

I cursed Abram softly under my breath. Not a real curse, it was no malediction from Ereshkigal, the ruler of the Netherworld. It was no call to the God of Noah to damn him. It was just empty threats. However, lives and human history are sometimes changed forever by such vague utterances—words once spoken that can't be taken back.

My name is Lot. Yes, that Lot—the one who barely escaped the destruction of Sodom with his daughters—my wife wasn't so fortunate. The Lot that Abraham rescued from the king of Elam, bringing me home tied to the backside of an ass with my arms flailing wildly in a vain attempt at maintaining my balance and my dignity. How dare he rescue me in such fashion in front of my entire family—even the self-indulgent have their pride!

There are those who say that I got a raw deal. After all I was the eldest son of the eldest son. I should have been the chosen one, the one to lead the family and receive the blessing. But you won't hear me say that. As my old headmaster Sheshgal literally beat into me: "friendship lasts a day, but kinship lasts forever." I don't begrudge Abram his success in the least; I just feel he should acknowledge my part in his.

Who do you think arranged for those parting gifts on our way back from Egypt? You think Pharaoh came up with that idea on his own? He was so broke by his never-ending war with the other Pharaoh up in Thebes that he wouldn't give a drink of water to the Queen Mother unless she paid "in grain, full-measure upfront." And Abram, he was so embarrassed by his half truths to Pharaoh that he just wanted to slink out of the country in the middle of the night. He kept mumbling something about the God of Noah will provide. I didn't doubt that, I just always heard that God helps those who help themselves.

So I took the risk of letting old Sherptak, the grand vizier and royal henchman, know that Abram's God would not like us being sent down the road without adequate supplies. And before that, who devised the means for the whole family to escape Ur with fortune intact one step ahead of King Ur-Nammu the Usurper?

But that was years later. Now Abram was a skinny little runt in my care who had given me the slip for the last time if I caught him. Although Abram is my uncle, I am actually five years older than him. We were supposed to be watching Grandfather Terah's sheep, but as usual Abram had other ideas. Like most twelve year old boys, he had grand dreams of adventure—unlike other boys he frequently acted on them.

Where *was* Abram? Nanna, the moon god, was late in rising—probably dallying with his wife, Ningal—and the mountain path was nearly invisible in the darkness despite my torch. I tripped over a loose rock and fell heavily. As it slid off the path it dislodged another loose stone and then another and another. By the time I regained my feet, shale and debris were cascading down the slope. Gathering speed the slide uprooted boulders and swallowed up bushes. Trees snapped like twigs before being swallowed whole by that terrible mouth of destruction. Dust filled the air, stinging my eyes and burning my throat.

Peering vainly through the darkness down towards the camp at the far end of the valley, I could hear the sheep bleating in fear as the roar of the slide echoed off the mountain walls like thunder. Dogs barked their alarm and torches danced wildly as the herdsmen ran to calm the stupid sheep. Fortunately, they were in no real danger as the avalanche extinguished itself in a mighty crescendo in the dry river bed at least 300 steps downstream from their resting place.

Calming the jittery sheep would be the easy part, I knew. The herdsmen were even stupider than the sheep—with their foolish superstitions and mindless rituals to appease

their capricious gods and goddesses. They were sure to attribute this to the Galla—demons of the Netherworld—or perhaps Rabisu the Crawler who lurked in dark corners. Even now they would be clutching the amulets around their necks; even now they would be chanting the incantations some priest had sold them to ward off the ghosts of the improperly buried; even now they would be admonishing their wooden guard dog statuettes, “Don’t stop to think, Bite!” If I didn’t have to find Abram before he fell off a cliff or was mauled by a bear, watching them run in circles to ward off this supposed evil would be hilarious.

The worst part was they had warned me when I announced I was going to rescue Abram and asked for volunteers. “My cousin went out after dark once and his body was never found—just a trail of blood...A friend told me that a neighbor’s brother had seen a ghost floating ominously in these very mountains not more than ten years ago.” And so on. These were brave men who had battled barbarians, fought wild animals and endured blistering heat and blinding sandstorms without faltering. Anyone of them would have gladly stepped in front of a spear thrust aimed at Abram, but their knees turned to porridge at the thought of venturing away from the safety of their fires after dark.

*“Blast that Abram! How bad I let him manipulate me again?”*

It was emesh and we had led the flocks up into the Hursag Mountains to escape the searing heat of the plains and to find sufficient grass for the sheep. It had been a very dry enten and there wasn’t much grass in the foothills, so we had pressed on ever upwards, following the course of the great river that drained the rocky peaks of their perpetual snow. Only this year the peaks were barren and the river nearly dry and the sheep were bleating with thirst.

We were resting in the shade after lunch awaiting the return of Udul and Abram, whom I had sent ahead to scout for a spring to water the sheep. I had barely closed my eyes—I wasn’t asleep mind you—but couldn’t relax because it was much too quiet with Abram gone. That scamp couldn’t be silent any more than a hippo can tiptoe into a swamp.

Sitting upright, I surveyed our camp while I adjusted my tunic and fastened my sandals. This was a coveted grazing site which the family had jealously guarded for generations. Surrounded on two sides by steep walls covered with loose rocks and soft, dusty soil, a raiding party from above would be heard and seen hours before arriving in our valley. In good years, a small but steady waterfall trickled down the back wall of this valley and filled a small pool which fed a small stream that nourished a lush meadow dotted with clumps of oak, pistachio and almond trees. Gathering the nuts from these wild trees was almost as valuable to the family as the deep grass and the sweet water was to the flocks.

