



SONS OF

The
PRIEST

a novella

ENCOURAGEMENT



FRANCINE RIVERS



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AARON sensed someone standing close as he broke loose a mold and put the dried brick aside. Skin prickling with fear, he glanced up. No one was near. The Hebrew foreman closest to him was overseeing the loading of bricks onto a cart to add on to some phase of Pharaoh's storage cities. Wiping the moisture from his upper lip, he bent again to his work.

Through the area, sunburned, work-weary children carried straw to women who shook it out like a blanket over the mud pit and then stomped it in. Sweat-drenched men filled buckets and bent beneath the weight as they poured the mud into brick molds. From dawn to dusk, the work went on unceasingly, leaving only a few twilight hours to tend small garden plots and flocks in order to sustain life.

Where are You, God? Why won't You help us?

"You there! Get to work!"

Ducking his head, Aaron hid his hatred and moved to the next mold. His knees ached from squatting, his back from lifting bricks, his neck from bowing. He set the bricks in stacks for others to load. The pits and plains were a hive of workers, the air so close and heavy he could hardly breathe for the stench of human misery. Sometimes death seemed preferable to this unbearable existence. What hope had he or any of his people? God had forsaken them. Aaron wiped the sweat from his eyes and removed another mold from a dried brick.

Someone spoke to him again. It was less than a whisper, but it made his blood rush and the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. He paused and strained forward, listening. He looked around. No one paid him any notice.

Maybe he was suffering from the heat. That must be it. Each year became harder, more insufferable. He was

eighty-three years old, a long life blessed with nothing but wretchedness.

Shaking, Aaron raised his hand. A boy hurried over with a skin of water. Aaron drank deeply, but the warm fluid did nothing to stop the inner quaking, the feeling of someone watching him so closely that he could feel that gaze into the marrow of his bones. It was a strange sensation, terrifying in its intensity. He leaned forward on his knees, longing to hide from the light, longing to rest. He heard the overseer shout again and knew if he didn't get back to work he would feel the bite of the lash. Even old men like him were expected to fulfill a heavy quota of bricks each day. And if they didn't, they suffered for it. His father, Amram, had died with his face in the mud, an Egyptian foot on the back of his neck.

Where were You then, Lord? Where were You?

He hated the Hebrew taskmasters as much as he hated the Egyptians. But he gave thanks anyway—hatred gave a man strength. The sooner his quota was filled, the sooner he could tend his flock of sheep and goats, the sooner his sons could work the plot of Goshen land that yielded food for their table. *The Egyptians try to kill us, but we go on and on. We multiply. But what good does it do us? We suffer and suffer some more.*

Aaron loosened another mold. Beads of sweat dripped from his brow onto the hardened clay, staining the brick. Hebrew sweat and blood were poured into everything being built in Egypt! Raamses' statues, Raamses' palaces, Raamses' storage buildings, Raamses' city—everything was stained. Egypt's ruler liked naming everything after himself. Pride reigned on the throne of Egypt! The old pharaoh had tried to drown Hebrew sons in the Nile, and now Raamses was attempting to grind them into dust! Aaron hoisted the brick and stacked it with a dozen others.

When will You deliver us, Lord? When will You break the yoke

of slavery from our backs? Was it not our ancestor Joseph who saved this foul country from starvation? And look at how we're treated now! Pharaoh uses us like beasts of burden, building his cities and palaces! God, why have You abandoned us? How long, oh, Lord, how long before You deliver us from those who would kill us with labor?

Aaron.

The Voice came without and within, clear this time, silencing Aaron's turbulent thoughts. He felt the Presence so acutely that all else receded and he was cupped silent and still by invisible hands. The Voice was unmistakable. His very blood and bone recognized it.

Go out into the wilderness to meet Moses!

The Presence lifted. Everything went back to the way it had been. Sound surrounded him again—the suck of mud from stomping feet, the groan of men lifting buckets, the call of women for more hay, the crunch of sand as someone approached, a curse, a shouted order, the hiss of the lash. Aaron cried out as pain laced his back. He hunched over and covered his head, fearing the overseer less than the One who had called him by name. The whip tore his flesh, but the Word of the Lord ripped wide his heart.

“Get up, old man!”

If he was lucky, he would die.

He felt more pain. He heard voices and drifted into blackness. And he remembered . . .

How many years since Aaron had thought of his brother? He had assumed he was dead, his dry bones forgotten somewhere in the wilderness. Aaron's first memory was of his mother's angry, anguished weeping as she covered a woven basket she had made with tar and pitch. “Pharaoh said we have to give our

sons to the Nile, Amram, and so I will. May the Lord preserve him! May the Lord be merciful!"

And God had been merciful, letting the basket drift into the hands of Pharaoh's daughter. Miriam, at eight, had followed to see what became of her baby brother, and then had had enough boldness to suggest to the Egyptian that she would have need of a wet nurse. When Miriam was sent for one, she ran to her mother.

Aaron had been only three years old, but he still remembered that day. His mother pried his fingers loose. "Stop holding on to me. I have to go!" Gripping his wrists tightly, she had held him away from her. "Take him, Miriam."

Aaron screamed when his mother went out the door. She was leaving him. "Hush, Aaron." Miriam held him tight. "Crying will do no good. You know Moses needs Mama more than you do. You're a big boy. You can help me tend the garden and the sheep. . . ."

Though his mother returned with Moses each night, her attention was clearly on the infant. Every morning, she obeyed the princess's command that she take the baby to the palace and stay nearby in case he needed anything.

Day after day passed, and only Aaron's sister was there to comfort him. "I miss her, too, you know." She dashed tears from her cheeks. "Moses needs her more than we do. He hasn't been weaned yet."

"I want Mama."

"Well, wanting and having are two separate things. Stop whining about it."

"Where does Mama go every day?"

"Upriver."

"Upriver?"

She pointed. "To the palace, where Pharaoh's daughter lives."

