

Chapter 1

Deathmatch

It served as both a warning and summons to doom. Such was the scream of Seth, my son – the self-proclaimed king of Gerizim in the mountains of Ephraim. I smiled as his tearing roar pierced the night, knowing my skilled offspring used its chilling echoes far more as a lure than a wall of foreboding. But then I heard the human’s steady footsteps, smelled his calm patience, and realized this equally young man-cub was not one to cower. When his path continued with care toward Seth’s weak side, away from the trap my son prepared, I knew this was no mere human, just as my son was no mere lion.

It was then, I think, that love for this man-cub took root in my heart, as difficult as that is to imagine, considering what nuisances humans can be. But as these two titans maneuvered against each other, I sensed the Maker held great plans for both – should either survive this encounter.

Curious, I slipped into their battle zones and watched, confident their destinies hinged on what would soon follow. Little did I realize that, by following this path, I sealed my own fate.

Ah, few alive have witnessed such a spectacle! In his own feeble way, this fourteen-year-old man proved as fine a specimen as my Seth. Long, balanced limbs graced this human, all knitted and jointed well, with hands and feet that adapted to just about any terrain. Believe this, for he scurried barefoot up the steep, rocky incline as if born to it. And he must have gained his vision from a hawk! At the slightest hint of a sign, this fellow – called

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Simon, I soon learned – could kick into motion like a desert hare! A fluid drive propelled his swift feet across the most demanding paths, and he lost not one step, whether skipping over tree roots or sliding under low branches. Not once did his toes slip in loose earth.

You laugh, but I tell you this: few humans display such precise agility, for it requires the perceptions and coordination only a rascal squirrel or wise falcon possesses. You may pull your claws in on that bet – your prey would not escape.

That's not to say my son could not dispose of this Simon. Seth, after all, stood out as the best of my brood. Four cubs rose from my union with old Elessa, including one prince senior to our monarch, but Seth soon chased the others off. Which was right, after all. A pride may have but one king. The others could run rogue for a time... it would do them good. But Seth did not need such training. In time, he might even have chased me away had I presented a challenge, but events intervened. His women sought meals from a flock of loud, appealing sheep, not knowing or caring that their targets took shelter under Simon's crook. That youthful shepherd sent each conniving lioness away hungry – an affront Seth could not ignore.

These limestone peaks offer wonderful settings for blood duels, their wind-scoured heights providing many cuts and vales adorned with winding ledges, rapid waters, plunging walls, fields of tall grass and grain, and terraced hills sporting prickly brush and gnarled trees. All held choice options for surprising and slaughtering one's foes.

Seeing his first trap unhinged, Seth charged down the opposite slope to a narrow chasm pitted with dark caves. Perfect for an ambush. But this human, who hid his flesh under what his type call a tunic – that's a covering of sheep's wool or other spun stuff, entwined, fitted, and bound to their fragile bodies as a sort of a removable skin – anyway, this man-cub did not approach the ridge my son just left. Acting as if he could sense Seth's silent retreat, Simon continued around the stone knob, the wind at his face, and with his rod as an anchor, he climbed the ridge topping my son's dry cove. There Simon girded his cloth about his waist

with a strip of woven goat hair –

Yes, the hair of goats! These humans harvest such things! And take note now, for humans do this binding ritual when they prepare for battle or running or many other aggressive acts, so watch for it. Such girding tells of their mind and intent.

Now pay attention as I return to our tale. Simon girded his loins but did not get the chance to do more, for Seth had already left. Having heard the low rumble of dislodged sand, my king guessed the human's countermove and crept further down the slope.

So went this hunt, sometimes by moonlight atop ragged crests, sometimes within the black shadows of upturned limestone teeth. Our peaks echoed with fierce roars as Seth led his adversary on, once switching back to threaten the penned sheep, only to retreat before the human's crook and baying dogs. My king's trail hinted at some intricate design employed with lazy confidence, as if Seth enjoyed pretending to be prey rather than the hunter. From my central perch, I twice saw my son discard prime vantage points for ending his game. Both times he retreated with the arrogance of a champion taking pleasure in the chase, seemingly determined to extend this contest rather than face its final challenge. But that suggestion ignored his worthy adversary – and the laws of our Maker.

