, and surely, I felt, one that will not come our way again.* Though each event in its own occurrence had been inconceivable at the time, it had changed our people as a whole. It had stretched our tolerance and enlarged the borders of our tents, just as God had promised it would.

This day my mind was slipping in and out of that last day—the day when they pulled up the stakes of their tents and departed. It was not the farewell that I thought of, nor the sadness of our new friends leaving, nor the emptiness that it left in our midst, but rather the words that remained forever with me.

It was Ahran, who came to me in the private of the evening before his departure; the proud man humbled by the hand of God, who took my hands in his and kissed them. The soul that beseeched me to thank God for the miracle He had done for his young son, and for the mercy He had bestowed upon them, for he felt that he could not give thanks adequately, though he assured me that he had tried and would continue to do so the rest of his living days. It was a man, majestic before his own people, whom God had brought into meekness before His face, that he might be made into a better leader.

It was Korel, who that morn had sought me out while I was yet in my tent, and embraced me. It was this cultured man, his refined manner and deep wisdom that touched me, as he knelt down, and taking his own cloak off his shoulders, offered it unto me as a token of gratefulness for the care that we had given unto him and his people. It was the humility of one wise man able to open his innermost heart to another, and trust that I would understand what his words could not sufficiently express.

It was also the many others who had thanked

me in passing, who, with tears of joy in their eyes and smiles on their lips, gave words of praise to our God for His safe-keeping, and for now allowing them to be reunited with the remainder of their people. It was the look of pride in Ahran and Korel's eyes when they bid Bemar farewell, giving up as it were, a loyal friend and son to them, yet glad for another's contentment, and pleased to leave a part of themselves with our people. It was Isaac and Jehmi's childish embrace as they said goodbye, sad that they would not be seeing each other again, yet at the same time, more than glad for the short friendship they had enjoyed.

These were my musings. As the wind increased, I wrapped Korel's cloak around me more tightly. I could almost feel some of his manner and wise experience being imparted into my being as I did so. I did miss him. Many elders were available to discuss matters with me, and they possessed abundant wisdom also, yet Korel's characteristic observance and eagerness to understand, learn and obtain faith had been refreshing. Now that my mind had tasted of such freshness, I did not quite want to lose it.



The months wore into years, and Isaac meanwhile grew like a young sapling. He had shot up straight and tall, and in appearance had entirely changed from the small energetic boy we had so cherished in years past. He was now a bright young lad, his wiry body and skills strengthening by the day. He was full of thoughts, and ardent in his passion to learn to protect and defend our people. Perhaps that was his way of stretching himself into manhood earlier than the years were allowing him. He often offered himself to go out with the herds. After some reasoning, Sarah and I concluded that it was not because he held such a

streak of willingness, but rather that it provided him opportunity to do some hunting and attempt to kill small game, as when he was not on guard duty, he had the liberty of going off a ways from the herds with his other young lads.

We had always spent a fair portion of time together, Isaac and I, but as he grew older, we found that his interest in his peers had increased, and that we, his parents, were consulted less and less. We found this at first alarming, but after talking with some of the other elders who had raised an entire brood of children into young men and women, we found that our plight was not at all foreign. It was something that had to be handled sensitively. Still, Isaac remained respectful and committed to the ways of God. So much knowledge of God had been poured into him in his younger years that it seemed at various times, though he certainly did not make an effort to do so, it could not help but seep out of him.

## JOURNEY OF SACRIFICE

One peaceful day, as I was relaxing after having eaten our midday meal, I heard the voice of the Lord calling out to me.

*Abraham! Abraham!*

I looked about my surroundings, thinking it odd that God should call out to me then, for I was not in a quiet location, and there were many people around. Still, I had most certainly heard the unmistakable voice of God, so I rose to my feet and pondered for a moment as to where I should go.

*Come, walk with Me without!*

Instantly I set out to the edge of the camp, and soon found myself walking out into the open expanse. “Yes, my Lord. What would You have me to do?” I queried, eager to hear whatever it was that He would say to me. Recent months had been quiet, and with little or no interference from our surrounding villages and neighbors, we had enjoyed quiet peace and prosperity. While I had continued to commune with God regularly, it had been some time since He had sought me out.

*Where is My servant, Abraham?* the Voice came.

“I am here, my Lord, and I stand ready to do Your bidding. Even though my flesh is old and weak,

my heart remains strong before You, O God.”

*Wouldest thou give unto Me a sacrifice of thine heart?*

“I would gladly, my Lord. It has truly been some time since I have made a sacrifice and offering unto Your Name.” My heart felt pricked at my lack in this area. During times of peril, I sought God’s mercy often in this manner; yet during times of peace, it was easy to grow lax and careless.

*Take thy son, Isaac, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and go to the land of Moriah. It is there that you will give sacrifice unto Me. And the sacrifice that I would have is that of your own flesh—your son, Isaac. You shall make of him a burnt offering upon one of the mountains there, which I will tell you of.*

My head spun and I dropped to the ground. Once I had placed myself in a sitting position, I blinked my eyes and shook my head. *Surely I cannot be hearing these Words! My ears must be deceiving me!* I thought frantically. But the answer that came sent me into a panic.