One day Aaron snuck away when Miriam went out to see

about their few sheep. Though he had been warned against it, he went along to the Nile and followed the river away from the village. Dangerous things lived in the waters. Evil things. The reeds were tall and sharp, making small cuts on his arms and legs as he pressed through. He heard rustling sounds and low roars, high-pitched keens and frantic flapping. Crocodiles lived in the Nile. His mother had told him.

He heard a woman laughing. Pushing his way through the reeds, he crept closer until he could see through the veiling green stalks to the stone patio where an Egyptian sat with a baby in her lap. She bounced him on her knees and talked low to him. She kissed his neck and held him up toward the sun like an offering. When the baby began to cry, the woman called out for "Jochebed." Aaron saw his mother rise from a place in the shadows and come down the steps. Smiling, she took the baby Aaron now knew was his brother. The two women talked briefly, and the Egyptian went inside.

Aaron stood up so that Mama could see him if she looked his way. She didn't. She had eyes only for the baby she held. As his mother nursed Moses, she sang to him. Aaron stood alone, watching her tenderly stroke Moses' head. He wanted to call out to her, but his throat was sealed tight and hot. When Mama finished nursing his brother, she rose and turned her back to the river. She held Moses against her shoulder. And then she went back up the steps into the palace.

Aaron sat down in the mud, hidden among the reeds. Mosquitoes buzzed around him. Frogs croaked. Other sounds, more ominous, rippled in deeper water. If a snake got him or a crocodile, Mama wouldn't care. She had Moses. He was the only one she loved now. She had forgotten all about her older son.

Aaron ached with loneliness, and his young heart burned with hatred for the brother who had taken his mother away. He wished the basket had sunk. He wished a crocodile had eaten

him the way crocodiles had eaten all the other baby boys. He heard something coming through the reeds and tried to hide.

"Aaron?" Miriam appeared. "I've been looking all over for you! How did you find your way here?" When he raised his head, her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Aaron . . ." She looked toward the palace, yearning. "Did you see Mama?"

He hung his head and sobbed. His sister's thin arms went around him, pulling him to her. "I miss her, too, Aaron," she whispered, her voice breaking. He rested his head against her. "But we have to go. We don't want to cause her trouble."

He was six when his mother came home alone one night, grieving. All she could do was cry and talk about Moses and Pharaoh's daughter. "She loves your brother. She'll be a kind mother to him. I must take comfort in that and forget she's a heathen. She'll educate him. He will grow up to be a great man someday." She balled up her shawl and pressed it to her mouth to stifle her sobs as she rocked back and forth. "He will come back to us someday." She was fond of saying that.

Aaron hoped Moses would never come back. He hoped never to see his brother again. *I hate him*, he wanted to scream. *I hate him for taking you away from me!*

"My son will be our deliverer." All she could talk about was her precious Moses, Israel's deliverer.

The seed of bitterness grew in Aaron until he couldn't stand to hear his brother's name. "Why did you come back at all?" he sobbed in rage one afternoon. "Why didn't you just stay with him if you love him so much?"

Miriam cuffed him. "Hold your tongue or Mama will think I've let you run wild while she was gone."

"She doesn't care about you any more than she cares about me!" he yelled at his sister. He faced his mother again. "I bet you didn't even cry when Papa died with his face in the mud. Did you?" Then, seeing the look on his mother's face, he ran. He ran

all the way to the mud pits, where his job was to scatter straw for the workers to stomp into the mud in the making of bricks.

At least, she had spoken less of Moses after that. She had hardly spoken at all.

Now Aaron roused from the painful memories. He could see the heat through his eyelids, a shadow falling over him. Someone put a few drops of precious water to his lips as the past echoed around him. He was still confused, the past and present mingling.

“Even if the river spares him, Jochebed, whoever sees he’s circumcised will know he is condemned to die.”

“I will not drown my own son! I will not raise my hand against my own son, nor can you!” His mother wept as she placed his sleeping brother in the basket.

Surely God had mocked the Egyptian gods that day, for the Nile itself, the life’s blood of Egypt, had carried his brother into the hands and heart of the daughter of Pharaoh, the very man who commanded all Hebrew boy babies be drowned. And furthermore the other Egyptian gods lurking along the shores of the Nile in the form of crocodiles and hippopotamuses had also failed to carry out Pharaoh’s edict. But no one laughed. Far too many had died already and continued to die every day. Aaron sometimes thought the only reason the edict had eventually been lifted was to make sure Pharaoh had enough slaves to make his bricks, chisel his stone, and build his cities!

Why had his brother been the only one to survive? Was Moses to be Israel’s deliverer?

Miriam had ruled Aaron’s life, even after their mother had returned home. His sister had been as protective of him as a lioness over her cub. Even then, and despite the extraordinary events regarding Moses, the circumstances of Aaron’s life didn’t change. He learned to tend sheep. He carried straw to the mud pits. At six, he was scooping mud into buckets.

And while Aaron lived the life of a slave, Moses grew up in a palace. While Aaron was tutored by hard labor and abuse at the hands of taskmasters, Moses was taught to read and write and speak and live like an Egyptian. Aaron wore rags. Moses got to wear fine linen clothes. Aaron ate flat bread and whatever his mother and sister could grow in their small plot of hard, dry ground. Moses filled his belly with food served by slaves. Aaron worked in the heat of the sun, up to his knees in mud. Moses sat in cool stone corridors and was treated like an Egyptian prince despite his Hebrew blood. Moses led a life of ease instead of toil, freedom instead of slavery, abundance instead of want. Born a slave, Aaron knew he would die a slave.

Unless God delivered them.

Is Moses the one, Lord?

Envy and resentment had tormented Aaron almost all his life. But was it Moses' fault he had been taken from his family and raised by idol-worshiping foreigners?

