



SONS OF

The
WARRIOR

a novella

ENCOURAGEMENT



FRANCINE RIVERS



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“RUN!”

No one heard, so Kelubai put his fingers in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle. His relatives raised their heads. He pointed at the darkening sky. They looked up and stared. *“Find cover!”*

Men, women, and children dropped their hoes and scattered. Kelubai followed. Farthest out in Pharaoh’s field, he had the longest distance to run. The black swirling clouds moved with frightening speed, casting a cold shadow over the land. Was it the great lion of God that let out such a rumbling roar from that blackness? Screaming, hands over their heads, people ran faster.

A shaft of jagged light flashed and struck the middle of the barley field. Flames shot up from the ground and the stalks of ripened grain caught fire. Something hard struck Kelubai in the head. Then another and another, like small pebbles hurled at him from an open hand. And the air grew cold, so cold his breath came like puffs of smoke as he panted. His lungs burned. Could he make it to cover before one of those bolts of fire struck him down? He reached his mud-brick house, swung the door shut, and leaned against it.

Gasping for breath, he saw his wife, Azubah, crouched in the corner, their two older sons cowering beside her as she held their third son squalling at her breast. His older boys, Mesha and Mareshah, stood wide-eyed but silent. Their mother, Kelubai’s first wife, would not have been as quick to give in to hysteria. She had faced death—giving Mareshah life—with more fortitude than Azubah now showed in the face of this storm.

Tears streaked her frightened face. "What is that noise, Kelubai? What's happening?" Her voice kept rising until she was screaming even louder than the babe. "*What's happening?*"

He grasped her shoulders and gave her a hard shake. "Hush!" He let go of her and ran his hands over his sons' heads. "Be quiet." He kissed each of them. "Shhhh. Sit still." He gathered them all close, shielding them with his body. His own heart was flailing, threatening to burst its bonds of bone and flesh. Never had he felt such terror, but he needed to be calm for their sake. He fixed his mind upon his family, soothing, encouraging. "Shhhh . . ."

"Abba." His oldest son, Mesha, pressed closer, his fingers grasping Kelubai's robe. "Abba . . ."

Hard pounding came against the house, like a thousand fists hitting at once. Azubah ducked her head, seeking the shelter of his shoulder. Mesha pressed close. Hard white stones flew in through the window. Curious, Kelubai rose. When his wife and sons protested, he set Mesha beside Azubah. "Stay calm. See to Mareshah." Kelubai could not depend on Azubah to comfort them. They were not her sons, and she would always hold her own flesh and blood more dear.

"Where are you going?"

"I just want to see."

"Kelubai!"

He held up his hand, commanding her to silence. Edging across the room, he reached out to take up one of the stones. It was hard and cold. Turning it in his hand, he examined it. It became slippery. Frowning, perplexed, he put it to his mouth. He glanced back at his wife and sons. "Water!" He picked up several more and brought them to

Azubah and his sons. "Taste it." Only Mesha was willing. "It's water. Water hard as a stone!"

Shivering, Azubah pressed back farther into the corner. "What manner of magic is this?" When a burst of light exploded outside the window, she screamed; the boys cried hysterically. Kelubai snatched the blankets from the straw pallets and draped them over the children. "Stay down."

"You can't go out there. You'll be killed!"

He put his hand gently over her mouth. "Do not make matters worse, woman. Your fear is a contagion they can ill afford." He looked pointedly at the boys.

She made no sound, though her eyes were wide with fear. She drew the boys closer, drawing the blankets tighter, covering her head as well.

Animals bawled and screamed, their hooves pounding as they tried to run. Kelubai was thankful he had brought his team of oxen in early or they would be lost with the others. He rose and edged near to the window, staying back while looking out. An acrid smell drifted in the cold air amid the pounding. The fields of flax that had just begun blooming were now in flames. Months of hard labor were going up in smoke.

"It's *Him*, isn't it?" Azubah said from her corner.

"Yes." It must be the same God who had turned the Nile to blood, brought on a plague of frogs, then gnats and flies, death to the livestock, and boils to all but the Hebrews in Goshen. "Yes. It's *Him*."

"You sound pleased."

"You have heard the stories I have. A deliverer will come."

"Not for us."

“Why not for us?”

“What are you saying, Kelubai?”

“Something my grandfather said to me when I was a boy.” He came back and hunkered down before her and their sons. “A story passed down from our ancestor Jephunneh. He was a friend of Judah, the fourth son of Jacob, the patriarch of the twelve tribes.” Kelubai remembered his grandfather’s face in the firelight, grim, scoffing.

“I don’t understand. We have nothing to do with the Hebrews.”

He rose, pacing. “Not now. But back then, there was a connection. Judah’s sons were half Canaanite. Two were said to have been struck down by this God. Shelah was the last one, named for Shelahphelah, the land in which he was born: Canaan. Two more sons were born to Judah by a woman named Tamar, also a Canaanite. And then he returned to his father’s tents. This was during the time of the great famine. Everyone was starving, everywhere except here in Egypt. Then unbelievably, Judah’s brother Joseph became overseer of Egypt and subject only to Pharaoh. Imagine. A slave becoming second only to Pharaoh. A great and mighty God had a hand in that!”