This was not a good year. The waterfall had nearly stopped completely. The pool was little more than a mud wallow which trapped the parched sheep as they rushed desperately for even a sip of water. If not for the amazing skill and tenacity of our dogs, half the herd may have been trampled in the near-stampede. Even so, it had taken all twelve of the herders a couple of hours to drive the herd away from the pool and pull those which got stuck to safety. Now bedded down two hours below the pool, the still-hungry and still-thirsty sheep had devoured the few brown morsels of grass in that portion of the valley within a few hours.

And so we waited anxiously for Udul and Abram to return with ever-more critical news. Circling overhead a handful of buzzards foretold the grim end that awaited our expedition without water. If we didn’t find a good-sized spring by tomorrow, some of the sheep would begin to die. Our own goatskins had begun to shrink and less than two days of

water remained even though we were down to half rations.

Abram had wanted to go and scout ahead. “As the son of Terah, it is my duty to save his sheep by finding them water,” he declared.

“As the one Terah has placed in charge, it is *my* duty to make sure you don’t kill yourself while doing your duty,” I replied.

These mountains were very dangerous, with loose rocks, sheer cliffs and hungry lions lurking around every bend. Even worse, the barbarians of Gutia were raiding again. Not two days ride north of here another clan had been ambushed just last month: flocks stolen, men butchered, women and children dragged off—into slavery, presumably, or worse.

I didn’t want to hurt Abram's pride by rejecting his offer too quickly. Nor did I want to leave him without enough to do, as idle hands make much mischief. I had learned that the hard way: when Abram was just seven he wandered off with a caravan bound for Bactra—fabled Bactra of secret mountain passes and burning desert sands; of mythical beasts and exotic spices; of lapis lazuli and royal cloth. By the time we caught up with the caravan, he was almost halfway to Lagash.

Abram received a stern lecture from Terah about the dangers of strangers. I received a beating from my father Haran, who by ill-chance happened to be home for a brief respite from the seemingly never-ending battles he fought alongside King Utu-khegal against the Gutian barbarians. When I complained that I had not been the one to run off—I was told that keeping Abram out of trouble was more important than the flocks we had been tending when the caravan passed by.

And last year, Abram had sneaked aboard a ship in the harbor at Ur. Fortunately, the captain was sleeping off the previous night’s revelry thus delaying its return to Dilmun long enough for one of the crew to find Abram hiding in a sack of barley—apparently the other sacks of barley weren’t wriggling around and sneezing. Unfortunately, in his eagerness to avoid capture, Abram overturned two costly vessels of wine and trampled the ship’s personal shrine to Nammu, the goddess of the sea.

Arriving upon the scene just as the still-inebriated captain was being summoned to decide the fate of their diminutive stowaway, I observed that turning him over to the “proper authorities” might not be in anyone’s interests. After all, the temple priests would undoubtedly detect some inauspicious omens requiring days of expensive spirit-cleansing rituals and even more expensive delays in the completion of their shipping contracts. Slipping a silver armband to the first mate, I suggested that purchasing a couple of statuettes to pray before the shrine would be much simpler and quicker.

“As for this delinquent, as the scribes say: ‘his mother never should have given birth to him, his god should never have fashioned him.’ Turn him over to me and I’ll make it unanimous—after I thrash him—he’ll wish he had never been born, too.”

With a few theatrical kicks to his posterior, and some well chosen epithets for good measure, I pushed him down the boat ramp and across the square. On the way home Abram was unusually quiet most of the way. Finally, he looked up at me: “Lot, you should not have offered them idols for their false gods.” Well, I know it was wrong to encourage these pagans, but you can be sure I didn’t multiply my error by telling Terah about this escapade.

Maybe I could let Abram go with one of the older herdsmen. Sab-gal had been chief herdsmen for Grandfather Terah even before my father Haran was born. Now in his eighties?...nineties?—I wasn’t certain—he was still quite vigorous, but not as sure on his

feet as he once was. His son, Udul, was the biggest man I knew; he was nearly five cubits tall. Although he was not particularly clever, he could take care of himself and knew the mountains better than anyone but Sab-gal. If anyone could protect Abram it was Udul. Besides, how could Abram get into any trouble this time, now that I was wise to his tricks?

Nevertheless, ten hours later I was getting anxious. Standing up, I asked Sab-gal if they should have returned already but his answer was interrupted by shouts from the other herdsmen. A tall figure emerged from the trees above the camp. Slowly, one foot dragging after another, Udul hobbled into camp, shoulders slumped, head down—alone.

“Where’s Abram?” I shouted.

Udul stumbled and staggered across the camp and threw himself prostrate before me. His tunic was tattered and his arms were covered with scratches as if he had fallen into a thistle patch. A low moan like an animal’s escaped from his throat. His giant hands clawed great clumps of hair from his head and beard. Still prone, Udul awkwardly unsheathed his well-worn sword and pushed it, hilt first, to me.

“Take my worthless life, Master Lot. I have brought dishonor upon my family. I cannot bear to face Terah with my shame at losing his boy.”