Aaron didn't see Moses until years later when Moses stood in the doorway of their house. Their mother had come to her feet with a cry and rushed to embrace him. Aaron hadn't known what to think or feel, nor what to expect from a brother who looked like an Egyptian and knew no Hebrew at all. Aaron had resented him, and then been confused by Moses' desire to align himself with slaves. Moses could come and go as he pleased. Why had he chosen to come and live in Goshen? He could have been riding a chariot and hunting lions with other young men from Pharaoh's household. What did he hope to gain by working alongside slaves?

"You hate me, don't you, Aaron?"

Aaron understood Egyptian even though Moses didn't understand Hebrew. The question had given him pause. "No. Not hate." He hadn't felt anything but distrust. "What are you doing here?"

"I belong here."

Aaron had found himself furious at Moses' answer. "Did we all risk our lives so you could end up in a mud pit?"

"If I'm to try to free my people, shouldn't I get to know them?"

"Ah, so magnanimous."

"You need a leader."

Their mother defended Moses with every breath. "Didn't I tell you my son would choose his own people over our enemies?"

Wouldn't Moses be of more use in the palace speaking on behalf of the Hebrews? Did he think he would gain Pharaoh's respect by working alongside slaves? Aaron didn't understand Moses, and after years of disparity in the way they lived, he wasn't sure he liked him.

But why would he? What was Moses really after? Was he Pharaoh's spy sent to learn whether these wretched Israelites had plans to align themselves with Egypt's enemies? The thought may have occurred to them, but they knew they would fare no better at Philistine hands.

Where is God when we need Him? Far off, blind and deaf to our cries for deliverance!

Moses might have walked the great halls as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, but he had inherited the Levite blood and the Levite temper. When he saw an Egyptian beating a Levite slave, he became a law unto himself. Aaron and several others watched in horror as Moses struck the Egyptian down. The others fled while Moses buried the body in the sand.

"Someone has to defend you!" Moses said as Aaron helped him hide the evidence of his crime. "Think of it. Thousands of slaves rising up against their masters. That's what the Egyptians fear, Aaron. That's why they load you down and try to kill you with work."

"Is this the kind of leader you want to be? Kill them as they kill us?" Was that the way to deliverance? Was their deliverer

to be a warrior leading them into battle? Would he put a sword in their hands? The rage that had built over the years under slavery filled Aaron. Oh, how easy it would be to give in to it!

Word spread like fine sand blown before a desert wind, eventually reaching the ears of Pharaoh himself. When Hebrews fought among themselves the next day, Moses tried to intercede and found himself under attack. "Who appointed you to be our prince and judge? Do you plan to kill me as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?" The people didn't want Moses as their deliverer. In their eyes, he was an enigma, not to be trusted.

Pharaoh's daughter couldn't save Moses this time. How long could a man survive when he was hated and hunted by Pharaoh, and envied and despised by his brethren?

Moses disappeared into the wilderness and was never heard from again.

He didn't even have time to say good-bye to the mother who'd believed he had been born to deliver Israel from slavery. And Moses took their mother's hopes and dreams with him into the wilderness. She died within the year. The fate of Moses' Egyptian mother was unknown, but Pharaoh lived on and on, continuing to build his storage cities, monuments, and grandest of all, his tomb. It was scarcely finished when the sarcophagus containing Pharaoh's embalmed body was carried to the Valley of the Kings, followed by an entourage of thousands bearing golden idols, possessions, and provisions for an afterlife thought to be even grander than the one he had lived on earth.

Now Raamses wore the serpent crown and held a sword over their heads. Cruel and arrogant, he preferred grinding his heel into their backs instead. When Amram could not rise from the pit, he was smothered in the mud.

Aaron was eighty-three, a thin reed of a man. He knew he would die soon, and his sons after him, and their sons down through the generations.

Unless God delivered them.

Lord, Lord, why have You abandoned Your people?

Aaron prayed out of desperation and despair. It was the only freedom he had left, to cry out to God for help. Hadn't God made a covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? *Lord, Lord, hear my prayer! Help us!* If God existed, where was He? Did He see the bloody stripes on their backs, the worn-down, worn-out look in their eyes? Did he hear the cries of Abraham's children? Aaron's father and mother had clung to their faith in the unseen God. *Where else can we find hope, Lord? How long, O God, how long before You deliver us? Help us. God, why won't You help us?*

Aaron's father and mother had long since been buried beneath the sand. Aaron had obeyed his father's last wishes and married Elisheba, a daughter from among the tribe of Judah. She had given him four fine sons before she died. There were days when Aaron envied the dead. At least they were at rest. At least their unceasing prayers had finally stopped and God's silence no longer hurt.

Someone lifted his head and gave him water. "Father?"

Aaron opened his eyes and saw his son Eleazar above him. "God spoke to me." His voice was scarcely a whisper.

Eleazar leaned down. "I couldn't hear you, Father. What did you say?"

Aaron wept, unable to say more.

God had finally spoken, and Aaron knew his life would never be the same.

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Aaron gathered his four sons—Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar—and his sister, Miriam, and told them God had commanded him to go to meet Moses in the wilderness.

"Our uncle is dead," Nadab said. "It was the sun speaking to you."

"It's been forty years, Father, without a word."

Aaron held up his hand. "Moses is alive."

"How do you know it was God who spoke to you, Father?" Abihu leaned forward. "You were out in the sun all day. It wouldn't be the first time the heat got to you."

"Are you sure, Aaron?" Miriam cupped her cheeks. "We have been hoping for so long."

"Yes. I'm certain. No one can imagine a voice like that. I cannot explain, nor do I have the time to try. You must all believe me!"

They all spoke at once.

"There are Philistines beyond the borders of Egypt."

"You can't survive in the wilderness, Father."

"What will we tell the other elders when they ask after you? They will want to know why we didn't stop our father from such folly."

"You won't make it to the trade route before you're stopped."

"And if you do, how will you survive?"

"Who will go with you?"

"Father, you're eighty-three years old!"

