

SECOND TUESDAY (daylight)

CHAPTER 22: *THE SMUGGLER'S PARADISE*

"... [Abraham] was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him.... [H]e ran ... to greet them and ... said, 'My lords ... do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree.'" (GENESIS 18: 1–4)

I awoke in the predawn darkness, my face and arms coated with grit deposited by the almost constant north wind that sweeps through the Arava. As always, I had laid my sleeping bag with the opening pointing away from the North Star. With my bag so aligned, the wind-borne sand blew over it rather than into it, allowing me to sleep with a modicum of comfort. I used my arm to wipe the mixture of dust and dried sweat from my face and pulled the bag partially over my head. The wind blowing through my hair caressed me back to sleep. I awoke again with the dawn. The wind had died and with it the hint of coolness that it had brought.

This morning we would meet the Land Cruiser. It would resupply our water and food, as well as bring fodder for the goats. Even though Pesiah was a *Bedu* goat and Chalah half so, here, a day's journey from Eilat, the plant life was too sparse to sustain even them.

We had 6 liters of water left, distributed among a small water bag, one of my canteens, and Shai's water bottle. It was enough to last until noon, and beyond if we took shelter from the sun. With such a surplus, Shai used half a cup for the luxury of washing his feet, massaging them as he did so.

"You should try it," he urged, offering me the bottle. "It is good for you. It makes your whole body feel better, not just your feet."

We had still to break camp, and our rendezvous point was two hours away. We had yet to brew our morning tea. Shai would drink 1 liter until the rendezvous and I would drink two. Accounting for our tea, that would be more than half our supply. If the Land Cruiser were delayed, we would have less than 3 liters between us until it arrived. Although Shai and I equally shared the harshness of our journey, I felt reluctant to use any water for washing. I declined

Shai's offer.

"Don't worry," Shai smiled, studying my brow. "The Land Cruiser will come. Try washing. You will feel better. *Ensha'Allah*." Again, he extended the bottle.

"When the three angels came to Abraham," I observed, "it wasn't the early morning. There is no precedence that I should wash my feet at this hour."

Shai laughed.

I had cited the same passage to which he had referred three days before when he told the story of the tamarisk tree and Abraham accompanying the angels on their journey to Sodom. The narrative relates that Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent "as the day grew hot." When the three appeared, he rushed to greet them and offered them water to bathe their feet.

"So perhaps this evening, after the Land Cruiser has supplied us, you will wash your feet? It won't be the heat of the day, but it won't be morning either."

"Perhaps then," I grinned.

We ate and took tea, saddled and packed the camels, and began our trek toward the rising sun and the Arava. Although we had descended into the bowl of the Arava the evening before, the immediate area in which we had camped resembled rolling foothills. This geological form is not uncommon along the western side of the Arava. The peaks of the Eilat Hills are lower than those of Edom and rain is less frequent. The force of the floodwaters is limited and the *wadis* tend to meander as they enter the great valley, forming the foothill-like terrain. To the east, the mountains of Edom rise higher, their sides are steeper, and the rain comes more often. The floodwaters rush down the slopes, cutting straight channels.

The expanse of the Arava remained hidden by the ridgeline that had framed the peaks of Edom as they glowed crimson in the setting sun of the evening before. Now the same peaks appeared as dark silhouettes against the morning light. How different, I thought, from their radiance of little more than 12 hours before.

As we moved eastward, the *wadi* widened into a broad flat. Here the floodwaters slowed and seeped into the soil, depositing their contents—a mélange of coarse sediment and fragmented sandstone slabs washed from above. They provided the moisture for the acacias that had taken root and a crop for the people who had once planted. We passed the remnants left by those groups—circles of large rocks, which marked the living areas and corrals and littered fragments of worked flints.

In the mid-distance, a strangely angular group of rocks lay on the ground. As we approached, I recognized their form. Carefully chosen slabs had been laid horizontally into two parallel rows to form a narrow channel. Roofing slabs laid across the two rows covered the channel, allowing entrance only at the near end. A single vertical slab, held in place by slots in the horizontal rows, stood near the far end. Several of the roofing slabs had been yanked away and left in disarray. In that way, those who had last used the trap had pulled the body of the just-killed leopard from it to be skinned and the pelt tanned.

We reached a dirt track meandering along the course of the *wadi* and followed it for less than a mile to a lone acacia. We tied the camels and settled into the shade beneath the acacia to await the Land Cruiser. It was still mid-morning. Yet, the air felt as hot as at high noon the day before.

As we sat, Shai finished his water bottle. I had saved a full canteen. The dryness in my throat signaled that I was dehydrating. Still, I held the contents of the canteen in reserve.

The faint din of an engine drifted off the *wadi* walls, breaking the quiet. As the sound approached, it became disquietingly obtrusive. Perhaps the driver of the vehicle had shifted to lower gear to navigate the track. Perhaps, after days of silence broken only by the wind, foreign sounds, except for the exertions of my own body, were harsh to my ears.

