

PRODIGAL SONS

Part VI

"You said this trip would be full of surprises," Abe said. "You didn't mention that it would be full of dangerous adventure with wild and blood-thirsty men."

"It's no trip in the woods," Eliud countered. "There will always be surprises in life. That is what keeps it interesting. Be honest, your life must have been boring until now."

"We would make business trips every now and then," Michael offered. "We wouldn't be where we are today without those trips."

"And none were without incidents?" Eliud asked.

"OK," Abe admitted. "There were problems once in a while."

"Serious problems?" Eliud pushed.

"Remember that time we were set upon by robbers," Michael recalled. "That was close!"

"Couldn't go anywhere without protection after that," Abe admitted.

"We paid a mercenary group to travel with us," Michael said, "after that, to protect us."

"How do you know the mercenary weren't in on it in the first place?" Eliud challenged.

"Maybe they set the whole thing up just to get the business of protecting you."

"You think?" Abe asked.

"I'm sure that is a possibility," Eliud said. "Been down that road myself."

"That is why we were forever worrying about our sons' business trips, where they met your daughters."

"Good sons, Abe!" Eliud said. "You should be proud."

"We are blessed," Michael added.

"How far to the next watering hole?" Abe asked.

"Not much longer," Eliud replied. "This time, it should be only ourselves and the stars."

"I am looking forward to some quiet conversations under the night sky," Michael said.

"Are you sure we won't have any surprised visitors?" Abe asked.

"One can never be too sure," Eliud was playing it safe. "However, as you noticed, we are far from any other waterhole this time."

"How is that helpful," Abe said. "It would make us more vulnerable!"

"Because they would have to travel far, like us, to get there," Eliud said. "And we would have seen them by now. My scouts have been keeping out an eye for anyone following."

"That's good to know," Abe added.

"I wouldn't put my family at any unnecessary risk," Eliud also added.

"Is that it, there in the distance?" Michael asked.

"It is," he said. "You have good eyes. It is nestled at the foot of the hills. My men are already there scouting the area. The hills make a good look out too."

"It is bigger than I thought" Abe said. "I'm looking forward to a restful night."

"You will love the spot, Abe," Eliud said, "since the hills cool it off considerably in the night. There is also a surprise there that I am anxious to show you."

"Oh? What is that?" Abe was curious now.

"There is a marking on the cave walls there that you might find interesting," was all Eliud would say. "My scouts said there is an Ethiopian Official already camped there."

"That could be good or bad?" Abe wondered out loud.

"Most of the Ethiopians we have met on our travels were mainly officials and carriers traveling to Jerusalem," Michael said. "Maybe we know this one?"

"We think this one is probably an important official by the looks of things, waiting to rendezvous with his escort," Eliud guessed. "That is the usual way for them, and will meet them half way. It looks like his escort from Jerusalem has already returned."

"I wonder what he is doing out here in the middle of no-where?" Michael was guessing. "Probably the same thing we are doing, just going from one destination to the next," Eliud suggested. "He could have gotten off schedule, too. That is easy to do for anyone traveling on a schedule."

"It looks like we are only a couple of hours from our destination," said Michael.

"You are right, Michael," said Eliud, somewhat surprised. "You have hidden gifts that are starting to show on this trip. We will be there soon. My scout is returning."

After a short while a familiar rider approached. "The official from Ethiopia welcomes us to join him for dinner tonight," the scout informs Eliud and the brothers.

"Well, this is good news," Eliud said. "Tell him we accept. Brothers?"

"Yes, we would be delighted!" Abe and Michael answered in reply.

"I thought you said this oasis would be deserted?" Michael said more to the aside.

"Fortunately, the only person I am interested in seeing in all the world just happens to be at the same oasis at the same time we will be!" Eliud said excitedly.

"You've met him before?" Abe asked surprised.

"Oh, yes! Many times!" Eliud said still excited. "One cannot help but meet many people who travel a lot like us on the same roads. We even try to time it so that we can encounter each other."

"Why is that?" Michael asked surprised.

"Many reasons," Eliud said, "but mainly for good companionship, safety, and the latest news. Any news is important when traveling!"

"Why is that?" Michael repeated himself not realizing it.

"So that you don't fall into any unfortunate situations that could have been avoided by simply knowing about it ahead of time," Eliud said. "For example, the Romans are always on the move, which is why they built these roads and that is why they are successful in keeping their empire together. They may not get to a certain place in time, but they will get there eventually."

"What good is getting somewhere too late to do any good?" Michael asked.

"The fact that Rome will get there eventually and extract retribution one way or another is a very strong deterrent!" Eliud offered. "Their opponents will think twice next time, even if they have won this round."

"Do you find it very helpful?" Michael asked unconvinced.

"Yes, I do," Eliud responded, "up to a point. Besides, the alternative is very enticing."

"How is that?" Michael challenged.

"If the rulers of a territory cooperate, the Romans could even continue to let them rule themselves," Eliud answered.

"As long as they pay their taxes," Michael added sarcastically.

"The alternative is to be wiped out by a superior force, Rome," Eliud countered. "Besides, even if Rome wasn't a present danger, there are always some tribe or people waiting to

expand their territory worse than the Romans. Israel had a great arrangement with Rome."

"How is that?" Michael asked surprised.

"Our young men didn't have to enlist in the military," Eliud pointed out.

"If you paid a tax in place of service," Michael countered.

"We didn't have to send our temple tax to Rome. We were allowed to send it to Jerusalem instead," Eliud added, "and other amenities."

At that moment the Ethiopian Official rode up to meet them.

"Eliud, my old friend, you are still in one piece!" said the Official.

"I am, very much so, because I have traveled with the best...you!" Eliud returned the greeting. "Your good presence wards off all evil spirits. What brings you to this part of the country, business in Jerusalem?"

"Yes, the usual business," he said. "What about you and your two companions? I haven't seen them before. New sons in law?" he laughed.

"Sort of right, Telesphor! My daughters would be doubled blessed though. These are their new fathers-in-law!" Eliud proudly exclaimed.

"Oh?" Telesphor looked confused.

"The daughters and our sons..." Abe began.

"...our sons and their new wives..." Michael continued.

"...are at home running the business," Abe finished, "...with their mothers."

"So, its your chance to get away?" Telesphor offered.

"Yes!" they both answered and laughed.

"Good for you," was all Telesphor could muster.

"It's a long story, friend," Eliud said.

"We have the time," Telesphor added laughing.