Eleazar put his hand on Aaron's arm. "I'll go with you, Father."

Miriam stamped her foot. "Enough! Let your father speak."

"No one will go with me. I go alone, and God will provide."

"How will you find Moses? The wilderness is a vast place. How will you find water?"

"And food. You can't carry enough for that kind of journey."

Miriam rose. "Would you try to talk your father out of what God instructed?"

"Sit, Miriam." His sister merely added to the confusion, and Aaron could speak for himself. "God called me to this journey; surely God will show me the way." Hadn't he prayed for years? Maybe Moses would know something. Maybe God was finally

going to help His people. "I must trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to lead me." He spoke with more confidence than he felt, for their questions troubled him. Why should they doubt his word? He must do as God said and go. Quickly, before courage failed him.

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Carrying a skin of water, seven small loaves of unleavened barley bread, and his staff, Aaron left before the sun came up. He walked all day. He saw Egyptians, but they paid him no attention. Nor did he allow his steps to falter at the sight of them. God had given him purpose and hope. Weariness and desolation no longer oppressed him. He felt renewed as he walked. *God exists. God spoke.* God had told him where to go and whom he was to meet: Moses!

What would his brother be like? Had he spent all forty years in the wilderness? Did he have a family? Did Moses know Aaron was coming? Had God spoken to him as well? If not, what was he to say to Moses when he found him? Surely God would not send him so far without purpose at the end. But what purpose?

His questions made him think of other things. He slowed his steps, troubled. It had been easy to walk away. No one had stopped him. He had taken up his staff, shouldered a skin of water and a pouch of bread, and headed out into the desert. Maybe he should have brought Miriam and his sons with him.

No. No. He must do exactly as God said.

Aaron walked all day, day after day, and slept in the open at night, eyes on the stars overhead, alone in silence. Never had he been so alone, or felt so lonely. Thirsty, he sucked on a small flat stone to keep his mouth from going dry. How he wished he could raise his hand and have a boy run to him with a skin of water. His bread was almost gone. His stomach growled, but he

was afraid to eat until later in the afternoon. He didn't know how far he had to go and whether his supply of bread would hold out. He didn't know what to eat out here in the desert. He didn't have the skills to hunt and kill animals. He was tired and hungry and beginning to wonder if he really had heard God's voice or just imagined it. How many more days? How far? The sun beat down relentlessly until he looked for escape in a cleft of rocks, miserable and exhausted. He couldn't remember the sound of God's voice.

Was it all his imagination, birthed by years of misery and a dying hope that a Savior would come and deliver him from slavery? Maybe his sons were right and he'd been suffering from the heat. He was certainly suffering now.

No. He had heard God's voice. He had been on the point of exhaustion and heatstroke many times in his life, but he had never heard a voice like that one:

Go out into the wilderness to meet Moses. Go. Go.

He set off again, walking until nightfall and finding a place to rest. The inexorable heat gave way to a chill that gnawed at his bones and made him shiver. When he slept, he dreamed of his sons sitting with him at the table, laughing and enjoying one another while Miriam served bread and meat, dried dates and wine. He awakened in despair. At least in Egypt, he had known what to expect; every day had been the same with overseers to regulate his life. He had been thirsty and hungry many times, but not as he was now, with no respite, no encouraging companion.

God, did You bring me out into the wilderness to kill me? There is no water, just this endless sea of rocks.

Aaron lost count of the days, but he took hope in that every day there seemed to be just enough water and food to keep him going. He headed north and then east into Midian, sustained by infrequent oases, and leaning more heavily on his staff with

each day. He didn't know how far he had come, or how far he had to go. He only knew he would rather die in the wilderness than turn back now. What hope remained was fixed on finding his brother. He longed to see Moses as intently as he had longed for a long draught of water and hunk of bread.

When his water was down to a few drops and his bread was gone, he came to a wide plain before a jagged mountain. Was that a donkey and a small shelter? Aaron rubbed the sweat from his eyes and squinted. A man sat in the doorway. He stood, staff in hand, and came out into the open, his head turned toward Aaron. Hope made Aaron forget his hunger and thirst. "Moses!" *Oh, Lord, Lord, let it be my brother!* "Moses!"

The man came toward him at a run, arms outstretched. "Aaron!"

It was like hearing the voice of God. Laughing, Aaron came down the rocky slope, his strength renewed like an eagle's. He was almost running when he reached his brother. They fell into one another's arms. "God sent me, Moses!" Laughing and sobbing, he kissed his brother. "God sent me to you!"

"Aaron, my brother!" Moses held tight, weeping. "God said you would come."

"Forty years, Moses. Forty years! We all thought you were dead."

"You were glad to see me go."

"Forgive me. I am glad to see you now." Aaron drank in the sight of his younger brother.

Moses had changed. He was no longer dressed like an Egyptian, but wore the long dark robes and head covering of a nomad. Swarthy, face lined with age, his dark beard streaked with white, he looked foreign and humbled by years of desert life.

Aaron had never been so glad to see anyone. "Oh, Moses, you are my brother. I am glad to see you alive and well." Aaron wept for the lost years.

Moses' eyes grew moist and tender. "The Lord God said you

would be. Come." He took Aaron by the arm. "You must rest and have something to eat and drink. You must meet my sons."

Moses' dark and foreign wife, Zipporah, served them. Moses' son Gershom sat with them, while Eliezer lay pale and sweating on a pallet at the back of the tent.

"Your son is ill."

"Zipporah circumcised him two days ago."

Aaron winced. *Eliezer* meant "my God is help." But in which God did Moses place his hope? Zipporah sat beside her son, dark eyes downcast, and dabbed his forehead with a damp cloth. Aaron asked why Moses had not done it himself when his son was eight days old as the Jews had done since the days of Abraham.