He looked out the window. “When the Hebrews arrived, they were welcomed and given the best land: Goshen. Jephunneh was descended from Esau, Judah’s uncle, and he was a friend of Abdullam as well. So he gained the ear of Judah and made a pact in order to provide for our family. That’s how we became slaves, theirs at first, farming land and growing crops so that the Hebrews were free to shepherd their growing flocks. It was a loathsome alliance, but necessary for survival. And then things turned around. Other rulers came. We were still slaves,

but so were the Hebrews, and with each passing year, Pharaoh's heel bore down harder upon them than us."

"Why?"

He looked at her. "Who knows?"

Jealousy? Spite? More likely because they were fruitful and multiplied. One patriarch and twelve sons now numbered in the hundreds of thousands. There were as many Jews as there were stars in the heavens! Pharaoh probably feared if the Hebrews had wits and courage enough, they could rise up, join with Egypt's enemies, and gain their freedom. They could become masters over Egypt. Instead, they wailed and moaned as they worked, crying out to their unseen God to save them, and thereby making themselves the brunt of contempt and mockery.

Until now.

Kelubai looked up at the roiling dark sky in wonder. He could not see this God, but he was witnessing His power. The gods of Egypt were as nothing against Him. In the distance, the sun shone over Goshen. It would also seem this God could make a distinction between His people and the enemy. Pressing his lips together, Kelubai watched the fire sweep across the fields of barley. It had just come to head, harvest so close. Now, all lost.

There would be another famine after this night, and his family would suffer.

Unless . . .

A thin thread, a distant connection might be just enough to change everything.

Kelubai took a pellet from the sill. He rolled it between his fingers and popped it in his mouth. The stone was hard and cold against his tongue, but it melted warm and sweet, refreshing. His heart swelled at the sound and fury

around him. He rejoiced in it. The God of the Hebrews could turn water to blood and call forth frogs, gnats, flies, and disease. Wind, water, fire, and air obeyed Him. Here was a God he could worship. Here was a God not carved by human hands!

Cupping his hands, he held them outstretched. His palms stung as the hard pellets struck, but he held his hands steady until a small pile had gathered. Then he tossed them back into his mouth and chewed the ice.

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Kelubai gathered his relatives. "If we are to survive, we must go to Goshen and live among the Jews."

"Live among the people Pharaoh despises? You're out of your mind, Kelubai!"

"The wheat and spelt are still growing. The gods of Egypt protected them. We still have those fields left."

Kelubai shook his head. "For how long?"

"The gods are at war, Kelubai. And we had best stay out of their way."

"What say you, Father?"

Hezron had been silent since the discussion began. Troubled, he raised his head. "It has been generations since our ancestor Jephunneh followed Judah from Canaan. The Hebrews will have long since forgotten how and why we came here."

"We will remind them we were once close friends of Judah."

"Close?" Kelubai's oldest brother, Jerahmeel, snorted. "A friend of a friend?"

"Father, did you not once say your father said his father's father took a Hebrew woman to wife?"

Ram was quick to follow their older brother's lead. "And how many years ago was that? Do you think the Hebrews will care that we have one of their women in our line? Ha! What use is a woman? What was the name of her father?"

Kelubai scowled. "Have you forgotten? The Hebrews came to us for straw when Pharaoh would not provide it."

"Straw we needed for our oxen."

Kelubai looked at Jerahmeel. "I gave all I had."

"Is that why you came to me for fodder for your animals?"

"Yes, it is. And now, if you but look around, you'll see there's nothing left for the animals to eat. Except in Goshen! There is pasturage there." Kelubai looked at his father. "And we have traded grain for goats. These are alliances we can build on."

"Alliances could bring the wrath of Pharaoh down upon us!" Jerahmeel stood, red-faced with impatient anger. "What protection will we have against his soldiers? No alliances. We must stay out of this war."

"Are you blind? Look around you, my brothers."

Kelubai thrust his hand toward the barley and flax fields, flattened by hail, blackened by fire. "We're in the *middle* of the battlefield!"

"Pharaoh will prevail."

Kelubai gave a mirthless laugh. "Pharaoh and all his gods put together have not been able to protect Egypt from the God of the Hebrews. A river of blood, frogs, gnats, flies, boils! What will the God of the Hebrews send next?" He leaned forward. "We have heard the Hebrews wail for their deliverer. And their deliverer has come. Let us make Him ours as well."

"You mean Moses?"

"Moses is a man. He is but God's spokesman, telling Pharaoh what the God of the Hebrews has told him to say. It is an almighty God who destroyed our fields yesterday, and it is this God who will deliver His people."