*Your ears do not deceive you, Abraham. I have called unto you, and I do require this sacrifice of you. Take now the child of your loins, thine only son, whom thou lovest, and offer him unto Me.*

I sat silent and still for what seemed like an eternity—waiting, hoping, praying desperately that God would change His mind. But I knew inside that His Words had been spoken. I looked up at the sky, searching with my eyes to see a sign of God, to catch a glimpse of Him or a sign of His presence, but there was no movement, no indication, no more voice.

As the grief of a father began to penetrate into my soul, my heart burned and I pounded my fists on the earthen floor. I was too overcome to even speak to God. In my heart burned a rage, and I felt

sick at the thought of sacrificing my own son. *How could God ask this of me? How could He expect me to give up not only my son, but the promised seed which after so many years of waiting had been given into my hands?* I stared at the ground for some time, perhaps an hour or more, until I felt drops of rain pattering on my back. I rose to my feet, but I was not prepared to return to camp. I would have to tell Sarah of the message I had received. *Or could I simply not tell her?* The thought tempted my mind greatly.

I cursed aloud as I kicked a rock out of my way. I knew that choosing not to tell Sarah would not work. I could not even begin to imagine what Sarah’s reaction would be. Besides, it infuriated me that I had even considered that option.

Despite all that God had done for myself and our people, I could not so easily acquiesce to His wishes. *This is my son He’s talking about!—Not a sheep, a ram or a goat!* I thought for a moment of the act that would take place should I obey. I would have to kill Isaac with my own hands, then watch him burn as I lit the wood underneath his torn body. My temper again flared and I walked further into the distance. By this time the rain was beating down hard, and had it not, my own person might have burst into flames. Still, though I was wet from head to toe, I smoldered within.

At length I came to a large slanted boulder and I placed myself beneath the underside of it, which afforded me a small measure of protection from the wind and rain. I pulled my knees up toward me in a sitting position, and buried my face in my hands, weeping uncontrollably.

After some time in that wet and cold state, I felt a warmth surround me. It felt as if someone was placing a warm and dry cloak about me, but I knew that no one was there. I lifted my head

slightly and opened my eyes. There standing before me was the outline of a figure—a man, it seemed to be—but I could not make it out clearly. Then came the Voice that I knew and had loved so well for all my life.

*Abraham! Abraham! I gave unto you the promise of an heir, that your seed would be multiplied, and I have given him unto you. What I have given came not from your own body, nor from Sarah's own womb, for it was barren. Therefore hearken unto My Words. What I have given I shall take again to Myself.*

The words were loving and warm, not harsh. They were spoken with a father's concern, and were tinged with the same grief that I felt. I sunk my head back down in my hands, and my thoughts turned back to the promise that God had given me so many years ago. The promise of hope had been given to me on the day that God called me no more Abram, but Abraham. He said that I would be made exceeding fruitful, that kings would come out of my loins, and that my seed would spawn generations to come.

Yes, I had initially wondered at those words, and Sarah had laughed within herself, but deep in my heart I clung to them as a faint promise, for I had desired hard after a son all my days. I had been blessed with Ishmael, and though his birth brought me great joy, I had always longed for Sarah's womb to be opened.

At length, the difficulties and conflicts that Sarah encountered with Hagar led to the commandment of the Lord which sent Hagar and Ishmael forth from our camp, never to be seen again by my eyes, though later Ishmael did return and together with Isaac, laid my bones to rest after my death. I held the painful loss of my son Ishmael within me for some time. However, as Isaac, the Lord's promise to us, grew before our eyes, this hurt was healed in full,

and I could see before me the line of my generations, one following after the other, living in prosperity and in peace with God and man.

But now that my promised seed was being ripped from my side, my hope was darkened. I did not ask my manifest question, for the knowledge of an even more apparent answer. For all my years, I did know that God had been the One Who gave Isaac unto us. It had been a miracle from His very hand that Sarah had conceived. Therefore, despite the anguish and distress I felt at the Lord's command, I knew that I had not words wherewith to answer Him.

In my heart I questioned the promise that He had made to me so long ago. *Now how will my generations live on? Will God give us another son to fulfill His promise?* Even this was too much for my troubled mind to meditate on, and I let my heart give way to pleading once more. As the tears again began to stream down my face, I felt the warmth of the light pulling my gaze upward. Then came the words that gave me strength.

*Abraham! Do not think with your mind; only obey with your heart.*

As those words were spoken, the warm feeling about my shoulders wrapped around me more tightly and a peace passed into my heart. I knew in my heart that there was only one way for me to go and I determined to obey with my heart. I do not know what gave me the strength at that moment to make that choice, but I clung to those last words as I had never clung to any hope in my life before. Then the form vanished from my sight.