Moses bowed his head. "It is easier to remember the ways of your people when you dwell among them, Aaron. As I learned when I circumcised Gershom, Midianites consider the rite repugnant, and Jethro, Zipporah's father, is a priest of Midian." He looked at Aaron. "In deference to him, I did not circumcise Eliezer. When God spoke to me, Jethro gave me his blessing, and we left the tents of Midian. I knew my son must be circumcised. Zipporah argued against it and I delayed, not wanting to press my ways on her. I didn't see it as rebellion until the Lord Himself sought to take my life. I told Zipporah that unless my sons both bore the mark of the Covenant on their flesh, I would die and Eliezer would be cut off from God and His people. Only then did she herself take the flint to our son's flesh."

Troubled, Moses looked at the feverish boy. "My son would not even remember how the mark came to be on his flesh had I obeyed the Lord instead of bending to others. He suffers now because of my disobedience."

"He will heal soon, Moses."

"Yes, but I will remember the cost to others of my disobedience." Moses looked out the doorway to the mountain and then

at Aaron. "I have much to tell you when you are not too tired to listen."

"My strength returned the moment I saw you."

Moses took up his staff and rose, and Aaron followed. When they stood in the open, Moses stopped. "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appeared to me in a burning bush on that mountain," Moses said. "He has seen the affliction of Israel and is come to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, to bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey. He is sending me to Pharaoh so that I may bring His people out of Egypt to worship Him at this mountain." Moses gripped his staff and rested his forehead against his hands as he spoke all the words the Lord had spoken to him on the mountain. Aaron felt the truth of them in his soul, drinking them in like water. *The Lord is sending Moses to deliver us!*

"I pleaded with the Lord to send someone else, Aaron. I said who am I to go to Pharaoh? I said my own people will not believe me. I told him I have never been eloquent, that I'm slow of speech and tongue." He let out his breath slowly and faced Aaron. "And the Lord whose name is I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS said you will be my spokesman."

Aaron felt a sudden rush of fear, but it subsided in the answer of a lifetime prayer. The Lord had heard the cry of His people. Deliverance was at hand. The Lord had seen their misery and was about to put an end to it. Aaron was too filled with emotion to speak.

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Aaron? I'm afraid of Pharaoh. I'm afraid of my own people. So the Lord has sent you to stand with me and be my spokesman."

The question hung unspoken between them. Was he willing to stand with Moses?

"I am your older brother. Who better to speak for you than I?"

"Are you not afraid, Brother?"

“What does a slave’s life matter in Egypt, Moses? What has my life ever mattered? Yes, I’m afraid. I have been afraid all my life. I’ve bent my back to taskmasters, and felt the lash when I dared look up. I speak boldly enough in the privacy of my own house and among my brethren, but it comes to naught. Nothing changes. My words are but wind, and I thought my prayers were, too. Now, I know better. This time will be different. It won’t be the words of a slave that are heard from my lips, but the Word of the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!”

“If they don’t believe us, the Lord has given me signs to show them.” Moses told him how his staff had become a snake and his hand had become leprous. “And if that is not enough, when I pour water from the Nile, it will become blood.”

Aaron didn’t ask for a demonstration. “They will believe, just as I believe.”

“You believe me because you are my brother, and because God sent you to me. You believe because God has changed your heart toward me. You have not always looked at me as you do now, Aaron.”

“Yes, because I thought you were free when I wasn’t.”

“I never felt at home in Pharaoh’s house. I wanted to be among my own people.”

“And we scorned and rejected you.” Perhaps it was living among two separate peoples and being accepted by neither that made Moses so humble. But he must do as God commanded, or the Hebrews would go on as before, toiling in the mud pits and dying with their faces in the dust. “God has chosen you to deliver us, Moses. And so you shall. Whatever God tells you, I will speak. If I have to shout, I will make the people hear.”

Moses looked up at the mountain of God. “We will start for Egypt in the morning. We will gather the elders of Israel and tell them what the Lord has said. Then we will all go before Pharaoh and tell him to let God’s people go into the wilderness

to sacrifice to the Lord our God." He shut his eyes as though in pain.

"What is it, Moses? What's wrong?"

"The Lord will harden Pharaoh's heart and strike Egypt with signs and wonders so that when we leave, we will not go empty-handed, but with many gifts of silver, gold, and clothing."

Aaron laughed bitterly. "And so God will plunder Egypt as Egypt plundered us! I never thought to see justice prevail in my lifetime. It will be a joyous sight!"

"Do not be eager to see their destruction, Aaron. They are people like us."

"Not like us."

"Pharaoh will not relent until his own firstborn son is dead. Then he will let us go."

Aaron had been beneath the heel of Egyptian slave drivers too long and had felt the lash too many times to feel pity for any Egyptian, but he saw Moses did.

They set off at daylight, Zipporah taking charge of the donkey carrying provisions and pulling a litter. Eliezer was improved, but not well enough to walk with his mother and his brother. Aaron and Moses walked ahead, each with a shepherd's staff in hand.

+ + +

Heading north, they took the trade route between Egypt and southern Canaan, traveling by way of Shur. It was more direct than traveling south and west and then north through the desert. Aaron wanted to hear everything the Lord had said to Moses. "Tell me everything again. From the beginning." How he wished he had been with Moses and seen the burning bush for himself! He knew what it was to hear the sound of God's voice, but to stand in His presence was beyond imagining.

When they reached Egypt, Aaron took Moses, Zipporah,

Gershom, and Eliezer into his house. Moses was overcome with emotion when Miriam threw her arms around him and Aaron's sons surrounded him. Aaron almost pitied Moses, for he saw that Hebrew words still did not come easily to his brother, so he spoke for him. "God has called Moses to deliver our people from slavery. The Lord Himself will perform great signs and wonders so that Pharaoh will let us go."

"Our mother prayed you were the promised one of God." Miriam embraced Moses again. "She was certain when Pharaoh's daughter saved you that God was protecting you for some great purpose."

Zipporah sat with her sons, watching from the corner of the room, dark-eyed and troubled.

