

Chapter 1

Away from death

“Get up, and get out,” ordered the guard, gesturing to the open door, where another guard could be seen waiting.

“What’s the hurry?” I moaned.

“Just do what you’re told. We’ll tell you what’s happening as we go.”

“Will I be going outside? How cold is it? When will...”

“Oh, stop asking questions! Get up and get out, or I’ll help you along with my spear.”

I stood slowly and stumbled towards the door. Catching hold of the doorpost, I steadied myself, groaning, then bent over double as an agonising cough shook me.

“Get a move on. We don’t have all day.”

I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t move. At that moment, I might even have thanked him if he had lost patience and killed me with his spear.

Eventually, the coughing relaxed its grip enough for me to open my eyes and slowly move again.

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“Take it easy, Jeremiah,” said the guard from outside. “Come when you are ready.”

“He doesn’t deserve any sympathy, Vaniah,” said the guard who had been haranguing me. “After all, he hasn’t shown any for all the people who have died because of his treachery.”

“Come on, Kallai, you know it’s not Jeremiah’s fault that Nebuchadnezzar has attacked us. He’s attacking everyone.”

“And so is Jeremiah. Didn’t you hear about Hananiah the prophet? And now it’s his own brother!”

“I heard about Hananiah, of course, but did Jeremiah really kill him?”

“He put a curse on him!”

“I can get a hundred men representing almost as many different gods or goddesses to put a curse on someone – but it doesn’t mean much. Does Jeremiah really have the power to make curses happen, does he?”

“Well, I doubt it, but maybe he gives them a little helping hand with a bit of poison here and there.”

“I have no power for such curses,” I said, speaking slowly and with difficulty, “but Yahweh, the God of Israel, does. He cursed Hananiah for his lies and then fulfilled his curse.”

“You were the one who spoke the curse, so don’t blame God!” snarled Kallai. “And now you’ve killed your brother too.”

“That’s going a bit far, I reckon,” said Vaniah. “I don’t like Jeremiah’s message any more than anyone else, but blaming him for everything bad that happens doesn’t make sense.”

“Anyway, I’m sick of arguing about it. Let’s get him out of here and cleaned up.”

I couldn’t help putting a grimy hand to my face, my

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fingers feeling the dirt that covered it too. It would be good to get clean, but why the urgency? Despite my exhaustion, I was beginning to get suspicious about the entire affair.

“What for?” I asked.

“Don’t ask any more questions, just do it.” He struck at me as he spoke, sending me staggering back against the wall of my cell.

Vaniah hastily came between us and offered me his arm to lean on. “Kallai, there’s no point in hurrying him out if he drops dead on the way because of how you treat him.”

Slowly I recovered my balance and, leaning on Vaniah’s arm, plodded slowly from the cell.

They marched me out of the vaulted chamber and took me to a room where I could wash.

“It hardly seems worth wasting precious water on a traitor like you,” said Kallai sourly, “but those are our orders: clean you up and take you to the High Priest’s house.”

Slowly, I scrubbed off the accumulated dirt, reflecting on my situation as I did so. Why should I be taken to the High Priest’s house? Was I to see my nephew, Seraiah, the new High Priest? It was hard to really accept that my nephew was old enough to be the High Priest. Time moves quickly.

The cold water revived me, but I still felt terribly weak as I put on the clean clothes the guards had given me.

“Hurry up,” urged Kallai as we walked out of the house together. It was clear that I was not going to be set free – Kallai kept a grip on me at all times, but carefully avoided giving me any support. If I had collapsed on the paving, he would have cheered.

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Slowly we made our way to the High Priest's house, and it was only when we arrived that it became clear that I had been called to help perform the duties necessary to bury my brother, Azariah. Suddenly I understood that when the news of my brother's death had come to me that morning, I had been one of the first to hear it. From the way it had been told me, and the delays I had experienced in hearing earlier news, I had assumed that it had happened days or weeks before. Instead, it appeared that just that morning, Azariah had arisen as usual and gone to the temple to make some arrangements for collecting the annual rent paid by several idolatrous cults for the right to have altars and idols in its courts. An hour later he had returned, saying that he felt a little strange. He went to lie down, and a short time later was found dead on his bed by a servant.

"I am not going in," I said to Vaniah.

"Why not?"

"Yahweh has told me not to take part in mourning."