I rose to my feet and began the long walk back home. The rain still poured down from the heavens, but now it felt refreshing, rather than angry. It ran down my cheeks and cleansed my eyes of their tears, rather than stinging my face with its bitter lashes. I repeated the words of my

salvation over and over again in my mind: *Do not think with your mind; only obey with your heart.*

As I neared our camp, the guard must have sent word to Sarah, for she reached me before I had nearly entered the gate. The concern on her face was evident as she quickly pulled off my drenched cloak, and put a dry one about my shoulders.

“Darling! I have been so worried for you. It is now so late! Where have you been?” Running her hands through my wet hair, she continued, “My love, you will become ill. Come quickly with me. I have hot water and soup prepared for you.”

I was tired and faint, not only in body, but in spirit also. I looked deeply into her eyes, past her concern over my frail body, and into the inner recesses of her soul, searching for some look of assurance or comfort, but my thoughts were far from hers.

“Come, my dear. Come now!” she said again, with a greater sense of urgency, this time putting one of my arms around her shoulder. She motioned to one of the guards to help take me to our tent, and I soon was resting on the bed. I felt better after all my wet garments had been replaced with dry ones. I sat upright, leaning on a heap of pillows, soaking my feet in hot water, as Sarah dried my hair with a thick linen cloth.

*My poor darling Sarah*, I thought to myself, seeing how troubled she was by my state. *But this is nothing to concern herself over, seeing what shall come upon us.* Again the words sounded in my mind: *Do not think with your mind; only obey with your heart.* But even the struggle that it took not to think exhausted me, and I soon drifted into a restless sleep which I did not come out of until the morning.



When I awoke early the following morn, Sarah’s loving eyes looked into my own. “Darling, did you

sleep well? I was so worried about you throughout the night! You kept tossing and turning, yet not seeming to wake.”

It was then that my memory was jolted, and I remembered my dream. Only it wasn’t just a dream—it was a replay of an event that had happened some years earlier. As I slept, I was brought back to the most unusual encounter with Ahran and his people. The scene that flashed before my eyes was one of myself, kneeling in prayer in the tent of worship. I had ceded to remaining at the camp, but I insistently told God that I would move Sarah and our beloved son, Isaac, away from harm’s reach. I relived the rebuke I received, a firm voice instructing me that we three were to remain—that what God had given, He was able to protect.

Why had this come back to haunt me in a dream? I had obeyed. I had remained, as God had instructed me, with Sarah and Isaac. We had fulfilled the Lord’s Words, and all had ended miraculously well. What was the significance of this?—Or was there any?

Then the feelings rushed back into my soul—the anger that I had felt toward God and what I supposed to be His heartless and cruel commands. How had I dealt with these emotions of mine? I had set them aside, for the morn pressed upon me, and I sought a message of comfort for the people. I pushed these thoughts to the back of my mind, and fearful of losing the blessings of God, I had no choice but to remain with my family. As I went along, I again saw the wisdom and the goodness of God, but I had never repented of having questioned His will. I had only suppressed my angry emotions, not forsaken them. In truth, I hardly knew I had them until they were brought back to me.



Sarah ran her hand across my forehead, and I remembered that she had asked me a question which I had not yet answered. Lost for words, I wondered what it was that I should say to her. "I am recovering, my darling," I finally managed to get out. She continued to look deep in my eyes, searching for what had happened, for what was wrong, for the reason I had been away nearly the entire day, and had not told anyone of my intentions. But she did not ask. She knew that I was aware of her questions.

After a lengthy silence, I said, "Sarah, my dear, the voice of the Lord called me out of the camp, and bid me to follow." That was all I was able to say for the time being, for the chill of the Lord's message began to engulf me once again, and I had not the strength of courage to say anything yet to Sarah.

Content to wait until I offered further insight into what the Lord had said to me, she prepared a morning meal, and we ate together.

"Where is Isaac this day?" I inquired, hardly wanting to know.

"I believe he said something to me yesterday about carving. I'm not sure, dear. Will you need him for something?"

"He must remain in the camp today," came my awkwardly brief reply.

"I will see to it then."

"Sarah ... I must go out again, this time only for a short while. When I return, I will explain."

Once I was alone again, with God as my only companion, I lifted my face to the heavens and pleaded desperately within my heart. I quieted my spirit and listened, but no audible answer came. A feeling reverberated momentarily through my body, giving me strength and courage to go on another moment. Then I asked what I

knew that I must: *Why had the dream come back to me? What had I done wrong then, and why had it returned now?*

The answer slowly came, not in words, but in a mixture of pictures, feelings and deep understanding within my soul. It all became so clear. I had judged God as having treated me harshly, though being bound to Him as I was in our desperate predicament, I had set it aside to pursue more urgent matters. But I had never freely relinquished my anger. I had not confessed that I had been wrong in my accusation of what I thought, at the moment, was God's merciless instruction.

Now that God had required another sacrifice of me, concerning my beloved and only son, this musty chamber of my heart had been once again flung open, and the old remains of a bitter prayer had emerged. I was now not only dealing with my current emotions, but those of the past also.