My son's fifth trap looked almost perfect. Wheeling about the slopes to get between the shepherd and his flock, Seth found a gift from the Maker: a narrow ravine leading straight to the sheepfold. It offered ideal security, with sides so cluttered by brush and barbed vines that a human could not hope to penetrate them without entangling himself. Charging within, happy to lose telltale hairs to the thorns, my son discovered an eroded hole overlooking all possible passages, its cold walls shielded from the moon's light. There Seth waited, silent, almost breathless. The sweat slicking his fur surely chilled within that still tomb, yet I doubt he felt it. This opportunity was worth its cost.

I crept forward, my head swelling with pride in anticipation of my son's sweet victory. The human proceeded with caution into that dark gorge, probing the brush with the base of his rod while

the upper knob pushed aside branches and vines. Ever nearer he drew to the kill zone, his prudence betraying him here, even as I crept in silence against the grain of the slope, keeping my silhouette still within the moonlight.

Then I made my first mistake.

Padding close with light steps, a bit distracted by the drama below, my left paw sent tumbling a small wave of sand.

The night froze. Simon stood as one with the limestone, his body still, his ears open, his eyes ever vigilant. Tense, feeling the fool, I clung to the earth, listening to the tiny rocks bouncing into the deep darkness. I had no wish to betray my child and king! But the human did not look my way or abandon his course. Bending behind a leafy tree trunk, the man-cub used the worn tip of his rod to probe markings in the clay and rock piles below Seth's perch. Only then did I realize the human had heard my steps and ignored them, concentrating on the trail left by my son.

Betrayed by his paw prints to an opponent shielded by thick, thorny branches, Seth slipped away to find a new defense. That trek led my offspring to the southern sheepfold and three alarmed hounds. At most times such a ruckus would not trouble my son; he had feasted before after similar troubles, on both lamb and dog. But a shadowy figure followed the barks, and young Simon came on oh so quick, the briars failing to delay him. Seth howled from angry stings to his left foreleg and flank, both caused by stones cast from the human's sling. Such blows spurred my son back into the craigs, a deadly plot on his mind.

I crept to a new position. Watching Seth maneuver, I recognized a cunning trick my son once used on me. With deliberate strides the king loped against a sharp breeze and savage slope. By all appearances he ran to escape the last call of those hounds, who did not give chase, restrained by some human commands. But the man-cub followed Seth with swift steps, even as my son disappeared into moonlight shadows.

I sank low to the earth. Simon had every reason to pursue the fleeing lion, his scent sharp in the breeze. But if the lad had known the lay of this land, as I did, he would not have charged like a shrieking wind into the Maker's Tongue, a bitter slide that

ended with a steep plunge of death.

When Seth had so baited me into this snare, I survived only by the slimmest of margins – leaping across a chasm four times my outstretched length. That effort both exhilarated me and left my flesh numb to my bones, but Seth must have admired it, or so I assume. Perhaps that explains why he allowed me to stay among his women... not that it matters now. Still, knowing this, I watched the lad with rising trepidation, for no human could match my feat. Especially as the surrounding walls shielded the drop from the moon, leaving the pit almost invisible at night.

Reaching the limits of our faint light, Simon slowed his pace but stayed on the scent. On he traveled, following the trail across a dark rock spine, through a scrub brush line, then around a second ridge. Reaching the entrance to the Tongue, he stopped. His body actually froze in place, helping his ears sift for clues. Surprised, for my son's scent remained active, I crept closer to see what Simon meant to do. That's when the human went in.

Even with his sure feet bare to the earth, the sandy slope overwhelmed the man-cub. He slid against the grain, his staff little good as a brake. I heard his heart and breathing surge. Caught by sudden fear, Simon dropped his bottom and back to the ground, stretching out his limbs to collect the sand and grasp the rock walls. His speed increased. His fingers dug at the slope, to no avail. A harsh curve shoved him against a stone wall. He bounced off and tumbled downward.