"No." Jerahmeel glowered. "No, I say. *No!*"

Kelubai clung to self-control. Exploding in anger at his brother's stupidity would not convince their father to leave this place of desolation. He spread his hands and spoke more quietly. "What if we are left behind? What happens when Pharaoh and his officials are hungry and need grain? Will he say, 'My foolishness has brought destruction upon our land'? No, he won't. He'll send his soldiers to take whatever is left. The sacks of grain we have winnowed from our labors will be stolen from us. But we can take these stores with us to Goshen as gifts. All of the wheat and spelt."

"Gifts?"

"Yes, Ram. Gifts. We must align ourselves with the Jews. And we must do it now."

Kelubai felt his father's eyes upon him. He met that troubled stare with a look of fierce determination. "If we are to survive, Father, we must act *now!*"

His father looked at his other sons. "Perhaps Kelubai is right."

Flushed and angry, they protested, everyone talking at once. But no one had another solution to protect them from impending disaster.

"If Pharaoh hated the Hebrews before, he hates them all the more now."

"He'll be sending soldiers to Goshen again."

"Would you have the king of Egypt turn his hatred upon us as well?"

“Father, we had best stay out of this.”

Kelubai had talked all morning and been unable to convince them. He would *not* waste any more time. He stood. “Do as you will, my brothers. Stay in your huts. Hope that whatever plague comes next will leave your barley untouched. As for me and my house, we’ll be in Goshen before the sun sets, before another plague is upon us, a worse one than the last!”

His brothers all protested. “Better to wait and see what happens than be a headstrong fool.”

Kelubai glared at his older brothers. “Wait long enough and you’ll all be dead.”

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By the time Kelubai returned to the land over which he had charge, Azubah had loaded the oxen with the plowshares, the pruning hooks, and the remaining sacks of grain from last year’s harvest. Stacked on top were all the family possessions. Mesha would see to the small flock of goats that provided milk and meat.

Kelubai noticed a small wooden cabinet lashed to the side of the cart. “What’s this?” he asked his wife, although he knew all too well.

“We can’t leave our household gods behind.”

He untied the box. “Have you learned nothing these past weeks?” Ignoring her shriek, he heaved the container against the wall of his empty hut. The cabinet burst open, spilling clay idols that smashed on the ground. He caught her by the arm before she could go after them. “They’re useless, woman! Worse than useless.” He took the rod from Mesha and prodded the oxen. “Now, let’s go. We’ll be fortunate if we reach Goshen before nightfall.”

Others were heading for Goshen; even Egyptians were among those with their possessions on their backs or loaded in small carts. Squalid camps had sprung up like thistles around the outer edges of the humble Hebrew villages. Kelubai avoided them and went into the villages themselves, seeking information about the placement of the tribe of Judah. They camped away from everyone.

On the third day, he approached a gathering of old men in the middle of a village, knowing they would be the elders and leaders. Several noticed his approach and studied him nervously. "I am a friend come to join you."

"Friend? I don't know you." The elder glanced around the circle. "Do any of you know this man?" There was a rumble of voices as the others agreed that Kelubai was a stranger to all of them.

Kelubai came closer. "We are connected through my ancestor Jephunneh, friend of Judah, son of Jacob. Our people followed your family from Canaan during the great famine. We were your servants for a time."

"What is your name?"

"Kelubai."

"*Caleb*, he says." *Dog*. Some laughed, not pleasantly.

Kelubai felt the heat pour into his face. "Kelubai." He spoke slowly; his gaze went to each man in the circle in an unhurried clarification.

"*Caleb*," someone said again, snide and unseen.

And then another, "No doubt a friend of Egyptians."

Kelubai would not let insults or his temper rule his judgment. "I am your brother."

"A spy."

They seemed determine to insult him, these men who had been slaves all their lives.

Kelubai stepped inside the circle. "When the heel of Pharaoh came down upon you, our family continued to barter grain for goats. When Pharaoh denied you straw to make bricks, I gave all I had. Do you so quickly forget those who help you?"

"A little straw does not make you a brother."

These Hebrews were as hard to reason with as his own family. Kelubai smiled mirthlessly. That alone should be a sign that they were blood related. "I am a son of Abraham, just as you are."

"A claim not yet established."

He faced the elder who spoke and inclined his head. "I am descended from Abraham's grandson Esau, and Esau's eldest son, Eliphaz."

Another snorted. "We have no commerce with Esau's spawn."

"See how *red* his face is." *Edom.*

Kelubai's hackles rose. How did they come to be so proud of Israel, the trickster, who cheated his brother, Esau, out of his birthright! But he held his tongue, knowing it would not serve his purpose to argue that cause before this council of men. Besides, Israel might have been a deceiver, but Esau had been less than wise.

Someone laughed. "He has no answer to that!"

Kelubai turned his head slowly and stared into the man's eyes. The laughter stopped.

"We are sons of Israel." The elder spoke quietly this time, his words fact, not insult.

Did they think he would back down? "I am a son of Abraham, who was called by God to leave his land and go wherever God would take him."

"Is he speaking of Abraham or himself?"

“The dog thinks he is a lion.”