For the next hour or more I rummaged through old memories and feelings, trying to seek out any and every moment when I had doubted, questioned or manifested unbelief in God. These trappings would have to go before I could possibly hope to see, even faintly, God's hand in the request He had made of me. At length I discovered all, and desperate to be rid of this torment, I placed my all in God's hands. I had placed many things in His care over the years of my life, but never had one been so difficult and costly to give up as the life of my own son.

When I returned to Sarah's side, I explained to her that God was requiring of me a sacrifice. I was to take Isaac with me, and make an offering unto the Lord in the land of Moriah. God had instructed me to not disclose unto her more than this nor to speak of our son. My heart grieved at this word

from His lips, but having endured a night and a day of inner turmoil already, I consented to the will of God, though I carried a heavy heart.

“Is that all?” she asked, questioning, for by the intensity of my countenance and disposition the past several hours, it seemed more than what my words had alluded to.

“My dear, God has spoken to my heart also concerning matters of faith. I have had to search my soul deeply and make right all areas of my life, for I cannot make this sacrifice unto Him without having done so thoroughly.”

Sarah respected my words, and offered to prepare all the necessary provisions that we would require.

“When will you be leaving, dear?”

“We leave early on the morrow. I must go now and find Isaac to tell him.”

Noticing my heavy countenance, Sarah encouraged me, saying, “He will be so happy, Abraham.” My heart sank even lower, and I only wished to God that He would shut down the functions of my mind for a season, that I could find a moment of serenity.



I said little until the following morn. Two young men were to be Isaac’s and my companions, and they had prepared all that was necessary. Sarah rose early also to see us off, though inside I wished that she hadn’t. I did not want to see her and Isaac’s last exchange, particularly since she was unaware that it was to be her last. She stood by our side, as the faithful wife and mother she always was, until we were entirely ready. Then she kissed me and wished us a safe journey.

“I will pray for you, my love,” she said to me.

Walking over to Isaac, she gave him a hug and kissed his forehead. “Be good for your father, and

learn all that he has to teach you. It is a special thing to be called by God to give a sacrifice to him.”

“I know, Mother. I will make myself useful.”

She smiled and added, “I love you, Isaac.”

“I love you too, Mother!”

I turned my face to hide the tears welling up in my eyes and announced, “We must be off now!” I prodded my beast and began to move along, not turning back to wave goodbye until I was a safe enough distance away that Sarah could not see my tear-filled eyes.

We traveled by donkey, and were to journey three days before reaching the appointed place. Isaac was indeed cheerful, and talkative as usual, but even he sensed something somber about the occasion as we went on, and the two men with me exhibited great wisdom in keeping their tongues to themselves. I tried not to let my grief spill over onto Isaac, for this was to be my last journey with him. Yet during moments as he rode ahead, and I trailed behind our small company, I could not help but shed tears for our coming loss.

These three days of journey were the longest I had ever endured. Not only was my mind placed in a wretched state, but my body also reflected my sorrow. My limbs ached and my every bone reacted to the jolts of our rugged travel. How I longed to be back in a place of comfort, of rest and peace!

Many hours were spent daily in travel, and there were only so many words that could be said, leaving several hours of the day spent in silence and reflection. Isaac always found something to keep him occupied, whether it was collecting rocks, wandering a ways to the right or the left to explore something that caught his eye, or attempting to snare a small animal that had been unfortunate enough to choose the same path as we. But I was left alone in my musings—entirely alone, until

such a moment as I would call upon God in my desperation and feel the breeze lend me some balmy relief, or my heart lighten somewhat.

On the third morn, I saw our destination in the distance. As the Lord put His instructions within my heart, I told the two men to remain where we were with our belongings, and to wait for Isaac and me to worship and make our sacrifice unto the Lord.

“Will you not take one of the animals with you?” one of the young men asked, seeing by the look in my eyes that our destination lay still a short journey off.

“No, we will walk the distance,” I replied. “Come now, Isaac, fetch the wood for the sacrifice.”

The two men unloaded the beasts and set themselves down to wait. They arranged an awning to provide them protection from the sun. Isaac, meanwhile, brought the wood which had been tied in bundles to me.

“Strap it on my back, Father,” came his voice.

Even my hands were heavy and, despite my efforts, they cooperated loathely with my attempts to tie the bundle of wood about his back. One of the young men stood by, and graciously motioned that he could be of assistance. Somewhat reluctantly I stepped back and allowed the young man to fasten the wood on Isaac’s slender shoulders. Once the task had been completed, Isaac proudly announced, “Now we are ready, Father, let us go!”

As one of the young men placed the fire torch in my hand, I reached down to my side to feel my large dagger still hanging off my waist tunic. A chill ran through my heart. The time had come. We had but barely set off when Isaac stopped and turned toward me, with a question in his eyes.

“Father?”

“Yes, my son.”

“We have here the wood for the sacrifice and the fire, but where is the lamb that we are to sacrifice to our God?”

It was the innocence of his question that took my breath away. Then the words came, full of assurance and divine confidence, “Son, God will Himself provide a lamb for the burnt offering.” Perfectly content with a father’s answer, Isaac continued walking, without a care in the world.