I felt swelling anxiety, which surprised me. Perhaps at this, the place of my last great challenge, I hated to see one suffer who had performed so well. I sank my claws into the earth, frightened that this cub would indeed fall to his death, even though such a turn could provide a satisfying meal. When the lad managed to straighten his back, then lurch up to a running stance, I knew his fate was sealed. His last steps propelled Simon with blind recklessness into the chasm.

Watching this, I prayed to the Maker for this human to meet a gracious end. His skills deserved that much. Imagine my wonder when, at the very lip of the crevasse, Simon planted the tip of his staff and leaped forward! The rod itself provided a boost, bending

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and swaying with such force that it helped propel the fleet cub over the chasm. Where I, in my challenge, had landed with two feet in the gorge, the others rooted to the rim, this Simon fell upright upon that far lip of rock and soil, secure on both feet, his limbs balanced, the rod still in his tight grip, his mind ready for battle.

My heart almost stilled at that sight, both in admiration and fear. After all, I had prayed for this one – and yet, while I respected his skills, I did not want the Maker to deliver this cub over my son.

Ah, but while Simon's feat may have stunned me into inaction, Seth acted on an opportunity. Poised among the rocks above the human, my king threw himself forward with his claws primed to kill. Simon dove to the sand, rolling to escape. Seth caught up with him just as the man-cub settled into a crouch on his toes, his rod perched against his left shoulder.

That – not my prayers – saved him.

Hurdling through the darkness, Seth could not spin from the hard knob of that upraised staff. The impact forced the lad to tumble away, even as my son drew his four paws against the shepherd's tunic. My king's hind legs missed Simon's flank by the width of a limb, but Seth's left foreclaws latched into the cub's muddy cloth and tore it from his shoulders.

Though I saw nothing, I smelled blood.

Simon jumped up, striking first with the sharpened tip of his rod, then with its gnarled head. While skillful, the manner of blows revealed the human's near blindness in the dark. With superior eyesight in such shadows, Seth dodged the sweeping attack as he maneuvered left. Then he lunged, but Simon, having found nothing but rock within the radius of his rod, changed his stepping pattern. Seth saw this at the last moment and reared back, just missing the human's exposed side. Frustrated, my son released a brief, angry snarl. Simon struck at the sound, a blow my king avoided with more luck than skill. He tried to dart in while the man's stomach lay exposed, but Simon spun his staff about and warded my son off.

In this way they strove against each other, taking turns

striking, countering, dodging, evading. They circled like the winds of a dust devil, growing ever nearer, challenging each other with their power, avoiding strikes through their grace. Seth twice tried to maneuver Simon into the abyss, but the human had enough presence of mind to recall the danger and escape destruction. The cub also worked to corner my son against the rock wall, only to find Seth's reflexes too quick to counter in such gripping blackness.

I settled behind a limestone crest, sheltered from the wind, and waited for one to tire or err. Through the slow passage of the moon, this human, while hot with sweat, showed few signs of strain. Neither did Seth, though he began to pause in his circular stalking to issue deep, grinding roars that rumbled through the canyons. Undeterred, at the fourth tearing scream Simon drew a smooth stone from a girdle pouch and, with a flick of his wrist, sent it sailing into my son's open maw. I could not help chuckling, though Seth responded with unbridled fury. Charging, he flew over Simon's empty footsteps and felt the darting human's rod strike his skull. Undaunted, Seth pounced again, once more suffering a hard blow from the knobby wood. But he did not slow, throwing himself backward from the wall – which tripped his foe.

Together they rolled ever nearer the great fall. Simon managed to crawl away as Seth came to rest on his stomach. The human struggled in loose sand, dazed by billowing dust. My son pivoted with slow, determined force, crouching in his hatred to make his final attack.

Into this tense moment sprang a sliver of man's light.