Kelubai clenched his teeth. “As Abraham was called out of Ur, so too have we been called out of Egypt. Or do you think Moses speaks his own words and not the words of God?”

Kelubai might not be as pure in blood as they, but his desire to be counted among God’s people went far beyond blood. It came from the very heart and soul of him. Could these men say the same, when they bowed down in worship one day and rose up in rebellion the next?

The old man assessed him. Kelubai felt a prickling of apprehension. Finally the elder held out his hand. “Sit. Tell us more.”

Kelubai accepted the invitation. The others in the circle watched him closely, mouths tight, making it clear a hearing was not a vote of trust. He must choose his words carefully so he would not offend anyone. “You have good reason to be suspicious of strangers. Every time the Lord your God sends His prophet Moses to Pharaoh and another plague strikes Egypt, Pharaoh hates you all the more.”

“We have had more trouble since Moses came out of the desert than we had before!”

Surprised, Kelubai glanced at the man who spoke. “What Moses says comes to pass. This is proof he is what he says he is—a messenger from God.”

“He brings more trouble upon us!” the Israelite insisted.

Kelubai might as well be talking to his father and brothers. “Your animals survived the pestilence. Did any of you suffer boils? The hail and fire did not touch your lands. The God of Abraham is protecting you.”

“And you want that protection for yourself. Isn’t that the real reason you have come here and tried to worm your way into our tribe?”

“It is not *your* protection I seek.” Clearly, some sitting in their council did not believe in the God who was fighting for their salvation. “You have as little power in yourself as I have.” Kelubai drew a slow breath, and focused his attention on the elder who had invited him to sit. Here, at least, was a reasonable man. “I am a slave of Egypt. All my life I have worked for taskmasters, and all my life I have dreamed of freedom. And then I heard that the Nile had been turned to blood. I went to see for myself, and saw frogs as well—by the thousands—come up from the river into Thebes. Then gnats and flies by the millions! I saw oxen drop dead in harness because my neighbors did not heed the warning and bring the animals inside. Members of my family suffered from boils just as the Egyptians did. And a few days ago from the window of my hut, I watched the wheat fields in which I’ve toiled for months beaten down by stones of water and set aflame by spears of fire from heaven!”

At least they were silent now, all eyes on him, though some most unfriendly. “I *believe* Moses. Every plague that has come upon the land of Egypt weakens Pharaoh’s power and brings us closer to freedom. The God who promised to deliver you has come, and He has shown He has the power to fulfill His Word!” He looked around the circle of elders. “I want—” he shook his head—“no. I *intend* to be counted among His people.”

Some grumbled. “Intend? Such arrogance!”

“Honesty, not arrogance.”

“Why bother to speak to the council at all?”

“I want to be shoulder to shoulder with you in whatever lies ahead, not nose to nose.”

Others said what did it matter if this Edomite and his

family camped nearby? Hundreds of other people, Egyptians included, had put up tents around the village. What did one more man and his family matter as long as they brought their own provisions with them? Besides, wouldn't having such numbers around them afford a hedge of protection if Pharaoh sent his soldiers? They talked among themselves, argued, worried, fretted.

Kelubai sat and listened, measuring these men with whom he would be aligned. He had expected the Hebrews to be different. Instead, they reminded him of Jerahmeel and his younger brothers squabbling and carping, assuming and fearing the worst would happen. One would think they wished Moses had never been sent to Pharaoh to demand the slaves be released. One would think it would be better to go on making bricks for Pharaoh than risk even the hope of freedom!

Was it not a mighty God directing events that would open the way to salvation?

The old man, Zimri, watched Kelubai, his gaze enigmatic. Kelubai looked into his eyes and held his gaze, wanting the elder to know his thoughts. *I am here, Zimri. These men can ignore me, but neither they nor you will drive me away.*

It was hours later and nothing decided when the men began to disperse. God was ever on their lips, but clearly they did not trust the signs, nor the deliverer. When Kelubai rose, he saw Mesha waiting for him in the shadows between two huts. Smiling, he headed toward him.

"Caleb!"

Hackles rising, Kelubai turned and faced three men he knew to be his enemies. He remembered their names: Tobias, Jakim, and Nepheg. It was always wise to identify

your enemies. Jakim raised his hand, pointing at him. "You don't belong among our people, let alone among the elders."

"I came to make a petition."

"Your petition has been rejected."

They spoke boldly now that the others were gone. "I will wait to hear what the entire council has to say." Not that it would make any difference. He was here to stay whether they liked it or not.

"We say, *Caleb*, stay outside the boundaries of our village if you know what's good for you. We don't want outsiders among us." They walked away.

"They called you a dog, Father!"

Yes, they had cast him among those wretched animals that lived on the outskirts of settlements, living off the scraps from the garbage heaps. He saw the shame in his son's eyes, anger flaring in his youthful confusion. More stinging was the unspoken question Kelubai saw in his son's eyes: *Why did you allow it?*

"They don't know me yet, my son."

"They insult you." Mesha's voice trembled with youthful fury.

