

FIRST SATURDAY (late afternoon)

## ***CHAPTER 6: THE LEOPARD SHRINE***

"... as a leopard by the way I will lurk." (HOSEA 13:7)

Sheltered in the khan, I contemplated the blood-red sun settling toward the horizon. Puffs of dust swirled in the sweltering wind. Shadows formed and deepened. The monotonous browns of midday transformed to radiant golds and vibrant reds.

The Negev uncovers its secrets in the late-afternoon light. As the shadows lengthen, they reveal the lines worked by men. What at noon appears as an elongated mound of rubble, in the evening traces a ruined wall. What in direct sun suggests a jagged stone, at dusk forms the serrated edge of a worked flint. What in full daylight seem like fragments of weathered debris, at nightfall become shards of delicately incised pottery.

Each year as I returned to the Negev, I became more adept at discerning these nuances of worked stone. I felt a strengthening bond with the desert and its history, which more and more became my own.

Shai's voice broke my thoughts. "In ancient times, the Ovdah Valley was a paradise—at least for this part of the world. It is flat. When the winter rains come and their floods reach it, the water slows and sinks into the ground. The floods carry more dirt to add to the soil. That helps it to keep its moisture. Those who lived here could plant. Caravan routes crossed. Travelers could trade for water and food. You have never seen it. Come and I will show you."

I rose and followed him. We brushed past the blanket at the entrance, ascended the three stone steps, walked the few feet to the Land Cruiser, and climbed in. With Shai behind the wheel, we descended to the camel yard and into Wadi Shacharut, retracing the route by which Tomer had brought me the day before. Halfway through the *wadi*, Shai pulled from the road.

"Look at the top of the hill." He motioned toward the south wall of the *wadi*, now falling into deep shadows. There at the crest, silhouetted in stark outline by the falling sun, rose a series of what at first appeared to be truncated square columns. They had been built from the slabs that littered the desert surface. Fourteen in all, they stood like sentinels, as if protecting the millennia

of caravans that had once followed this route.

"Possibly they are *metzivot*." Shai referred to the sacred pillars of idol worshipers.

From the time of the Exodus onward, the Torah—the Five Books of Moses, the foundation of Jewish Law—admonished Ancient Israel against worshipping such “pillars of stones” and commanded the people to “tear ... down [the idols of their adversaries] and smash their pillars to bits” (Exodus 23:24). Yet, pillars held a grip on the people. For Exodus also records that Moses “set up an altar at the foot of [Mount Sinai and placed next to it] 12 pillars for the 12 tribes of Israel (Exodus 24:4).

"However, they are not built like *metzivot*," Shai continued. "*Metzivot* are single pieces of stone. These are made of many stones. More likely, they were road markers erected by the Romans after they conquered the Nabateans. All who passed would see them and recognize the power of Rome."

Images of Nabatea's fabled capital of Petra rushed through my mind. Exquisitely hewn from red sandstone cliffs, its long-silent chambers lie east of the Arava in present-day Jordan, no more than 35 miles from where we now stood.

The Nabateans dominated the southern Negev for four centuries, from the time of Alexander the Great in 350 BCE, to beyond the reign of Herod the Great at the turn of the Common Era. They had evolved into an independent state by the second century BCE, and reached their height of power in about 80 BCE. By then, their rule radiated from the eastern side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River north to Damascus, south beyond the Gulf of Aqaba into Arabia, and west into the Sinai, halfway to the Nile.

So situated, the Nabateans controlled the major caravan routes of the region. The taxes they levied doubled the cost of goods—incense from Dhofar on the southernmost coast of Arabia, pearls from the Persian Gulf, silk from China, and spices and cotton from India. They collected bitumen—a natural tar—from the surface of the Dead Sea, trading it to Egypt, where it was used for caulking boats and preserving the bodies of the dead.

In 65 BCE, Rome established ties with Nabatea, using it as a buffer against the tribes of Arabia. Following the Roman conquest of Israel and destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, relations between Rome and Nabatea deteriorated. Coveting the caravan taxes, the Emperor Trajan annexed northern Nabatea into the Roman Empire in 105–106 CE. Soon thereafter, Nabatea faded from history.