Aaron's sons went back and forth through Goshen, the region of Egypt that had been given to the Hebrews centuries earlier and in which they now lived in captivity. The men carried the message to the elders of Israel that God had sent them a deliverer and the elders were to gather and hear his message from God.

Meanwhile, Aaron talked and prayed with his brother. He could see him struggling against fear of Pharaoh and the people and the call of God on him. Moses had little appetite. And he looked more tired when he rose in the morning than when he had retired to bed the evening before. Aaron did his best to encourage him. Surely that was why God had sent him to find Moses. He loved his brother. He was strengthened at his presence and eager to serve.

"You give me the words God speaks to you, Moses, and I will speak them. You will not go alone before Pharaoh. We go together. And surely the Lord Himself will be with us."

"How is it you have no fear?"

No fear? Less perhaps. Moses had not grown up suffering physical oppression. He hadn't lived long for the promise of God's

intervention. Nor had he been surrounded by fellow slaves and family members who relied on each other for strength just to survive each day. Had Moses ever known love other than those first few years at his mother's breast? Had Pharaoh's daughter regretted adopting him? In what position had her rebellion against Pharaoh placed her, and what repercussions had it caused Moses?

It occurred to Aaron that he had never thought of these things before, too caught up in his own feelings, petty resentments, and childish jealousies. Unlike Moses, he hadn't grown up as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter among people who despised him. Had Moses learned to keep out of sight and say little in order to survive? Aaron hadn't been caught between two worlds and accepted in neither. He hadn't sought to align himself with his people, only to find they hated him as well. Nor had he needed to run away from Egyptian and Hebrew alike and seek refuge among foreigners in order to stay alive. Nor had he spent years alone in the desert tending sheep.

Why had he never thought of these things before? Was it only now that his mind and heart were open to consider what Moses' life must have been like? Aaron was filled with compassion for his brother. He ached to help him, to press him forward to the task God had given him. For the Lord Himself said Moses was to be Israel's deliverer, and Aaron knew God had sent him to stand beside his brother and do whatever Moses could not do.

Lord, You have heard our cry!

"Ah, Moses, I've spent my life in fear, bowing and scraping before overseers and taskmasters, and still getting the lash when I failed to work fast enough for them. And now, for the first time in my life, I have hope." Tears came in a flood. "Hope casts out fear, Brother. We have God's promise that the day of our salvation is at hand! The people will rejoice when they hear, and Pharaoh will cower before the Lord."

Moses' eyes were filled with sorrow. "He won't listen."

"How can he not listen when he sees the signs and wonders?"

"I grew up with Raamses. He is arrogant and cruel. And now that he sits on the throne, he believes he is god. He won't listen, Aaron, and many will suffer because of him. Our people will suffer and so will his."

"Pharaoh will see the truth, Moses. Pharaoh will come to know that the Lord is God. And that truth will set us free."

Moses wept.

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Israel gathered, and Aaron spoke all the words the Lord gave to Moses. The crowd was dubious, some outspoken and some derisive. "This is your brother who murdered the Egyptian and ran away, and he is to deliver us from Egypt? Are you out of your mind? God would not use a man such as he!"

"What's he doing back here? He's more Egyptian than Hebrew!"

"He's a Midianite now!"

Some laughed.

Aaron felt the rush of hot blood. "Show them, Moses. Give them a sign!"

Moses threw his staff on the ground and it became a huge cobra. The people cried out and scattered. Moses reached down and took the snake by the tail and it became his staff again. The people closed in around him. "There are other signs! Show them, Moses." Moses put his hand inside his cloak and drew it out, leprous. The people gasped and recoiled from him. When he tucked his hand inside his cloak and drew it out as clean as a newborn child's, they cried out in jubilation.

There was no need for Moses to touch his staff to the Nile and turn it to blood, for the people were already shouting with joy. "Moses! Moses!"

Aaron raised his arms, his staff in one hand and shouted,

“Praise be to God who has heard our prayers for deliverance!
All praise be to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!”

The people cried out with him and fell to their knees, bowing low and worshipping the Lord.

But when asked, the elders of Israel refused to go before Pharaoh. It was left to Aaron and Moses to go alone.

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Aaron felt smaller and weaker with each step inside Thebes, Pharaoh’s city. He had never had reason to come here amid the bustle of markets and crowded streets that stood in the shadow of the immense stone buildings that housed Pharaoh, his counselors, and the gods of Egypt. He had spent his life in Goshen, toiling beneath overseers and toiling to eke out his own existence through crops and a small flock of sheep and goats. Who was he to think he could stand before mighty Pharaoh and speak for Moses? Everyone said that even as a small boy, Raamses had shown the arrogance and cruelty of his predecessors. Who dared thwart the ruling god of all Egypt? Especially an old man of eighty-three, as he was, and his younger brother of eighty!

I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.

Lord, give me courage, Aaron prayed silently. You have said that I am to be Moses’ spokesman, but all I can see are the enemies around me, the wealth and power everywhere I look. Oh, God, Moses and I are like two old grasshoppers come to the court of a king. Pharaoh has the power to crush us beneath his heel. How can I give Moses courage when my own fails me?

He could smell the rankness of Moses’ sweat. It was the smell of terror. His brother had hardly slept for fear of standing before his own people. Now he was inside the city with its thousands of

inhabitants, its enormous buildings and magnificent statues of Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. He had come to speak to Pharaoh!

“Do you know where to go?”

“We are almost there.” Moses said nothing more.

Aaron wanted to encourage him, but how, when he was fighting the fear threatening to overwhelm him? *Oh, God, will I be able to speak when my brother, who knows so much more than I do, is shaking like a bruised reed beside me? Don't let any man crush him, Lord. Whatever comes, please give me breath to speak and the spine to stand firm.*

He smelled smoke laden with incense and remembered Moses talking about the fire that burned without consuming the bush, and the Voice that had spoken to him from the fire. Aaron remembered the Voice. He thought of it now and his fear lessened. Had not Moses' staff turned to a snake before his eyes and his hand shriveled with leprosy, only to be healed as well? Such was God's power! He thought of the cries of the people, cries of thanksgiving and jubilation that the Lord had seen their affliction and had sent Moses to deliver them from slavery.