Our time together was nearing to a close. There were only hours left before we would reach the place of sacrifice. I rested my hand on his shoulder, and all at once memories began flooding through my mind. I saw Isaac as a baby, his first smile, then as a toddler, the first steps that he took, his first fall, his first word—the joy and pride that he had brought Sarah and me through every day of his life—and he was still so young, still my son.

Mercifully, the stern voice of God put an end to my reverie. *Abraham! You must remove Isaac from your heart, or you must remove Me from your heart. I am a jealous God, and I will not have your son before Me. That which I have given to you, I would not have separate you from My side. Put your thoughts behind you now, and set yourself to the task at hand. You cannot climb this mountain unless you do so.* The words pierced deep into my soul, and I knew that I had sinned in putting Isaac before the will of my God.

“Wait one moment, Isaac,” I said, as we neared the foot of the mount where we were to go. I closed my eyes, and with all the strength left in me, I inwardly praised God for the blessing that Isaac had been in our lives. I thanked Him for the years we had been blessed to have together.

Despite the throbbing pain within my heart, I knew I must give God that which He had asked of me—and that I must give it willingly. I was pricked

to the heart by my lack of faith, for I had doubted God's ability to fulfil His promise of generations to come, should Isaac be removed from my side.

*It was God Who gave Isaac to me in the first place, I reminded myself. If He was able to give unto Sarah a child at an age so far past child-bearing, surely He can once again restore our son—or another heir—to us again.* I strengthened myself in God's magnificent power, and as I did so, I felt my fears begin to shrink.

*Forgive me, O my God, forgive me!* I cried out silently, as desperately as I had ever prayed in my life. *Though I have turned away from obeying Thy voice with joy, restore unto me now the blessing of Your presence. I will give unto You that which You have asked. For Isaac is Thine, and not mine. That which You have given, it is most lawful for You to seek again. Blot out my sin, that I may now sacrifice unto Thee.*

As I finished my prayer, I opened my eyes and saw Isaac, who had wandered off a ways. "This is my sacrifice—the sacrifice of my very heart—to you, my Lord and God," I whispered. The tears rolled down my cheeks, but they were no longer angry ones. I felt my heart break within me, but it was a sweet crushing. Out of my heart now flowed a yieldedness to the will of my Maker. In the place of my former anger and fear rested a sturdy faith and trust, and a determination to obey the voice of the Lord.

Now, I would sacrifice him unto the Lord, as He had commanded me. As for my worries about Sarah, and the promise that God had once made me of my future generations being propagated in Isaac's loins, these I would entrust into the hands of the God Who had breathed life into a barren and dry womb. With this resolution etched in my heart, and the consequent feeling of peace and assurance

that flooded my heart, I motioned to Isaac to come. When he had reached my side, I placed my arm about his shoulder, and kissed his head. Then we started up the mount.

When we reached the top, Isaac and I set forth to build an altar. I then took the wood which had been carried on Isaac's back and laid it on the altar. I then paused for a moment, knowing that what would come next, I would have to do quickly, for I did not relish the thought of hearing Isaac's cries.

As my beloved son stood before me, I took a small cord and bound him twice about his arms.

"Father?" came the surprised response, as he nervously looked about for a moment, wondering what I was doing.

"Quiet, my son," I managed to say calmly enough. I then picked him up and laid him upon the altar, in place of the sacrifice. Without losing an instant, I placed my entire hand over his face, covering his eyes and his mouth. I then swiftly drew my knife out and raised it high above my head. I felt my son begin to shift and move slightly.

*God!* The silent prayer left my heart, and a tear rolled down my cheek, as I set my hand in motion to slay my son. But the angel of the Lord halted my hand with His voice.

*Abraham! Abraham!*

"Here I am ... " my lips mouthed the words, but no sound came forth.

The voice came again. *Abraham! Lay not your hand upon your son. For now I know that thou fearest the Lord God above all other things, for you have not withheld even thine only beloved son from Him.*

The tears burst forth from within me like a gushing river, and I felt as if my heart would break in two. My knife fell from my hand to the ground, and I quickly untied Isaac and brought him close to me. He sat on the altar, dazed and bewildered,

yet ever thankful to be in the arms of his father. And I, ever thankful to have had my son restored to me. I wept and wept, holding Isaac's face between my two hands as I looked into his eyes, only half wondering if he had understood any bit of what had just taken place. I then hugged him close.

As I rested my head above his shoulder, I saw a ram caught by his horns in a nearby thicket. *God has provided the sacrifice!* My heart overflowed with amazed wonder and joy. Each touch of God's mercy to me now was multiplied an hundred fold, and I could not cease praising Him.

I pointed over toward the ram and whispered in Isaac's ear, "God has provided our sacrifice, my son!" My heart was light and my face radiant. Isaac turned his head to see, and beamed a smile. He scooted himself off the altar and began to make his way toward the thicket, and I followed him. Once we had determined that the animal was without blemish, and fit to be sacrificed to our God, I returned to the altar, where I fetched the rope that I had bound Isaac with, and returned the knife that was to slay him to its sheath.