On the crest opposite mine, atop a ledge far above the Tongue, emerged a second shepherd upholding a burning chunk of wood. Its fearful flames lit the deep rock drifts with shifting hues of yellow, brown, and gray. Seth's damp fur sparkled of gold. And Simon? Well, but for what remained of his torn tunic, the blond human looked surprisingly attractive. A somewhat tasty one, if you preferred strong bones and muscle under lean, glistening skin – and you dared face the imposing challenge it took to chew upon such youthful flesh.

At that point, confronted by clear views of their adversaries, both titans hesitated. But Seth's fury consumed too much of his mind for this revelation to daunt him now, and so he charged, forgetting his greatest advantage all along had been the black night. Simon, though weary, pivoted on nimble toes to what I guess must be his favored side. Driven by his thirst to slay, my son could not adjust his aim in time. As Seth passed by, Simon planted the narrow point of his rod between my king's shoulders. Seth landed with poise against the sod and thrust himself back, but the human prepared for this, having seen my son reverse course that way before. Pressing forward, the shepherd rammed the pointed tip of his rod against Seth's spine. Aided by my king's efforts to pursue, the wood punched deep into my child's flesh, piercing his heart and lung.

With one choked scream, Seth's writhing spirit left for the Maker. I almost wept at that, knowing my son would have wished to make one final call to honor his conqueror. But still, this end left me satisfied. Both combatants fought well, and their battle provided a death worthy of a king.

Keeping an eye on the torch-bearing interloper, I offered a silent prayer of gratitude and prepared to escape into the night. I would not feast on my own son's flesh – let others claim that prize! But then, for reasons I cannot explain, I stopped. For the human, despite his obvious mental limitations and that short-sighted heritage of his kind, this man-cub whispered thanks to the Maker and praise to my fallen king.

"Well done," shouted the keeper of the flames.

Simon made no reply, occupied as he was with his prayers.

I waited then, not wanting my movements to attract attention in the flickering torchlight. But also, I had a growing curiosity about these humans. I wished to see what else they might do.

The torch bearer paused a moment before glancing about for a descending path. I chuckled, thinking the Tongue might yet claim a victim. But that thought overlooked the hawk-sighted man below.

Eyeing the shifting light, Simon must have figured out its meaning, for he soon called out, "Stay there, Reuben! Do not

come down. It's a treacherous walk. Wait for me. I will meet you in a moment."

"But you need help with the carcass!"

"No," said Simon, working free his rod. "I will take nothing from him."

"Oh, surely his claws at least."

"No."

"But father –"

"No!" Simon insisted. "He was strong, and sly, this one. A worthy foe. I will not dishonor him in death."

Laying down his staff, the young man gathered rocks to lay about Seth's body. These actions puzzled me until I realized that Simon meant to entomb the corpse. Oh, how my bile flowed at that thought! This barrier would mock Seth's life and defy our Maker's plan! But as I pondered this, my burning fury dissolved into confusion of equal depth, and something even more peculiar. For as I watched Simon at work, and I debated over and over just what his actions revealed, I felt my love for my son transfer to this human. This shocked me not just for its oddness, but its objective. For I grasped how the Maker valued Simon and his destiny – which lay now in my care. And that placed us all in great peril.

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Chapter 2

Decisions

Overwhelmed by these mysteries, I was slow to notice the two brothers descending to their sheepfolds. Simon took cautious, restful strides alongside Reuben, who walked as if his concerns lay behind him.

“You did well,” said that older one. Like Simon, he was a fine specimen of mankind, his limbs rested and honed, his articulate speech reflecting a well-developed mind – two years his brother’s senior, by my guess. Perhaps that explains how he could hold that flaming branch with calm assurance while its consuming hunger brought me nothing but fear.

Simon kept his reply short: “The Lord is gracious.”