"A man who gives in to anger might as well burn his house down over his head." He could swallow his pride when his family's survival was at stake.

Mesha hung his head, but not before Kelubai had seen the tears building. Did his son think him a coward? Time would have to teach the truth. "A wise man picks his battles carefully, my son." Kelubai put his arm around Mesha and turned him toward their camp on the outer edges of the village. "If they call me Caleb, so be it. I will make it a name of honor and courage."



The family remained on the periphery of the villages of Judah, but Kelubai stayed close whenever the council met and therefore heard whatever news came at the same time the Judeans did. And news did come by way of Levite messengers from Moses and his brother, Aaron. Pharaoh had hardened his heart again; another plague was coming. It would not touch Goshen, but would lay waste to Egypt.

“We must go back and warn your father and brothers!”

Kelubai knew what his wife really wanted was to go back, to be away from these Hebrews who would not speak to her. “I warned them already. We will wait here and make a place for them.”

“What makes you so sure they’ll come?”

“They aren’t fools, Azubah. Stubborn, yes. Frightened? As am I. No, we remain here. I left my words like seeds. When they have been plowed under and more plagues rain down upon them, what I said will take root and grow.”

The next morning, he went to the edge of Goshen and watched the cloud of locusts come. They darkened the sun. The noise was like a rumbling of chariots, like the roar of a fire sweeping across the land, like a mighty army moving into battle. The locusts marched like warriors, never breaking ranks, never jostling each other. Each moved according to the orders of the Commander, swarming over walls, entering houses through the windows. The earth quaked as they advanced and the heavens trembled. The ground undulated black. Every stalk of wheat and spelt, every tree was consumed by the advancing horde God had called into battle.

It won't be long now, Kelubai thought, watching the road for his father and brothers.

Kenaz came alone. "Jerahmeel rages against the god of the Hebrews for destroying the last of his crops."

"And Father?"

"You know Father cannot leave without his eldest son."

"And Jerahmeel will not come because it was *I* who suggested it. He is the fool!"

"You did not suggest, Kelubai. You commanded. Your manner did not sit well with our brothers." Kenaz smiled. "Since I am the youngest, it matters not what I think or whom I follow."

"You're wrong about that, my brother. You've shown courage by coming of your own free will, rather than bending to the will of those older and fiercer, but far less wise, than you." He looked toward the west. "If Pharaoh does not let the Hebrews go, there will be another plague, and another. Jerahmeel will change his mind."

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Trading and bartering for goatskins, Kelubai enlarged his tent enough to shelter his brothers and their families when they came.

Another plague did come, one of darkness upon the land of Egypt. But when Moses and Aaron returned to Goshen, they brought ill tidings of Pharaoh's fury. He would *not* allow the people to go with their flocks and herds, and he had threatened Moses that if Pharaoh ever saw him again, he'd kill him.

When Kelubai stood on the outer edge of the Jewish congregation and heard the instructions given by Moses' messenger, he knew the end was coming. He returned to

his camp and told Azubah he must go back and bring their father to Goshen. "You must stay here with her, Kenaz, and keep this camp secure. Now that the darkness has lifted from Egypt, others will come seeking refuge among the Hebrews. Hold our ground against them!"

Hastening to his father's house, he found his older brothers had gathered their families. "Another plague is coming!" Kelubai was thankful the locusts and darkness had made them willing to listen. "I heard with my own ears that all the firstborn sons will die in every family in Egypt, from the oldest son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the oldest son of his lowliest slave. Even the firstborn of the animals will die."

Everyone looked at Jerahmeel, and he paled. Jerahmeel looked at Kelubai with new respect. "You came back to save my life?"

"We are brothers, are we not? But it is not only your life I want spared, Jerahmeel, but those of your firstborn son and the firstborn of all my brothers. Remember! *Every* firstborn son."

Hezron stood. "We will return to Goshen with Kelubai. Our animals are all dead. What little grain we had hidden away for sustenance was eaten by locusts. There is nothing to hold us here."

They journeyed to Goshen willingly, setting up tents close by Kelubai's camp. He called them together as soon as they were settled. "Listen to what the Lord instructed Moses. Each family is to sacrifice a year-old lamb or goat without defect." The blood would be smeared over the entrance to their tent, and they must remain inside until death passed over them. The lamb or goat was to be roasted with bitter herbs and eaten with bread made with-

out yeast. "We are to wear sandals, traveling clothes, and have walking sticks in our hands as we eat this meal."

When the night of the forewarned plague came, Kelubai, his wife and children, Kenaz, his father Hezron, and fourteen others stood around the fire pit as a goat roasted over the hot coals. Trembling in fear, they obeyed Moses' instructions exactly, hoping everyone inside the thin canopy would survive the night.

