

THIRD FRIDAY

CHAPTER 27: *A FEAST IN THE DESERT*

“Then he [Isaac] made for them a feast and they ate and drank ... and they departed from him in peace.” (GENESIS 26:30–31)

I awakened as the Eastern sky brightened. Shai was crouching over the fire. We had camped in a *wadi*, no deeper than a standing man. Without high walls to trap it, the heat of the previous day had radiated into the night sky. I sucked the hint of cool into my lungs, drawing with it the aroma of our morning tea.

As I savored the aroma, a black beetle lumbered in the sand at my elbow. It was slightly longer than a man's thumbnail and half as wide. Its legs were unusually long and its elytra—the protective sheaths over its wings—were covered with several rows of minute horns. I puzzled at why a relatively small beetle needed the extra reinforcement.

"Shai, *mah zeh?*"—"What's this?"

Shai rose from the teakettle, curious at what I had discovered without even rolling from atop my sleeping bag. "Ah," he smiled as he picked up the strange intruder. The beetle offered a perfunctory struggle, as if in common with his human captor, it had only just arisen.

"This is a very interesting creature," Shai remarked. "He arises early to warm in the morning sun. The black of his body absorbs the heat so he can move and feed. He must start early before the lizards warm up or they will eat him.

"Look at how long his legs are. When he travels in the day, they keep him off the hot sand. His shell is very strong. He stores water between it and his body. When he uses the water, the space remains. That insulates him from the heat."

His lesson completed, Shai gently set the beetle down. We both watched as it scurried safely off.

I marveled at how the beetle had adapted to the desert and—not withstanding hundreds of millions of years of species separation—the similarity of its adaptations to those of the camel. As has the camel, the beetle evolved long legs to keep its body above the heat of the desert floor.

As does the camel, it stores water within its body. As a heavy skull protects the camel's brain, so air spaces insulate the beetle's body.

I contemplated the similarities of humans. We have learned to make water bags, to seek shelter in the heat of the day, and to cover ourselves with clothing. In these adaptations we differ little from other animals.

Yet, the Almighty has placed us as masters over all creatures and given us the unique mission to complete His work of creation. In that lies the distinction between mankind and other forms. Then, I smiled to myself. The *Bedu* say that men know 99 attributes of God. But, the camel is so wise that it knows 100.

By now, the sun had broken over the mountains of Edom. Vered crawled from her sleeping bag and joined us. Shai poured tea. We drank in the shadow of the *wadi* wall and then broke camp.

We trekked over the Arava for less than an hour, reaching a small rise next to an outcrop of sandstone. A quarter of a mile away, already shimmering in the early heat, clustered the dwellings of Kibbutz Samar.

We entered from the rear. Our rumped caravan made an instant hit. Although the kibbutzniks herded goats, camels were a novelty.

We led the animals to drink, filled our water bags, and washed. The wet, evaporating from our bodies, provided a few minutes respite from the sun. Shai and Vered returned to the outcrop to raise the tent, lay the fire, and begin preparing our *shabbot* feast. I sprawled beneath an acacia at the kibbutz entrance to await Jane, her family, and friends.

In early afternoon, a large rental van pulled into the kibbutz and crept to a stop. I lurched up to greet it, a ragged heap seemingly coming to life. The van remained motionless as I approached.

Hesitantly, the passenger side window cracked open. "Herschel?"

Never before had I heard such a tentative tone in Jane's voice. Masked behind goggles and *kafiah* and in worn, almost tattered, clothes coated with dust, I looked a specter compared even to the open shirts and shorts of the kibbutzniks.

I pulled aside my *kafiah* to expose my face.

The doors of the van sprung open—Jane, husband, friends, and assorted youth—tumbled out, glad to stretch after hours of sitting.

"Not yet," I warned, "unless you want to walk to the camp." The afternoon heat encouraged little enthusiasm for such a venture. The crowd tumbled back into the van, me joining. I guided them through the kibbutz and over the desert to the outcrop.

With various degrees of eagerness, the husbands and children took turns riding the camels. The women declined, preferring to join Vered beneath the tent to prepare our *shabbot* fare—a pungent vegetable stew to be poured over a bed of rice. They fell readily to work with camp knives and chopping board, chatting easily, allaying my concern that our hospitality would prove too Spartan compared to their familiar comforts.

The obligatory camel rides ended, husbands and youths returned to the tent, moving slowly, accommodating to the heat. The stew bubbled. The rice boiled. We sat back from the fire, taking in the desert expanse, and shared stories of our respective trips. The stew thickened. The rice simmered. We washed—with even our guests drawing little water—recited the blessings over wine and bread, and consumed our feast.

With full stomachs, the children wandered off to explore the crannies and colored sands of the outcrop. The adults stayed within the shelter of the tent, continuing to talk and drink tea—savoring an interlude free of schedules, obligations, or commitments.

The breeze ebbed. The shadows lengthened. The shades of evening emerged. Our words faltered. Quiet enveloped the campsite. The passing of time slowed. Each became lost in separate thoughts. The tranquility of solitude settled over us, its silence speaking to our souls.

Twilight filled the Arava. The Mountains of Edom glowed bright like embers. The children returned from the outcrop. Our guests aroused themselves, rising to take their leave. As Jane stepped into the van, she turned to me. "Now I understand what draws you to the desert."