Still . . .

Aaron looked up at the enormous buildings with their massive pillars and wondered at the power of those who had designed and built them.

Moses paused before a huge stone gate. On each side were carved beasts—twenty times the size of Aaron—standing guard.

Oh, Lord, I am but a man. I believe. I do! Rid me of my doubts!

Aaron tried not to stare around him as he walked beside Moses to the entrance of the great building where Pharaoh held court. Aaron spoke to one of the guards and they were brought inside. The hum of many voices rose like bees amid the huge columns. The walls and ceilings were resplendent with colorful scenes of the gods of Egypt. Men stared at him and Moses, frowning in distaste and drawing back, whispering.

Aaron's palm sweated as he held tight to his staff. He felt conspicuous in his long robe and woven sash, the woven shawl that covered his head dusty from their journey. He and his brother looked strange among these other men in their short fitted tunics and elaborate wigs. Some wore long tunics, ornate robes, and gold amulets. Such wealth! Such beauty! Aaron had never imagined anything like this.

When Aaron saw Pharaoh sitting on a throne flanked by two huge statues of Osiris and Isis, he could only stare at the man's magnificence. Everything about him announced his power and wealth. He glanced disdainfully at Aaron and Moses and said something to his guard. The guard straightened and spoke. "Why have you come before mighty Pharaoh?"

Moses lowered his eyes, trembling, and said nothing.

Aaron heard someone whisper, "What are these stinking old Hebrew slaves doing here?" Heat filled him at their contempt. Uncovering his head, he stepped forward. "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Let My people go, for they must go out into the wilderness to hold a religious festival in My honor.' "

Pharaoh laughed. "Is that so?" Others joined in. "Look at these two old slaves standing before me, demanding that their people be released." The officials laughed. Pharaoh waved his hand as though brushing aside a minor irritation. "And who is the Lord that I should listen to Him and let Israel go? Let you go? Why would I do that? Who would do the work you were born to do?" He smiled coldly. "I don't know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go."

Aaron felt the anger rise in him. "The God of the Hebrews has met with us," he declared. "Let us take a three-day trip into the wilderness so we can offer sacrifices to the Lord our God. If we don't, we will surely die by disease or the sword."

"What does it matter to me if a few slaves die? Hebrews reproduce like rabbits. There will be more to replace those who

die of pestilence." Counselors and visitors laughed as Pharaoh continued to mock them.

Aaron's face burned, his heart thundered.

Pharaoh's eyes narrowed as Aaron stared up at him. "I have heard about you, Aaron and Moses." The ruler of Egypt spoke quietly, his tone filled with threat.

Aaron felt chilled that Pharaoh knew him by name.

"Who do you think you are," Pharaoh shouted, "distracting the people from their tasks? Get back to work! Look, there are many people here in Egypt, and you are stopping them from doing their work."

As the guards moved closer, Aaron's hand clenched his shepherd's staff. If any man tried to take hold of Moses, he would receive a clubbing.

"We must go, Aaron," Moses said under his breath. Aaron obeyed.

Standing in the hot Egyptian sun once again, Aaron shook his head. "I thought he would listen."

"I told you he wouldn't." Moses let out his breath slowly and bowed his head. "This is only the beginning of our tribulation."

✦ ✦ ✦

An order came quickly from the taskmasters that straw would no longer be given them to make bricks, but that they would have to scrounge for their own. And the quota of bricks would not be lessened! They were told Pharaoh's reason. The ruler of Egypt thought them lazy because Moses and Aaron had cried out to let them go and sacrifice to their god.

"We thought you were going to deliver us, and all you asked was that we be allowed to go for a few days and sacrifice!"

"Away with you!"

"You have made our lives even more unbearable!"

When the foremen among the sons of Israel were beaten for

not completing their required number of bricks, they went to Pharaoh to beg for justice and mercy. Moses and Aaron went to meet them. When they came out, the foremen were bloodied and worse off than before.

"Because of you Pharaoh believes we are lazy! You have caused us nothing but trouble! May the Lord judge you for getting us into this terrible situation with Pharaoh and his officials. You have given them an excuse to kill us!"

Aaron was appalled at their accusations. "The Lord will deliver us!"

"Oh, yes, He will deliver us. Right into Pharaoh's hands!"

Some spit at Moses as they walked away.

Aaron despaired. He believed the Lord had spoken to Moses and promised to deliver the people. "What do we do now?" He had thought it would be easy. One word from the Lord and the chains of slavery would fall away. Why was God punishing them again? Hadn't they been punished enough all these long years in Egypt?

"I must pray." Moses spoke quietly. He looked so old and confused, Aaron was afraid. "I must ask the Lord why He ever sent me to Pharaoh to speak in His name, for He has only done harm to this people and not delivered them at all."

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The people Aaron had known all his life glared at him and whispered as he walked by. "You should have kept your mouth shut, Aaron. Your brother was out in the desert too long."

"Speaking to God! Who does he think he is?"

"He's mad. You should've known better, Aaron!"

God had spoken to him as well. Aaron knew he had heard the voice of God. He knew. No one would make him doubt that!

But why hadn't Moses thrown down his staff and shown Pharaoh the signs and wonders the moment they were in the

ruler's presence? He asked Moses about it. "The Lord will tell us what to say and what to do, and when we are not to do anything less or more than that."

Satisfied, Aaron waited, ignoring the taunts and watching over Moses while he prayed. Aaron was too tired to pray, but he found himself distracted by concerns about the people. How could he convince them that God had sent Moses? What could he say to make them listen?