Though pressed to his limits by my son, this man-cub sounded ready to renew the contest. His heart carried a steady beat. His breath filled his lungs with gentle ease. His sweat came slow and flowed clean. His muscles flexed with little strain, his limbs relaxed yet prepared for action. All that amazed me. My nerves stayed alert observing these two, yet this young man walked in peace, almost as he had before all this started. I doubt I could recover so fast from a deathmatch!

I suspect now he lived each day this way.

“I saw you circle back twice,” said Reuben. “Must have been quite a chase.”

“He led me on. Goaded me, as if he’d plotted it all out. I might have fallen to his traps twice, but for the Lord’s insight. And your appearance. Our God truly blessed me with you, my brother!

You're always there when I need you."

Reuben smiled, then paused to look upon their three sheepfolds, each guarded by a hound. Two female humans and a young lad also watched over the enclosures, each bound in patched, multicolored cloaks and other dusty wraps like those Reuben wore. The sisters stood at rest, contented, as if they knew the danger had passed, but their hounds acted confused. It worried me until a shift in the wind revealed Seth's strong scent clinging to both approaching shepherds. That made me smile, for I knew his mark would mask the humans for days.

"Must have been a fine beast," Reuben reflected. But Simon had his mind on other things.

"Who is here?" he wondered aloud, his gaze locked upon a flickering smoke trail drifting to the stars. My eyes followed that meandering wisp to a small crackling fire circled by stones within what the humans call a tent. Beside the covering stood two beautiful horses, their backs marked by old saddle burns. The great stallions rested, their heads bound and tied to a stake. About their shoulders and necks hung cloths bearing the purple hue of human cavalry soldiers.

Any other night, I would look upon such steeds with hunger, especially if the air bore no scents of their masters. Indeed, just seeing these beasts spurred me to creep closer to that camp, though I did have mind enough to not alert the dogs. Then the wind shifted.

"Wait," Reuben advised. He stood still a breath, then pivoted to look over the dark, rocky slopes. I froze as his flaming light flashed by my hiding place. His eyes passed over me once, twice. My blood grew hot.

"There is another," he whispered.

His caution came with a smile... a subtle passion for the hunt. I gripped the earth with my claws, then pulled them back, ready to spring away. But Simon was not distracted.

"Yes, an older one," said my bondmate. "He watched me battle the young lion. Pay him no mind; I doubt he will act."

Taking a deep breath, Simon pulled his brother about to head once more toward the tent. Like Reuben, I fought to regain my

calm. It was difficult but necessary. Flexing my claws, I murmured thanks to my Maker for the reprieve. It reminded me once again just how kind He is.

“What is this?” Simon asked his brother.

Reuben looked to the steeds, then that enclosure of draped cloths, its waving sides aglow from campfires within and without. Having no answer, the older shepherd shrugged and said, “Let’s find out.”

At that point I did the first of many stupid things. With bold strides the siblings proceeded to camp, where Simon took time to wash and prepare himself.

I raced to the tent.

Oh, I was careful – you can bet on that! Having engaged horse soldiers in my past, I respected the perils of human knives and arrows, and the pain a bold hoof could deliver. While I saw two stallions, I could smell others, no doubt standing somewhere in the dark with other riders.

And yet something drove me on... I look back on it now and wonder why, but for the Maker’s prodding, I would take such risks.

This tent was a simple contraption, a square of leveled soil blocked off on two sides with brushed hides taken from goats and other worthy prey, their skins cleaned, honed, and sewn together. Some humans must have hung these sheets over poles connected by dried woven vines, which humans call rope. The hides overlapped the squared earth to shield the seated men from the sky, then hung down from the ropes to form two makeshift walls. Wood stakes anchored their edges, though not too tight, leaving the cloths to flap in the breeze. The humans created a third windbreak by piling their bundles, boxes, saddles, and other things along an open side of that square – and this gave me an opportunity. With my scent diminished and concealed by the wind, I crept behind the loose, flapping wall sheets to hide among the hoarded baggage.

In the center of that square, beneath the tent’s waving roof, crackled that smoking fire ringed by stones. The flames warmed a charred iron pot suspended from stakes bending under its weight.