We tied the rope about the ram's neck, allowing both of us to hold onto him, for he was large. No sooner had we loosed him from the thicket than he desired nothing more than to remove himself from our sides, and attempted to do so with a fury. Nevertheless, with some effort we managed to bring him to the altar, where we offered him unto the Lord as a burnt offering.

I savored every moment of this sacrifice. In truth, I had not expected, in the least, that God would grant me reprieve from that which He had required of me. I was as a child receiving a gift which he had greatly longed for, but had not in any manner expected. My heart leapt for joy and my spirit was buoyant. Isaac had been returned to

us, and it was like we had been given yet another son, for truly in my heart I had given him up and returned him to God.

I now understood that God had tested me with this great sacrifice to prove my obedience. He had not meant to take my son, which He had given me, out of our lives, much less for me to harm my own son. Rather, he had wished to see whether I would put His Own Words above the fulfillment of His promise to me. I could only give glory to God that somehow, and despite my natural human weakness, God had given me supernatural strength and faith to pass this test.

As the smoke from the sacrifice made its way toward the heavens, I looked at Isaac, who was intently and soberly watching it wend its way up in curls and curves. *Did he know and understand what had happened?—Or rather, what had nearly happened?* In his own way, he seemed rather oblivious to it all; not shaken or questioning of my earlier actions. It seemed from appearance that the entire event was nearly gone from his mind, but I resolved not to discuss it with him just then, for I was glad to see that he was at peace.

When we had completed our sacrifice unto the Lord, I raised my hands and said aloud, "The name of this place shall be called Jehovah-jireh, for God has done here a mighty work in the life of His humble servant."

"Jehovah-jireh," Isaac repeated intently, somewhat awed at having just witnessed the naming of a mount.

Then the angel of the Lord called out unto me from the heavens again, saying, *Thus saith the Lord, because thou hast done this thing, having not withheld from Him thine only son, in blessing I will bless thee. In multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars which shine in the heavens, and as the sand*

*which is on the seashore. Thy generations to come shall possess the habitations of their enemies. And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, for thou hast obeyed the voice of the Lord thy God.*

A shiver ran through my body and I felt humbled before the Lord. How had I been found worthy of this great and effectual promise? I had doubted, cursed and railed at the Most High, yet even in my weak obedience, He bestowed upon me the treasure of generations to come. I fell to my knees, and Isaac promptly came to my side. In like fashion, he too knelt down and bowed his head silently. After some moments, we both rose to our feet and felt the peace of God settle upon us. Our sacrifice had been completed, and God had accepted it with graciousness. We left the altar standing as a memorial, and made our way down the mount and on to where our fellow companions awaited us.

## HER DYING WISH

Our journey home was pleasant and enjoyable, entirely different from when we had ventured out. The wind sent a cooling breeze our way, and every now and then birds chirped and sang their songs. Isaac stood straighter and taller, and seemed to have grown a great deal during this week. Perhaps it was that this had been his first direct encounter with the presence of the Lord which now that he was older, he was more able to understand. But I still was not sure whether he had heard the voice of the Lord himself, or if it had been only I who had heard it. At length I asked him.

“Isaac, what did you hear when we stood on the mount together to give sacrifice to God?”

He paused for a moment, wrinkled up his nose as if he was traveling back a few days to relive the event. “Well,” he began, “when you covered my eyes, I saw a bright light and felt a warm kind of feeling all over me. But I didn’t hear any voice then. Then later I did hear a voice. It was telling you that your generations would be multiplied as the sand of the seashore.”

I looked at him intently. His face showed no sign of worry, of fear—hardly even of remembrance



at what had happened. Perhaps God had taken the memory from him, and all that he still held was the recollection of my hand being placed over his face. *God, You are merciful!* I thought, as my fears of Isaac remembering my dreadful actions that day, and holding it against me, began to dissipate.

“Yes, son. God gave back to me the promise of my seed continuing on forever. This is a wonderful gift.”

“But Father,” Isaac said, in a matter of fact tone of voice, “didn’t God give you this promise many years ago, before I was born? Then when I was born, the promise was fulfilled. He never took away His promise, did He? You and Mother have taught me that God’s promises are never broken, and that He always fulfills His Word.”

I was silenced by my child’s question, and his full of faith approach to the situation. Logic—and his parents—told him that God’s Word could not be broken, and he saw no cause to wonder whether it should be otherwise.

“Indeed, Son. God always keeps His promises—every single one of them.” And my heart marveled at how even in such seemingly contradictory circumstances, God was more than able to maintain the validity of His every Word, and yet perform His will in the heart of a weak man.



Sarah was there to greet us upon our return, and how we hugged and embraced one another, my eyes again full of tears. There had been such a marked change in me since my departure that she knew that something had happened, and this reflected in her eyes.

“I will tell you, my darling, once we have seen Isaac off,” I assured her and she nodded.