The vehicle pulled into view, yellow headlights shining and a trail of dust suspended in the air behind. Rendezvous vehicles always travel with their headlights on. Within the vast rubble stretches, vehicles, men, and camels easily become lost in the glare and haze of the chaotic landscape. The camels turned their necks to watch the vehicle arrive, staring inquisitively, or perhaps associating the vehicle with the water it was carrying.

Shair, the managing director of the guide service, opened the driver's door with a hearty "*shalom*," followed by, "*Ha chol besadar?*"—"Hello. Is everything all right?" "*Ha chol besadar*," Shai replied. "Everything's all right."

As Shair opened the rear of the Land Cruiser, we exchanged pleasantries over the

challenges of our journey, our physical condition, that of the camels, and the rising temperature. Four 20-liter water bags lay on the floor. Next to them nestled three cardboard cartons filled with melons, fresh vegetables, and packages of rice, flour, and sugar. There was more than enough rice and lentils—as well as squash, onions, and eggplant—vegetables that would keep for several days. Jane—my business partner—and her husband, children, and friends were touring Israel. We had long planned to meet at Kibbutz Samar. These were the makings of our rendezvous feast. There were no spices. Shai's ammunition box contained a seemingly inexhaustible supply. Behind the food cartons was a large red plastic crate, brimming with fodder.

We lifted the empty water bags from the saddles and replaced them with the full ones. The camels watched the process, as if anticipating that they would drink. Not so. They would wait until we reached Timna in two days time. If allowed, each could have consumed the entire 80 liters.

Pesiah and Chalah, however, could not endure so long without fluid. Shai opened one of the water bags and filled the stew pot. Cheek-to-cheek, the two goats drank it empty. As they drank, Shai spread half of the fodder for them. They ate ravenously, revealing their hunger and the paucity of brush over the route we had traveled.

We repacked the contents of the cartons into the saddlebags. After a few more minutes of small talk, Shai bid us adieu and departed. The dust raised by the Land Cruiser hung in the air long after the sound of its engine had faded into the desert quiet.

We waited for the goats to feed and then followed the *wadi's* course into the open Arava. The mountains of Edom emerged fully visible, albeit their forms still muted by the haze. We turned north, toward Timna, staying relatively close to the western wall of the Arava. The surface alternated between rubble-strewn rock and loess sand. My boots sunk into the latter, as if pulled by an invisible hand. I struggled with each step. In the rising heat, I envied the camels who, with their large spreading pads, passed effortlessly over the grasping earth.

Within the hour, we reached a graded dirt road. It was a remnant of a youthful Israel's romantic dream, to reclaim the riches of Solomon and again to mine the ancient ores of Timna. In common with most romantic dreams, the venture failed. The road lay as it had been abandoned. Only the occasional washes, cut by runoff from the nearby hills, revealed that it had not been maintained for a generation or more.

The sun had reached its zenith. The heat swirled up from the ground as if from the door of an open furnace. The searing air enveloped us, hotter yet than the already brutal temperatures that had assailed us as we had struggled toward Wadi Shacharot 24 hours earlier. Despite the severity of the heat, I could move more easily over the level road than over the row after row of ridges that we had surmounted the day before.

We rested at noon and afterward continued north. Sandstone outcroppings rising from the alluvial floor clustered along our route. The wind had carved them into voluptuous curves like gigantic Henry Moore sculptures.

As the shadows cast by the falling sun began to cross the Arava, we approached a series of small, undulating sand hills. They had been formed by the fan of a *wadi*. Part of the area was encompassed by a barbed wire fence, now fallen in several places. A natural grove of palms, the sign of an oasis, grew within the fence. Among the palms stood barracks, which, like the road, had been long abandoned. Without my asking, Shai explained the site.

"This was a training camp, where high school students would come before they entered the army. This is the largest oasis in the Arava—at least on the Israeli side. Here they are rare, because there is so little rain. On the Jordanian side, the mountains are higher. More rain falls and there are more springs.

"Today the gazelles come to drink and maybe ibex, although they tend to stay more in the hills and mountains. And of course birds come and many small animals. In ancient times there were wild asses, and the addax. That is the *pygarg* of the Bible. It is able to smell new grass from very far away, so it always finds something to eat. There was also the oryx. It is a kind of antelope with beautiful long, curved horns. If you see it from the side, it looks like it has only one horn. So, perhaps, it is also the unicorn."

Shai's eyes twinkled at his conjecture.

"And, of course, the meat-eating animals will come to hunt the others. Today the wolves and hyenas come. During the time of the Turks there were leopards and cheetahs. And during the time of the Romans—lions as well."

"That's why Joseph's brothers could tell their father that Joseph was killed by a wild beast," I reflected.

"Yes," Shai replied. "A man by himself would not have a chance against a lion or a pack of wolves."

We passed the camp and moved farther into the sand hills. They devolved into a dry delta of intertwining channels, separated by hillocks half again as high as a standing camel, many with near-vertical walls. The network of channels formed a smuggler's paradise. Several persons could have stood silently on the opposite side of a hillock, no more than 10 feet away, and we could have passed, never knowing that they were there.

As the twilight deepened, we pushed onward.