Kelubai heard a sound moving overhead, a whispering wind that made his blood run cold. He felt a dark presence press down upon them, press in from the thin leather flap that served as their door. All within the circle held their breath and pressed closer to one another. Kelubai shoved Mesha and Jerahmeel into the center of the family circle. "You die; we all die." Jerahmeel looked around, confused, shaken. When screams rent the cold night air, Azubah grasped Kelubai's robe and hid her face in its folds while their sons hugged close around him. A man screamed, and everyone in Kelubai's shelter jumped.

"We're all going to die!" Some began to weep.

"We won't die." Kelubai spoke with a confidence he was far from feeling. "Not if we put our faith in the unseen God."

Jerahmeel held his oldest son by the shoulders, keeping him close. "We've only goatskin to cover us, Kelubai, while the Hebrews have mud-brick huts and doors."

"Something is out there. . . ."

Fear grew in the room, fanned by more screams from outside. The children whimpered; the circle tightened.

"We must follow the instructions." Kelubai cut meat from the goat. He strove to keep his voice calm. "See to the bread, Azubah." She rose to obey.

"How can you expect us to eat at a time like this?"

"Because the God of Abraham demands it." Kelubai held out a slice of goat meat to his father. Hezron took it. "Give thanks to the God of Abraham for His protection from this plague of death."

Kelubai swallowed his fear and forced himself to eat the Passover meal. *Tomorrow will bring our freedom!*

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Egyptians came running toward Goshen, crying out,

"Leave! Go quickly!"

"Pharaoh has relented!"

"Go as quickly as you can or all of us will die!"

"Hurry!"

"Here! Take this grain as a gift. Plead with your god for my life."

"Take my silver."

"Here is my gold!"

"Pray for us!"

"Away with you! Hurry!"

Others clutched at the Hebrews' robes, pleading, "Please, let us walk with you, for we've heard God is with you!"

Kelubai accepted the proffered gifts as his sons stripped down the goatskin coverings and yanked up the tent poles. He laughed. "Didn't I tell you all that our freedom was at hand?" Who would have imagined that God would make the Egyptians pour offerings upon them as they begged them to leave? Kelubai raised his hands in the air and shouted, "What a mighty God You are!" Laughing joyously, Kelubai heaved the last gift onto his cart. "Our taskmasters shower us with gifts and plead with us to leave!"

Azubah scrambled about, gathering their possessions and tying bundles while calling out to the children to keep the goats close. "Frogs, locusts, pestilence, and death! How do we worship such a God? No one gives without expecting to receive, Kelubai. What will this God ask of us?"

"So far He has asked nothing but that we believe what He says."

"And once we are in the wilderness, what will He ask of us then?"

"If He asked for everything, I would give it to Him."

"Our sons, Kelubai? Would you sacrifice our sons?"

Her fear gave him pause. The great overseers of Canaan were gods who thirsted for human blood. Was the God of Abraham such as these? If so, why had He asked for the blood of a lamb or goat rather than the blood of Israel's sons?

Kelubai prodded the ox, and caught up to his father and brothers who had set off before him. Having no animals or possessions to carry, they could travel faster than he.

Hezron shared his excitement, but Jerahmeel feared the future as much as Azubah. "And how many more will be out there in the desert waiting for us?"

"They will have heard what God has done for us."

"The nations may fear this God, but what reason have they to fear a band of slaves?"

Kelubai waved. "We are more than a band, brother. Look around you! We are thousands upon thousands."

"Scattered in a dozen tribes, with stragglers who cling like ticks. We are not a nation. We have no army."

"What need have we for an army when the God of heaven and earth fights for us? When people hear what has happened to Egypt, they will flee before us."

"Where do you come by this faith in a God whose people call you *dog*?"

Kelubai grinned coldly. "I've been called worse."

* * *

The ragged mass traveled by day and night, moving south, away from the trade route. Deeper into the wilderness they moved before turning east, pressing between the high walls of a great wadi that spilled into the Red Sea. And there the masses huddled in family groups, crying out to Moses to save them when news came that Pharaoh and his army were not far behind them.

"Now see what you've done to us, Kelubai!" Jerahmeel ranted. "Had we stayed in Egypt our lives and the lives of our children would be safe."

Thousands screamed and wailed in terror when they realized they were blocked from all possible escape.

Kelubai lowered his head against the wind and pushed. "Stay in close with the Judeans." Wind whipped at his robe, stinging his face with sand and drops of salt water. "Stay together!" He hauled his wife and sons closer as a cloud caught flame. Raging overhead, it swirled into a pillar of fire that closed the wadi and stopped Pharaoh's chariots from racing out onto the spillway.

"They're moving!" Azubah cried out.

And so the multitude pressed forward as the sea opened before them clear to the other side, revealing the path of salvation. Some people ran down the slope. Others, burdened with possessions, moved slower. Kelubai shouted for Azubah to run ahead and take their sons with her while he followed with the oxen and cart. His father and brothers stayed with him, grabbing sacks to lighten the

load and make the way swifter. Thousands came behind, pressing tight, moving down the road through the sea. When he reached high ground, Kelubai found his family waiting among the Judeans.