Around that bowl sat four men taking turns dipping chunks of some pastry –

What is a pastry? Well... they also call it bread, or a loaf, if those terms help you understand. Whatever the name used, the pastry is something they eat, made by their own hands. This one was round like a stone yet flat as a leaf – a thick leaf, mind you, like your tongue. Or his tongue.

Anyway, these humans sat there dipping torn pieces of flat bread into some sort of bean stew boiling in that pot. It gave off a hearty fragrance that warmed my nose yet left me discouraged, for the broth held no meat.

As these men ate these drippings, their attention drifted more than the breeze. It seemed not one of them wanted to be there. Troubles dribbled from their voices, one in regret, one in sadness, one edging on contempt, and one trapped by anger. I doubt this misery drew from the stew's lack of flesh. Two of the men apparently held little use for tents. They didn't like the rippling cloths or the stale smoke or that burning broth. I could tell they preferred the open sky – even in rain, I would guess. But most of all, they grumbled in their hearts over these intrusive horse riders. The soldiers endured this, occupied as they were by their own burdens. Most revolved about concerns to be elsewhere, and yet behind that I sensed an impending doom, one that chilled them to their core.

"I can offer a third," an aged voice said, his words hard as the rocks I had just crossed. I could not see the speaker clearly with that haphazard mound in my way, so I crept closer, hoping to find a better view.

"Two-thirds," said an older, softer tone.

"All," came a firm reply.

In the silence that followed, I found a gap between these loosely piled things, one that offered me a good look at all these humans. That's when I spied a third soldier, who stepped around a hanging wall to address the four in the tent.

"Two more shepherds approach," said this sentry.

"My sons," explained an elder.

"Let them pass," answered a voice of authority.

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I thanked the Maker for this. Simon and his brother must have caught the guard's eye, distracting him from me.

Of course, I had long suspected those elders carried Simon's blood. They bore a shepherd's distinctive stink, and wore weathered tunics and goatskin cloaks like others whose sheep I'd feasted on. Both elders sat with legs crossed, their laps filled by the curling ends of gray, tangled beards. They smiled at Reuben and Simon, but beyond that, their lives told different tales. The oldest one bound his well-traveled feet in unraveling leather sandals and bared his balding, spotted scalp to the chill night. The younger father left his callused soles open to the earth but kept his crowning hair pulled off his tense brow with a mud-caked cloth tied about his skull. The eldest's pale flesh drooped below his eyes, two patient orbs that stared with sorrow into the stew. His companion's hazel orbs sparkled in the faint light, alert to the smallest details of their visitors. The eldest relaxed with his hands in his lap, knowing his life was his own, while the other – his son, I guessed – gripped his knees with crusty fingers, determined to protect his domain from any challenge.

Opposite them sat two cavalry soldiers, their muscular trunks protected by thick, embroidered cloaks that stank of horse and sweat. Beneath these wraps I glimpsed leather armor dried to cracking by long exposure to the sun and wind. One rider still wore his headgear, a dust-speckled sheet of faded purple wool banded by three strands of old rope. Both soldiers kept a sheathed metal sword and two scraped knives tethered in readiness about their chests.

By their cynical stances and bitter stares, I knew these men sat about this pot with arms and legs ready to attack – although their preference most likely was to get this meeting over with so that they could sleep and depart this wilderness before dawn.

Their readiness prompted reminders of my own longing to leave, to forgo this adventure and stand proud in the night breeze once more. Too many times had I put up with meddling humans. I did not want to endure their antics yet again! But my calling to Simon answered this reluctance with power, holding me firm. I watched the four men gaze long upon each other, weary of talk.

Only the oldest among them, that balding shepherd, offered any hint of compromise.

“We are bound for home,” said the younger father, even as Reuben chose to rest behind him. I was surprised to see both brothers had found time to wash before entering, and Simon had replaced his tunic, though their sire paid this no attention. “We have no time to backtrack,” he continued. “And we have no sheep to spare. We sold half of our surplus at Samaria last week, and most of the rest at villages or caravans along our way. Only our breeding stock remains.”