"Nonsense! You won't go because you have no respect for the temple or the priests - even the High Priest," said Kallai.

"Not true. I must obey Yahweh. Even when my father died, back in the days of Josiah, I did not go in to mourn or bury him."

At that moment, my brother Gemariah came down the steps. "Who are you people? What do you want?" he asked.

"We are guards from the prison in the house of Jonathan, sir," answered Kallai. "Jehucal the son of Shelemiah told us to bring Jeremiah here, sir, to help with the burial of your brother. But now he is refusing to go in."

"Jeremiah?" My brother looked at me in shock - clearly he had not recognised me. He put a hand on my

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shoulder and looked into my face. "Is it really you, Jeremiah?"

"Yes."

"You look terribly ill. Where have you been?"

"In prison."

"But you were going out to see that land in Anathoth, weren't you? We knew from Mother that you had left, but that was all we knew. Mother was worried, but Azariah and I just assumed that you must have gone off somewhere on that work of yours. Then the Chaldeans came back and we couldn't do any more to check."

"They stopped me at the gate." I wanted to continue, to ask about Mother, but speaking only the few words I had spoken had left me exhausted.

"The officials were concerned that he was defecting to the Chaldeans, sir," interrupted Kallai.

"And he has been locked up all through the winter?"

"Yes, sir."

"And not fed very much, from the look of him."

"Nothing unusual, sir. We don't overfeed criminals. Or traitors."

"Nor my brother, either, it seems. Can't you tell that he is sick?"

"So was Hananiah the prophet, sir, if you will remember. Jeremiah didn't seem to care about him."

"Look, I don't have time to keep arguing with you, but once I have buried my older brother, I will see what I can do about my younger one." He looked back at me again and spoke more gently than he had done for several years. "Are you coming in, Jeremiah?"

"No. Yahweh said 'no mourning'."

"Oh, yes. I remember. Your stubbornness makes it hard for anyone to help you, you know."

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“If he’s not coming in, then we might as well take him away again, sir,” said Kallai.

“I suppose so. You said that he was in Jonathan’s house, didn’t you?”

“Yes. On the orders of the officials, sir – the king’s friends.”

We left and walked slowly back to Jonathan’s house, Kallai trying to hurry me up at every step.



The death of my brother reminded me of my own mortality.

How long might I have left of my own life? True, Azariah was ten years older than I was, but I was already 55 years old, and my father had died at only 57. The way that I was feeling, it seemed quite likely that I, too, would be dead before long.

Would Gemariah be able to do anything about my situation? Would he really try?

I found that I didn’t care very much either way, although I already had more desire to continue to live than I had felt that morning.

My brother was dead, a new High Priest had already been chosen and his ordination had begun. Time really was marching on. Azariah had been High Priest since the twentieth year of Josiah – and that was now 33 years ago! It took me a while to work out just how old my nephew Seraiah was, but in the end I concluded that he must be about 37 years old.

I stopped and thought: How did I feel about my brother? We had never got on well, but after all, a brother is a brother. My father had always favoured his firstborn, and Azariah had been closer in temperament to him than either Gemariah or I had been. I didn’t hate

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him, but I didn't respect him either. My main feelings against him related to the way in which he had carried out his job as Yahweh's High Priest, and it is probably best not to go into details about that. He cannot defend his actions now.

Seraiah was taking over in a time of great difficulty for the nation. Whether he accepted it or not, all that could be expected was the final destruction of Jerusalem, and with it, the temple. Somebody had to be High Priest when that happened, but I was glad that it wasn't me. Seraiah's son, Jehozadak, was 16 years old at that point - too young to be a priest, and not likely to ever be one, even if he survived the coming desolation.

Having given my mind a little free rein in criticising others, I moved quite naturally on to the greater question which had been troubling me all through the winter as I suffered in my cell: how did I feel about God? I had been discontented with what was happening to me. God had promised me that he would care for me, as long as I remained strong in presenting his truth to my nation. But as my imprisonment dragged on, I began to feel that my nation was prevailing, and that God was no longer with me in the same way that he had been. I have to admit that I was blaming God for my troubles and my self-pity.

39 years of work as a prophet, and what was my reward? I was a hated outcast locked in a dungeon, in a city surrounded by an army that would soon destroy not only the city but my entire nation.