The pillar of fire had lifted, and Pharaoh's army raced out onto the sand and down into the pathway God had opened. Kelubai spotted Zimri among the stragglers. The old man, pale with exhaustion and sagging beneath the weight of a sack lumpy with possessions, struggled up the slope, his son, Carmi, helping him. Kelubai ran to them, grasped the pack, and supported the old man as they made their way up the hill.

"The chariots are coming," Kenaz shouted, reaching them and taking the pack. "They're coming! Hurry!"

A rushing sound and screams came from behind, and Kelubai felt a cold wet blast at his back. He fell forward onto his face and then felt hands upon him, dragging him up, shouting. Kelubai dug his heels into the wet ground and pushed, dragging Carmi up the slope. Lungs heaving, Kenaz flung the sack onto dry ground. Zimri was helped up, frightened but uninjured.

"They're gone." Kenaz stared out over the sea, searching. "All of them, gone."

The multitude was silent, staring out at the rippling sea as bodies of the Egyptian soldiers washed up along the shore.

Kelubai stood beside Zimri and Carmi. "Praise be to the God who saved us."

The old man was still pale, but he had regained his breath. He gripped Kelubai's arms for support. "My thanks, Caleb." For the first time, the term was spoken without derision. Caleb. *A new name for a new alliance. So be it.*

The old man's hands tightened. "Make your camp next to mine." His son, Carmi, grinned and slapped Caleb on the back.

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Before three days had passed, jubilation became complaining when the desert water was found to be bitter and undrinkable. Moses prayed and cast tree bark into the pond, enabling people to quench their thirst before traveling on to the date palms of Elim. Some would have been content to stay, but God had told Moses to lead His people into the wilderness. Why? was the common cry. Why didn't God lead them to green pastures and still waters instead of heading them out into an arid wasteland of sand and rock? Thirst and hunger soon set in, and the people complained for meat, as though God were a heavenly servant meant to give them whatever they craved. Moses prayed and God sent quail into the camp, so many that no one could walk without stepping on them. But in the morning, a greater miracle came when God gave them the bread of heaven to sustain them. Instructions were given to collect only enough for one day and no more.

Caleb knelt, picked up a few white flakes, and let them melt on his tongue. They were sweeter than anything he had ever tasted and held the slightest moisture of dew. When he had filled his clay jar, he rose and looked up at the cloud overshadowing the huge camp. It did not move with the air currents as other clouds did, nor disappear over the course of a hot day. It remained with the people, thick in portions, with fingers of gray-white, as though the mighty hand of God Himself shaded the Israelites and fellow travelers from the killing heat of the desert sun.

Freedom, water, food, shelter. Was there anything the Lord had not given them?

Overwhelmed with emotions he could neither understand nor define, Caleb raised his omer high, tears streaming down his face. "How do I worship You, Lord? How do I give thanks for my life? How am I to live from now on? Nothing is the way I imagined it would be, oh, Lord!"

Life had become confusing. Freedom was not the simple matter he had dreamed. As a slave, he knew what the day would hold and how to get through it. Now, he didn't know what the next morning would bring. Every day was different. He didn't know where he would camp or for how long or why a particular place was chosen. He pitched his tent near Zimri's each evening, but there were always others around them, strangers vying for a better position. How was he any different from all these others, ambitious for themselves and their families, craving something better than what they had always known, demanding more now that freedom had come and brought with it the reality of daily decisions that had always been made for them. Caleb had liked to think of himself as more shrewd, more able to find his own way, but realized now that he was the same as all the others. He had been born and reared in a mud hut and lived all his life on one small plot of land he worked for Pharaoh's benefit. Now, he was in constant turmoil, out of his element. Instead of dwelling in one place, he traveled great distances and lived in a tent like a desert nomad. This was not the life he had imagined.

Tense, irritable, fighting against the confusion of his new life, fighting to keep his relatives together and in some semblance of order, he felt more shame than joy. At

times, they behaved like a pack of wolves, growling at one another, fighting over scraps.

“Where are we going, brother? I thought we were supposed to be heading for Canaan, and we’re in the middle of the wilderness!”

Every day had its squabbles and challenges. How did Moses hear the voice of God through the cacophony of voices raised in constant question and complaint?

Caleb struggled within himself, too.

In his heart, he cried out to God. *I don’t want to question Your ways, Lord. I want to go with thanksgiving and without hesitation where You tell us to go. I want to set off into the unknown the way Moses does—head up, staff in hand. I don’t want to look back with longing on the life I’ve known. Oh, God, help me to remember how unbearable it was and how I longed to be free. Is it possible for You to change a man? If so, change me!*

“Caleb!”

At the sound of Jerahmeel’s annoyed voice, Caleb lowered the omer and held it against his chest, eyes closed, teeth clenched.

“We’re on the move *again!* Though who but Moses can guess where we’re going this time. As if there’s a better place than this to rest . . .” Jerahmeel’s complaining faded as he stalked away.

The cloud was moving now. In its changing shape, Caleb imagined its folds like an eagle with outspread wings, floating, head down watching them, not as prey but as sheltered offspring.