Staring at the columns, I tried to imagine their impact on ancient traders as they guided their laden caravans. Those first seeing them would have been told of their source by their companions or the inhabitants of the Ovdah Valley. And in the telling, they would have surely appreciated the power of Rome. As the size of the columns and their commanding position attested, they served a greater purpose than that of road marker.

Turning our backs on the columns, we returned to the Land Cruiser. Shai placed it in gear and within a few minutes we reached the fan of alluvial sediments that marked the mouth of Wadi Shacharut.

The Valley of Ovdah—or, in Hebrew, *Biq'at Ovdah*—spread before us. True to Shai's words, it lies almost perfectly flat, running from the Negev Plateau in the southwest to the edge of the Arava in the northeast. At its widest, it stretches 4 miles across, ending in *Zuqe Ovdah*—the scarp of Ovdah—which rises as much as 500 feet above the valley floor.

We were still within the alluvial fan when Shai again pulled from the road. More than 100 yards away and slightly above the flood line stood the outline of a wall, the remnants of a rectangular stone building. Even from the distance, the lengthening shadows revealed several courses of carefully laid stones. As we moved closer, I saw that the walls defined three rooms of an L-shaped structure. The passages of two doorways still stood in place. Within the largest room, two ashlar—large cut stones—rested one atop the other.

"Those," Shai pointed, "supported a second floor. You can see that the walls were strong enough to hold it. Look at how carefully they laid the stones. That shows it was built by the Romans. Perhaps it was a guard post, or more likely a place where they collected taxes from the caravans."

I smiled to myself, thinking back to the columns we had just left. During the times of the caravans, they would have stood two hours distant from this building, serving notice of the impending taxes due.

Shai reached down and picked up what at first seemed to be eroded bits of stone. As he placed them in his palm, I saw that they were exquisitely thin shards.

"These are Nabatean," he observed. "Their pottery was beautiful. The Romans knew well the riches they were getting."

We walked along the edge of the valley. To our right, slight hills marked the beginning of Wadi Shacharut. To our left, 2 miles away, the shadows of a ridge defined the far side of the

valley. In the setting sun, the valley resembled a Martian landscape—strewn with monotonous, nondescript reddish rubble. Only in a slight depression where the *wadi* emptied into the valley did a bit of dried brush give evidence to the rare presence of water. I wondered at Shai's description—that this had been an ancient paradise.

As the sun touched the far ridge, we came to an incongruous open area. A few inches of loosened surface debris had been cleared, exposing an almost level bed of unbroken limestone. "This was a threshing floor," Shai explained. "It's above the water line so stones and silt wouldn't fill it when the floods came. There are many in the Ovdah Valley. It is the widest valley in the southern Negev and was one of the first settled. There are storage pits nearby, but most are now filled. Likely, there were cisterns in the upper parts of the *wadis*. They would be placed so they would not fill with silt."

I recalled the words of the 23rd Psalm, "... The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters." In Sunday school, we learned that this was a metaphor of faith. But, as I had discovered over the past two summers, the words were as much a description of the desert—and an allusion to the lush growth that would briefly bloom amid the pools of the *wadis*, once the life-giving rains had filled them.

We walked farther, coming to a second area cleared to bedrock. Within it, carefully laid stones outlined a series of animal effigies. Tails curved gracefully upward. Heads were affixed to near neckless muscular bodies. A large stone stared out from within each head. Shai watched for my reaction.

"Large cats," I mused.

"Yes," Shai's eyes twinkled. "These are leopards. This is from 6,000 years ago—or at least originally. Tanks used to practice here and they damaged the stones. After the tanks left, archaeologists replaced them.

"There must have been many leopards—and dangerous—for people to make such a cult site. Leopards are still in the Negev, but now closer to Be'er Sheva. And today, they avoid people."

I shuddered to imagine the terror that leopards held for the inhabitants of 6,000 years ago. They were likely the size of *Bedu* today, where older men, raised in the privations of the desert, may stand less than 5 feet and weigh under a hundred pounds. Far slower than an ibex or gazelle, such men would be easy quarry for a large cat, lurking on a rock outcropping and leaping from

above.

I tried to envision the frightening uncertainty of living in a world in which death could come so unexpectedly. I could not. Little did I imagine that before our journey ended, that fear would grip me more than once.