Simon sat down beside the post upholding the tent’s open corner. Drawing his feet beneath him, the lad leaned back and looked me in the eye.

What a moment that was!

Yes, I should have run – but I felt no fear! None at all! I hid among my enemies, with this young Simon but a leap away, and I knew no fear! For in this man-cub’s clear gaze, I saw the heart of the Maker. I sensed confidence, peace, and love.

“We need them all,” said the older soldier. Having long ago discarded his turban, this weary warrior wiped his stiff fingers through his short black hair, rubbed his aching eyes, and admitted, “We have little choice.”

The elder shepherd smiled but gave no ground. “They are our family, captain.”

“Jonathan,” the soldier offered.

“Captain,” the shepherd repeated.

To his credit, this warrior took no offense at that abrasion.

“You will be paid,” he assured them.

“Not enough!” snapped the younger father. “Raising a flock is the toil of generations!”

“You learn their strengths, their natures,” the eldest said, trying to reason with these grumbling intruders. “We raised many of them from birth, nurturing them, winning their trust, even their love.”

“They are pets to our sisters,” offered Reuben, showing no fear of the newcomers.

“Yes, that is true,” the eldest agreed. His comrade smiled.

“They feed them by hand, tell them stories,” said the younger father, the thoughts he shared bringing a smile to his dry lips. “It is something to see! Truly, these sheep are like family to us. Hannah, my oldest daughter, she named them all, and often sleeps among them. So does Anna!”

Simon laughed, and others joined in. The sound amused and thrilled me!

“We learn from our flock, and they from us,” said the eldest. “We teach them to mind us and our hounds, and for the most part, they do.”

“Oh, yes!” said Reuben.

“In this way we weed out the bad seed and nourish the best lines,” continued his grandfather. “In time, they come to live and move together, as one.”

“They learn what we want of them,” Reuben said, “and they respond at our commands, sometimes before we need them to. A few even understand enough to teach their young. Oh, that is so good to see.”

“It is our life’s work,” whispered the elder.

“Yes!” barked the other father, his anger returning just that quick. “Our lives! What you ask would make us give all that up. Start over!”

“I am sorry,” said the one called Jonathan, which irritated the younger soldier.

“Why barter with them?” he spat.

“Because they speak the truth!” the captain stated, at last releasing his own harbored anger. He tried to ease his stance, glancing first at the stew, then Simon and Reuben, but as this man turned back to the older shepherds, his eyes remained hard.

“I can pay you what the crown allows,” he said. “No more. Maybe it is not enough, but I doubt you will get much better anywhere else.”

“Why?” Reuben said, leaning into the torchlight above the eldest. His young face looked quite handsome in the waving smoke and glowing dance of the flames.

“Hoshea turns upon us,” remarked the younger father.

“Not so, Elon!” the captain shot back. “Our king – King

Hoshea – he respects your rights. But the Assyrians march against us. Again. Their lord, this Sargon... he demands blood.”

“He demands servitude,” the one called Elon answered. “Hoshea rebelled.”

The irate soldier bristled. “King Hoshea!” he insisted. “King!”

“Enough,” growled the captain.

That young one ignored the order. His eyes burned with threats.

“You think your homeland safe?” this soldier said to taunt the shepherds. “Judah may soon face the same Assyrian whips. As will its people.”

The eldest scowled. “Yahweh rejects you.”

“All the gods reject us,” scoffed the youth.

“Fool!” snapped Elon. “There are no others!”

The hot one stiffened. His brow knotted, his eyes smoldered. His commander snapped a cold command, but that brute still cast unspoken warnings.

These shepherds remained still, unshaken by this tension.

“You never learn,” the eldest said in gentle, guarded tones. “Yahweh foretold this. He warned us of the devil’s coming, through Amos, through Hosea. We rejected Him. All the tribes... we all failed. All.”