Moses came to him. "The Lord has spoken again: 'Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh. When he feels my powerful hand upon him, he will let the people go. In fact, he will be so anxious to get rid of them that he will force them to leave his land!'"

Aaron gathered the people, but they wouldn't listen. Moses tried to speak to them, but stammered and then fell silent when they shouted at him. Aaron shouted back. "The Lord will deliver us! He will establish a covenant with us, to give us the land of Canaan, the land we came from. Isn't this what we have waited for all our lives? Have we not prayed for a deliverer to come? The Lord has heard our groaning. He has remembered us! He is the Lord and He will bring us out from under the burdens the Egyptians have put on us. He will deliver us from slavery and redeem us with great judgments with an outstretched arm!"

"Where is his outstretched arm? I don't see it!"

Someone shoved Aaron. "If you say anything more to Pharaoh, he will kill us all. But not before we kill you."

Aaron saw the rage in their eyes and tasted fear.

"Send Moses back where he came from!" another shouted.

"Your brother has caused us nothing but trouble since he came here!"

Despondent, Aaron gave up arguing with them and followed Moses out into the land of Goshen. He stayed close, but not too

close, listening intently for God's voice and hearing only Moses speaking low, beseeching God for answers. Aaron covered his head and squatted, his staff held across his knees. However long it took, he would wait for his brother.

Moses stood, face to the heavens. "Aaron."

Aaron raised his head and blinked. It was near twilight. He sat up, gripped his staff, and rose. "The Lord has spoken to you."

"We are to speak to Pharaoh again."

Aaron smiled grimly. "This time—" he instilled confidence into his voice—"this time, Pharaoh will listen to the Word of the Lord."

"He will not listen, Aaron. Not until the Lord has multiplied His signs and wonders. God will lay His hand on Egypt and bring out His people by great judgments."

Aaron was troubled, but tried not to show it. "I will say whatever words you give me, Moses, and do whatever you command. I know the Lord speaks through you."

Aaron knew, but would Pharaoh ever realize it?

* * *

When they returned to the house, Aaron told their families they were going to stand before Pharaoh again.

"The people will stone us!" Nadab and Abihu argued. "You haven't been to the brick fields lately, Father. You haven't seen how they treat us. You're only going to make things worse for us."

"Pharaoh didn't listen the last time. What makes you think he'll listen now? All he cares about is bricks for his cities. Do you think he'll let his laborers go?"

"Where is your faith?" Miriam was angry with all of them. "We have been waiting for this day since Jacob set foot in this country. We don't belong in Egypt!"

As the arguments swirled around him, Aaron saw Moses

drawn away by his wife. Zipporah was as upset as the rest of them and speaking low. She shook her head, drawing her sons close.

Miriam reminded Aaron's sons again of how the Lord had protected Moses when he was put into the Nile, how it had been a miracle that the old pharaoh's own daughter had found him and adopted him. "I was there. I saw how the Lord's hand has been on him since he was born."

Abihu was unconvinced. "And if Pharaoh doesn't listen this time, how do you suppose we'll all be treated?"

Nadab stood, impatient. "Half of my friends won't even speak to me now."

Aaron blushed at his sons' lack of faith. "The Lord has spoken to Moses."

"Did the Lord speak to *you*?"

"The Lord told Moses we are to go to Pharaoh, and to Pharaoh we must go!" He waved his hand. "All of you, out! Go tend the sheep and goats."

Zipporah went out quietly behind them, her sons close at her side.

Moses sat at the table with Aaron and folded his hands.

"Zipporah is returning to her father, and taking my sons with her."

"Why?"

"She says she has no place here."

Aaron felt the rush of blood to his face. He had noticed how Miriam treated Zipporah. He had talked with her about it already.

"Let her share your work, Miriam."

"I don't need her help."

"She needs something to do."

"She can do as she wishes and go where she likes."

"She is Moses' wife and the mother of his sons. She is our sister now."

“She is not our sister. She is a foreigner!” Miriam said in hushed tones. “She is a Midianite.”

“And what are we but slaves? Moses had to flee Egypt and Goshen. Did you expect him not to marry or have children of his own? She is the daughter of a priest.”

“And that makes her suitable? Priest of what god? Not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

“It is the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who has called Moses here.”

“A pity Moses didn’t leave his wife and sons where they belong.” She rose and turned her back.

Angry, Aaron stood. “And where do you belong, Miriam—you without a husband and sons to take care of you?”

She faced him, eyes hot and moist. “I was the one who watched over Moses while he drifted on the Nile. I was the one who spoke to Pharaoh’s daughter so our brother was given back to Mother until he was weaned. And if that is not enough, who became mother to your sons when Elisheba died? Lest you forget, Aaron, I am your *older* sister, firstborn of Amram and Jochebed. I had much to do with taking care of you as well.”

Sometimes there was no reasoning with his sister. It was better to let her think things through for herself and keep peace in the family. Given time, Miriam would accept Moses’ sons, if not his wife.

“I will speak with Miriam again, Moses. Zipporah is your wife. Her place is here with you.”

“It is not only Miriam, Brother. Zipporah is afraid of our people. She says they blow hot and change direction like the wind. She has already seen that the people won’t listen to me. Nor are they willing to listen to you. She understands that I must do as God tells me, but she is afraid for our sons and says she will be safer living in her father’s tents than in the houses of Israel.”

Were their women destined to make trouble? “Is she asking you to return with her?”

“No. She only asks that I give my blessing. And I have. She will take my sons, Gershom and Eliezer, back to Midian. She has spent her life in the desert. They will be safe with Jethro.” His eyes filled with tears. “If God is willing, they will be returned to me when Israel has been delivered from Egypt.”

Aaron knew from his brother’s words that worse times were ahead. Moses was sending Zipporah home to her people, home to safety. Aaron would not have that luxury. Miriam and his own sons would have to remain and endure whatever hardships came. Hebrews had no alternative but to hope and pray that the day of deliverance would come swiftly.