Soon Isaac went to search out Jochim and his friends, for he had had quite enough of me for a

while, and a week of quiet company with those much older than him had made his heart long for the energetic and spontaneous play that could only be found among those of his own age.

Sarah and I stepped into our tent to rest, while the young men unloaded our beasts, and took care of returning all our unused provisions, which since Sarah had done the packing, was quite a bundle. There, during the next two hours, I gently unfolded to Sarah all the hidden events of the past week. I told her in full of the message the Lord had given me, of His command to sacrifice Isaac unto Him, and of our journey, and the mercy of our God—how Isaac had returned to us safely, once again entrusted into our unworthy care.

Sarah lay in my arms, weeping tears of joy. I had wondered if she would be angry at me or if she would think that I had lost my mind, but I had never been met with a more tender reception than this evening afforded me. Together we praised God, sang unto Him, and expressed our gratefulness for His mercies.



So the years passed by, one after the other. The last memories I possessed on Earth of my beloved wife, Sarah, were of the increased love and devotion she gave to Isaac during her remaining years. Isaac was not yet forty years of age when we laid Sarah’s body to rest in the land of Canaan, yet she had truly enjoyed and savored to the full every minute of her later life.

Since I had returned that day with Isaac from the land of Moriah, she seemed to receive double the joy from the love of our family. As her years wore on, and we knew that her time was nigh, Isaac spent much time by her side. She shared much of our life with him, telling him of his heritage and the promise of faith, upon which he

had been raised, and of that which God expected him to carry on. Her dying breath gave an admonition to her son, as she held my hand and Isaac's, passing on to her reward.



Now I stood in the land of Canaan, among a people of a faith that did not revere my own as I would have hoped. By my side stood a young man, strong and upright. I looked over at him and saw in his eyes a familiar twinkle. He had Sarah's eyes. It had not been long since she had passed away, and the grief and loss I felt in my heart had not been easily assuaged. Though I was oft reminded of her in Isaac's face, I could only smile and feel joy when I realized that both God and Sarah had left me a token of their love, to be lived out in Isaac.

Now there were two things to accomplish. Sarah had left with me her parting wishes, and I was intent to fulfill them. The first was being undertaken even at that moment, for I had sent my eldest and most trusted servant into the land of Mesopotamia, from whence I came, to seek out a wife for our son, Isaac. Sarah had not wished for him to marry a Canaanite woman, and beseeched me to find a young woman perfect before God, one who would please and care for Isaac all his days.

Her second wish led Isaac and me off a ways to once again make a sacrifice unto the Lord. As we set off on our journey, my mind flashed back on Sarah's tired face, the day that she left us.

The two of us had been in the tent. Every possible comfort had been brought to aid and relieve her steadily weakening body. I reached over toward a bowl of cool water which sat to the left side of the bed, and wrung out a wet cloth to place on her forehead.

"No, my darling. Not now." She clutched both of my hands in hers and looked directly into my eyes, managing a half smile. Though her body was collapsing, still her spirit remained intact. "My love, Abraham. I have told you of my wish for Isaac's future ... that you would seek him out a wife from among our own people."

"Yes, yes," I interrupted her, wishing her to save her breath. "I will immediately send forth my most trusted man to find a good woman for our son. And I pray to God that I would find one as beautiful in heart and spirit as you, my wife." The tears began to form in my eyes.

"There ... there is one more thing," she said, her words faltering slightly, but her deep gaze never wavering. "I have spoken of many things to Isaac, but there are two things which you must tell him of."

"What would those be?"

"You must tell him of ... of the wondrous protection of God. That time when he was just a young boy ... he does not remember it. When we were in Beersheba, and God sent ... Ahran and his people to dwell with us for that while."

"And what is the other, my dear?" I asked, only hoping to save her strength and remaining time with us.

"It is of your sacrifice in the land of Moriah, Abraham," she said, pulling herself up a small ways from the bed with effort, "you must tell him of all that truly happened. He is a man now, and he must know his heritage. He must be prepared for what God will expect of him." She then sank back into the cushions which supported her back.

I was quiet for a moment, and I let my mind drift back to those two occasions briefly. "And what is the significance of my telling him these things?" I asked, still curious, after all these years, to know

and understand her reasoning.

She faintly smiled. “For one, I have not much life left in me, and if I were to recount these events, time would fail me. Also I was not present for one of them. But most importantly ... these two happenings have had a great effect on your life, my husband. Within both of these tales lie all the knowledge and wisdom that Isaac will need to know for his life ahead. If you can clearly tell him of all that God told you during these times, and impart to him the understanding of these matters, he will be prepared for all that life holds for him. He needs your spirit, my darling ... your trust, your faith.” Her words began to weaken and she closed her eyes.

“No, my love. Do not go yet!” I pleaded. Summoning a maidservant quickly, I instructed her to call Isaac immediately.

“Isaac needs your unwavering support and love, my sweetheart,” I said, rubbing her hands in mine.

Her eyes flickered open for another instant, and she whispered, “Then let us pray that God bestows upon him all that he needs to have as happy and satisfying a life as we have been blessed to live.”