“You,” interrupted Jonathan, “you are in the heart of Israel, not Judah. It is the law of our king you must obey, not Ahaz. And I tell you now – we need your flock. All of it. Sargon will surely put Samaria under siege. His troops draw closer each day. We need your sheep to survive.”

The eldest smiled. “And if we refuse?”

Wrinkles fled the captain’s brow, but then his gaze tightened. “Then, Gilead, I will return with all my men, and we will take your flocks – without payment – or have them slain.”

Elon drew his hands into fists.

“I will not see Assyrian dogs feasting on your stock,” vowed the captain.

“They would not catch us,” Reuben injected. He leaned on Elon’s shoulder. “Father, resist. We will take to the hills.”

The younger soldier sneered at that.

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“You could guide your beasts, on foot, beyond the reach of our cavalry? I think not.”

Reuben stood, his form a flickering gray pillar of strength in the tent’s smoky shadows.

“Simon can track anything,” he declared. “And hide anything.”

I tensed in sudden realization of what all this meant. Yes... this was what I was supposed to hear through all their stubborn debates. This signaled the burden on my heart. But what did it mean?

The Maker provided no clues. And few of these human words made sense to me at that time, though all those demands and threats – the fear, anger, and terror they held – those emotions I grasped quite well. Indeed, I could feel them in my heart.

His frustration no longer manageable, the soldier captain slapped the earth with his right hand.

“You do not understand!” he insisted. “Our king has men scouring the hills for all the supplies we may find. Our soldiers will take everything! If you were one of his subjects, I would not even ask you for this. I would march you into the fortress, claim your flocks, your dogs, your clothing... all you have! And I would arm your sons for battle!”

“But we are of Judah,” said Reuben, a sly grin crossing his lips.

“You think that will stop us?” snarled the young soldier. “Truly?”

“This summer draws to a close,” continued Reuben. “We’ve already traded our prize stock. We could return home now with no time lost.”

“You would be caught,” the spiteful horseman growled. “If not by my men, then the Assyrians.”

“They would respect us,” Reuben asserted.

“They respect nothing!” the captain snapped. With a wave of his head to Simon and Reuben, the soldier said to the eldest, “You resist, and I assure you, your grandsons will be armed for battle, your daughters scattered, and you two will get posts atop Samaria’s walls, or worse.”

“Do not threaten us,” Elon warned.

The captain met their eyes, squared his shoulders, and rose to his feet. The other horseman followed his example, a sinister glare upon his face.

“Decide,” said Jonathan.

Elon looked to his father, a lifetime of understanding shared within their gaze, then stood, drawing his cloak about him. That move cast his sturdy frame into a dark silhouette.

“Reuben?” he called, both as a command and request.

“The hills,” answered his oldest son.

Elon nodded as if he had expected this.

“Simon?” he barked.

I drew still closer. The elders might have seen me then had they found any reason to glance at the baggage, but I gave them none. The young cub sat calmly upon the earth, holding their attention.

“Samaria,” he said.

Reuben stared first at his brother, then at his own feet. In that brief time of reflection, I understood the honor and respect they shared. Reuben would not question Simon’s decision.

Stroking his beard with his right hand, Elon acknowledged his younger son with a cautious nod, then turned to his father. But Gilead kept his eyes focused on the stew, saying nothing.

“Very well,” decided Elon, who now, at last, spoke as sheik. I felt some comfort at that, having wondered just who would take command of this brood. He turned to the captain and asked, “We’ll be paid in gold for our whole flock?”

“At Samaria,” Jonathan replied.

“And then we may leave?”

“If the Assyrians will allow it, so will I.”

“If those devils are there,” stated Gilead, “we will head for home.”

“No,” said Elon. “I will not risk that much. Gideon will start for home tonight with his sisters. We four will take the flock to Samaria.”

The captain peered into the elder shepherd’s deep-set eyes, then nodded. I, too, delved into those patient orbs and Simon’s

Lions of Judah

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strong gaze. And I wondered how I would follow them to that human fortress they called Samaria. For if I were caught...

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