

CHAPTER XIII

In the Flames of Exile

THE SETTING

Jerusalem, the holy city, had been plundered, the temple in ruins. There was no going back for this generation of Israel, no immediate return to the holy land. God's people had to come to terms with their exile.

Now in Babylon, the Hebrews reluctantly embraced life as citizens of this foreign empire, hoping to remain loyal to their heritage, despite the pagan idols and worship rituals that surrounded them. It became imperative for the Jews to make the best of their new life in Babylon and pray for the shalom of the province.

It wasn't going to be easy. King Nebuchadnezzar expected the conquered Israelites to forsake their roots and assimilate into Babylonian society. What the Jews lacked in pagan decorum they made up for with contributions to imperial society by working hard and with integrity.

The prophet Jeremiah urged the exiles to build homes, start families, and build a life in this foreign land. For the exile would last seventy years before God would allow Israel to return to Jerusalem.

It was time to become the people God had always intended Israel to be, a blessed people that blessed the rest of the world in the name of the Lord. *Blessing* had to take on new meaning. In the past, Israel had lost sight of God's heart for all humanity and had gotten caught up in its own nationalistic interests and idolatrous ways. This forced exile was God's way of reorienting the heart of Israel to the needs of those around them.

But it would take divine reassurance for the Israelites to know that God was with them, that the exile did not mean that he had abandoned them. One such Israelite named Shamar only knew the devastation that had befallen Jerusalem and the temple. Like many, he needed someone to be the example of what faith looked like.

A ROYAL GUARD SPEAKS

My name is Shamar. I serve in the royal guard to King Nebuchadnezzar. Though I wear Babylonian armor and carry a spear, my hair braided in true Babylonian fashion, at my core I am a Hebrew.

I was nine when my family left the holy city to finally settle in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed our home and my people left, defeated and vulnerable, ashamed of our sins, and sentenced to live out the consequences of generational transgressions. Finding myself amidst the enemy in a culture I couldn't understand, I clung desperately to my father.

My father took up work as a potter while my mother tried her best to keep tabs on me. To their dismay, I eventually signed with the local security. My hope was to honor them while I overcame my own fears. I trained hard and took assignments all across the empire. I climbed the ranks by providing protection for satraps, governors, magistrates and treasurers and sent the money home to support my parents.

The hard work yielded unexpected fruit. I was assigned to the king's guard. An official named Shadrach had recognized my potential and recommended me for the position. Day 1 as one of the king's guards was also the day that officials from across the empire were to gather on the plains of Dura. There, King Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue would be worshiped. I expected to see familiar faces in the assembly that day.

The multitudes of officials gathered before the golden statue as the sun rose high in the cloudless sky. The statue, larger than life, seemed to touch the midday sun.

All eyes were on the king, and the musicians were poised to play their instruments. The king bade them with a gesture, releasing the musicians to erupt in orchestral unison. The assembly kneeled and stretched out their arms in a tremendous display of worship as they bowed their heads reverently before the towering golden statue.

All worshiped the king, and he basked in their sunbaked worship, surveying them with a grin.

Suddenly my eyes caught sight of three men refusing to bow. They stood together. Not only did they remain on their feet, but they had also raised their hands above their heads reverently toward the heavens, uttering words of praise to God alone.

Why aren't they bowing? I wondered.

I expected them to fall on their knees.

Yet, they stood.

Are they not going to bow?

Defiant.

I glanced over. A blackened chamber opposite the king's tent at the base of the statue—the furnace. King Nebuchadnezzar did anything he pleased, and anyone who displeased him he fed to the furnace. If these men didn't bow down now, they would be burned alive. The thought of burning flesh combined with the heat of the day made my body tense up.

These days, we Hebrews must look out for one another. God wasn't about to save us. What possessed these men to throw away their lives?

They obviously believed differently.

They're being foolish!

Chaldean astrologers crawled away from their place in the crowd and rose before the king: "We did it, O King! Just as you had commanded, as soon as the music played, we bowed down," they said, acting like children before a stern parent. "Yet Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego pay no attention to your statue or your command! They defy your lordship."

No! Why these men of all men? Shadrach...

"Bring them to me," The King commanded with a snap.

Without thought, I joined five other guards, navigating the sea of officials with our spears poised dangerously. I gripped my spear tighter and cleared my throat. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not only exiled Hebrews like me but also men I had provided protection in years past. I'd have to watch them be...

No, that cannot happen.

Worst day of my life.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego kept their hands lifted high and continued in their worship of God as we seized them for the king. They made no attempt to run or draw blades if they carried any.

By the pleading tone of their worship and shaking bodies, they *were* afraid. And the king would make them crumble. Something told me, however, that it wasn't Nebuchadnezzar they were afraid of. I dismissed that idea without a second thought.

As we approached the king's tent with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Gasps and whispers arose from the fear-gripped assembly and their eyes widened from nervous glances toward the blackened doorway.

Compliant and unflinching, the three men did not try to wrestle from our grasp nor snatch our spears. Did that mean they would wait until they stood before the king? Assassinate him? I couldn't believe these men were capable of such violence.

If they were every bit as admirable as I took them to be, then...

Where was God?

But once they stood before the king they did nothing, not even a cry for mercy.

"Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, is this true?" demanded the king, his eyes narrowed. "You scoff at my statue? My gods? At me? Surely not!" The king's tone was menacing with a darkness about it, as if he could summon power from a dark, unseen source like an ill-tempered demi-god.

The men didn't flinch. They acted like royalty speaking to royalty, as equals.

"Your god cannot save you from me. I'll give you another chance," he said, raising a shaking finger. "When you hear the music again, bow down and worship my statue and be forgiven. Otherwise, you will be thrown into the furnace on my order."

With that, everyone expected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to plead for mercy, to fall on their knees in desperate tears.

But they were steady as oaks, showing no compulsion to speak. Surely this was arrogance on top of insolence. However, that did not speak to the truth of what my eyes beheld. King Nebuchadnezzar seemed out of his depth, almost stripped of power, on edge, vulnerable. Somehow, the steady silence of these men had given him pause.

Shadrach took a voluntary step beyond Meshach and Abednego after what seemed like a perpetual pause, his eyes calm and unwavering.

I knew them and didn't know them. *Who are they to act this way before the king of kings?* I wondered.

"Good king," Shadrach began. "We won't defend ourselves before you. Our destiny is not in your hands. We are confident that our God, whom we worship, will save us from your wrath. However, even if he doesn't, we will have your majesty know that we will not serve your gods or worship your statue."

His words came swiftly and clearly with not a hint of disrespect. There was no mistaking his fearlessness for arrogance at this point. Shadrach was a man of faith risking his life with his Hebrew brethren.

And where was God?

I gazed up at the sky, the ninety-foot statue of Nebuchadnezzar blocking a good portion of my view of the clouds. Birds flew past its head as if to remind me that the statue symbolized a king who had no real power.

“Bind them and heat the furnace to maximum!” the king declared angrily, which yanked me from the clouds and down to the waking fury of the furnace.

My heart leaped into my throat.

I'm expected to carry out his orders, I gulped.

In no time, the furnace had been brought to roaring life. The heat tickled the hairs on my arms. From its mouth burst whips of red and orange flame as if sinister spirits from Hades were inside ready to snag and drag me in for their own twisted pleasure.

No guard could throw these men in and walk away unscathed.

My mind began to spin into an anxious whirl of thoughts. *If I do as he commands, I'm dead. If I refuse, I'm dead. How long before the king recognizes that I won't obey his orders?*

I clenched my jaw and tightened my grip on the spear, trying to compose myself. The worries encircled my mind, morphing into a swirling fog of good suppressed fear. My heart raced.

I stiffened when several brawny guards broke formation and marched out beyond the royal post. They grabbed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Terror spilled into their faces while their hands were tied behind their backs as the guards pressed them toward the furnace. Silent prayers to God were upon their lips.

“Into the fire! They will pay for this *outrage*,” roared the king.

Tears wet my cheeks, despite my best efforts to compose myself as a loyal guard before his majesty. I was about to witness the death of good Hebrew men.

God, how could you let these men suffer? Where are you?

As if the raging furnace had come alive like a monster on his word alone, King Nebuchadnezzar, drunk with power, took pleasure in this.

The guards threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in.

At once, the mouth of the furnace erupted mighty flames and engulfed the guards as well. In an instant, they lay as burnt and blackened corpses at the lip of the hungry furnace.

The king and I and everyone around stared back into the depth of the furnace. I could not explain what I saw.

There, inside that fiery hell appeared not three but *four* silhouettes within a dancing fire.

It couldn't be, I thought.

“Weren't there only three?” asked the king.

Sweating through my clothes, I squinted against the bright heat, trying to make out the faces in the flames. The glowing presence of the fourth face overpowered the fire.

“Who is the fourth being?” asked the king.

The fourth silhouette, regal and heavenly, wielded splendor beyond imagining. A heavy weight was lifted, and my soul began to float in a state of peace as beauty washed away my worries.

It was tranquil.

The fourth being, whomever he was, touched my heart. Suddenly, an echo surrounded my thoughts, draining out the heat and flames from my senses. The music that had played before everyone bowed became a replay in my mind, folding in on itself to reveal a beautiful melody beyond anything capable of man's instruments. Like a rock on the surface of a lake, it skipped across sad, childhood memories. Flames of a conquered Jerusalem and the sinking hearts of a people marching single file into exile.

From the song rose the smell of mother's cooking, anchoring me in days growing up in Babylon after the invasion.

This led to one inescapable, otherworldly conclusion: this fourth being, who knew me, was God, author of Creation.

“Servants of the Most High God, come out!” shouted Nebuchadnezzar with his arm raised against the heat.

The king grabbed Shadrach by the arm as the men exited the dying fire. There were no burns.

“Praise and worship belong to your God,” the king shouted. “Your God delivered you, just as you believed he would. You remained loyal to him, willing to lay down your life.” The face of the king beamed with joy. Turning to the assembly of officials, he shouted, “I declare that no one from any nation represented here, not a single people or language group, can utter blasphemy against the God of the Hebrews. Anyone who does so will be torn limb from limb and their house destroyed. No other god can deliver his people like their God.”

Real power had been revealed.

God was with us, even in the flames of exile.