“Amen,” I agreed. “And I will tell him all that you ask.”

Her time was drawing closer, and though she remained peaceful and serene, my emotions began to overwhelm me. Isaac rushed in at that moment and knelt at the other side of the bed.

Sensing Isaac’s presence, Sarah opened her eyes again and held out her hand to his. “My son, my beloved son!” Tears began to stream down Isaac’s face as he kissed his mother’s hand. Lost for words, he placed his head next to hers and whispered in her ear the simple words, “I love you, my mother.” A contented smile came across her face, and she mouthed back the words in return, “I love you, my son.”

Then came her last words. “Follow the Lord always, my son. Hold to His Words and His truth forever, and turn not your feet from His path. Serve our God, and all those about you, not only in truth ... but in love.” She then offered a silent kiss into the air, clasped our hands as tightly as she was able to, and passed into the realm yet unknown to us.



“Father?”

Isaac’s voice brought my eyes back to the road ahead of me. “Yes, my son?”

“Is it Mother you are thinking of?”

“It is. But I will not give way to grief at this moment, for she left me a parting wish, which I will now fulfill. There are two tales which I must tell you of, which your mother wishes for you to heed diligently. The first occurred when you were a young boy, only six years old....”

Isaac urged his beast closer to mine, and I began the tale as we made our long journey, remembering every day and detail as if it had happened only yesterday.

The hours that had now passed in travel seemed as if they were but a moment, and my accounting concluded as we reached our destination.

Isaac was silent. He helped me to the ground and we began making preparations to offer our sacrifice. I knew that he had not heard such honest and deep confessions of my soul until this time, for I bared all my feelings and thoughts before him, and it took him some time to grasp it.

“But there is more,” I said. “Indeed, there is more.”

We sat at the foot of the altar under the sky which was now beginning to darken, and I told him of a day, many years earlier, when we had climbed

a mount together to give an offering unto the Lord together.

“I certainly remember that day,” Isaac interrupted.

“I know you do, but listen on. On that day certain things were hid from you, for you were but a child and were unable to bear the full Words of the Lord. Yet hear now what truly happened, that your heart may be sobered and find increased faith and trust in the just mercies of our God.”

An hour must have passed before I was finished, and my closing words fell upon two broken and tearful men—a father and a son—who now, years later, found themselves still acquiring a greater understanding of the workings of God.

I looked to see Isaac’s reaction, and saw only my own moved emotions and thankful heart mirrored in his face. At last he spoke. “I now understand that there is much which I do not yet understand and cannot perceive.” He shook his head, feeling incapable and unworthy.

“At your age, my son, I understood even less than you. Worry not. Bear these words within your heart, and look to them for wisdom and guidance. God will always show you what to do and which way to go. If you are willing to receive His Words, you will never lack for guidance or direction.”

We embraced tightly for a moment, then stood and gave our offering of a young lamb to God.



Two days had since passed and I was anxious for my servant to return. I did not know how many more years of life God would give unto me. Now that Sarah had departed, I felt weakened in body and spirit. But I knew that I must remain until Sarah’s last wish had been performed, and that day came its fulfillment.

I heard the jingle of bells and the excited

shouting of a handmaiden without my tent, and I stepped outside to see what the commotion was. I saw nothing at first. All seemed normal within our small camp. Then I looked off in the distance. I could barely make it out with my eyes, but yes, it had to be my servant returning. And not alone did he return! For there was a host of camels! *Isaac!* I thought. *Where is he?* As I moved my gaze slightly to the right, I saw him a far distance off, walking toward the approaching beasts and their riders, one of whom would be to him what Sarah had been to me. *My God, may Thy blessing be upon this union!* I silently prayed in my heart.

My eyes still focused on Isaac, I watched until the woman, whom I would come to know as Rebekah, and love as my own daughter-in-law, alighted from her camel, and placed her hand in his own. The ornamental veil was lifted from over her head and after a few words had been exchanged, they walked the remainder of the way to our camp through the fields on foot, hand in hand.

All at once a hush came upon my spirit. A smile spread upon my face, and I knew that Isaac had found the woman with whom he would spend his life. And what a wonderful woman she was indeed. Sarah’s last wishes and prayers had been fulfilled and answered to the full.

Content now that I had done all that had been asked of me, I retired to my tent and settled in my bed. Sarah had lain there in her last moments of life, and I somehow now felt her presence about me, how I did not know. The comfort of her spirit soothed and relaxed my weary body, and as though I were urged by her never failing concern for my health, I settled into a deep and contented sleep.

When I awoke the following morn, I felt something oddly familiar. It seemed that a bit of Sarah had entered into me, and I now possessed a

## TWO TESTS AND A WISH

renewed vigor and strength, a sort of longing and eagerness in regard to life, a certain joy at the prospect of seeing Isaac and Rebekah wed, that of enjoying my grandchildren playing about me. And this inspiration I carried with me throughout the rest of my blessed days, as I lived to see the promise of God fulfilled unto me more abundantly than I had ever imagined. Truly He fulfills His every Word.

**The End**