“*Caleb!* Are you going to just stand there? They’re *moving!*”

And will You please change a few others as well?

+ * *

The people rose up in anger when they reached Rephidim, for there was no water. Caleb and his wife had given their water to their sons, and were as thirsty as everyone else. His relatives gave him no rest.

“It was your idea to follow this God. . . .”

“Where’s the better life you promised?”

“I’m thirsty, Abba.”

“How long before we get there?”

“Ask your abba where *there* is.”

Caleb left them and sat among the rocks at the base of the high mountain. If he was going to die, he wanted to do it in peace and not surrounded by grumbling Israelites or relatives blaming him for every discomfort. Still, he heard the multitude crying out in the distance. Pressing his hands over his ears, he tried to shut out the angry shouting. His own wrath mounted, his heart pounding fast, his blood rushing hot and heavy.

How soon they all forget what You can do! You made the Nile run with blood. You brought forth plagues; You killed Egypt’s livestock with pestilence. You covered the people with boils, destroyed the land with hail and fire, and killed the firstborn from Pharaoh on down, all the while sparing the animals and lives of those who belong to You. And still that madman Pharaoh changed his mind and came after us!

But You opened the sea, made a dry pathway across, then closed it again over Pharaoh’s army, washing them away like dust before a windstorm. The sea. The Nile. The river of life . . . no. No! Who but a fool would long for that place of slavery and death?

Water, Lord. Please. Water is a small thing, but we will

die without it. Oh, hear us, God who commands the heavens and the earth. Help us!

Tongue parched, throat closing, his skin so dry he felt his body shrinking, he closed his eyes. If not for the cloud overhead, Caleb knew he would have perished already, baked in the heat, dried out like a Nile fish on a rack.

Why am I still alive? What is the purpose in all this suffering? I don't understand You. Did You set us free only to allow us to die of thirst? It makes no sense. Water, Lord. Oh, God of might and mercy, please, give us water. I don't believe You brought us out here to die. I don't believe it. I won't believe it!

The cries of the mob suddenly changed to screams of excitement and exultation. Trembling from weakness, Caleb stood and took a few steps so he could see what was happening. Water gushed from a rock in the side of the mountain, forming a stream that raced down and pooled. Thousands sank to their knees and fell forward onto their hands to thrust their faces into the water and drink like animals. Another miracle! Another, just when they needed it most.

Stumbling, Caleb made his way down the rocky slope. Pressing his way through the celebrants, his gaze never leaving the rock that flowed water, he squatted, cupped his hands, and drank. The Rock itself was the well of life-giving water. The stream flowed straight from the stone, fresh and clear and cool. As Caleb drank deeply, he felt his body renewed, strengthened, revitalized. Closing his eyes, he held the precious water and washed his face, longing to immerse himself in it.

As the people were quenching their thirst, Caleb heard shouting.

“The Amalekites are attacking! They are killing the stragglers!”

Moses called for Joshua. People cried out again, frightened this time.

“They’ll soon be upon us!”

“We have no army to fight against the Amalekites!”

Caleb rose, dripping, and ran to his camp. He rummaged through the possessions he had brought from Egypt until he found his scythe. “Come on.” He raised his farm implement and called to his brothers. “Fight for our brothers!”

“We’re not soldiers.” Jerahmeel stood back. “We’re farmers.”

Caleb faced him, angry. “Should not a farmer fight for his neighbors?”

“Who is my neighbor?”

There was no time to stand and argue. People were dying! Turning his back on his father and brothers, Caleb ran after Joshua. Others had gathered with Moses’ young servant. Moses had already given instructions and now climbed the mountain, his brother, Aaron, on one side and his friend Hur on the other.

Caleb peered through the crowd to the man in its center. Joshua looked so young and nervous. The men around him were tense, shifting, uncertain. Caleb felt uneasy. What did he know about fighting against a trained enemy?

He remembered what God had done for them already. The Lord, He would protect them. The Lord, He would give them victory. *I will believe that. I will set my mind upon Him. I will proclaim my faith before these men loud enough that they will all hear and know I am for the Lord!*

“Let me through!” Lowering his head, Caleb shoved his way through the crowd until he stood before Joshua. “We are God’s to command, Joshua. And the Lord has designated you to lead.” Caleb looked around and raised his voice. “God will fight for us! He did not bring us out into this desert to be picked off by cowardly marauders who kill the weak and helpless, nor by any who bow down to false gods!” Baring his teeth in a grin, Caleb stared Joshua in the eye. “Command us as God commands you. The battle is the Lord’s!”

Joshua’s eyes shone with sudden fierceness. He let out a shout and the others joined with him.

And so they went out into battle armed with farm implements and threshing tools, while three old men stood on the mountain praying.

And God gave them victory.

After the triumph came the lingering stillness. Caleb waited along with thousands of others camped at the base of the mountain while Moses went up to meet with the Lord. Days passed, and long nights of quiet and question.

Waiting proved a greater test than taking up arms against the enemy.