

Chapter One

Abraham

An old man entered his tent, dropping the door flap behind him. In the darkness he knelt slowly before a clay firepot, very tired. He blew on a coal until it glowed, then he bore the spark to the wick of a saucer lamp. It made a soft nodding flame. The man's face was lean and wounded and streaked with the dust of recent travel. He began to unroll a straw mat for sleeping but paused halfway, lost in thought.

Altogether the tent was rectangular, sewn of goatskins and everywhere patched with fresher skins of the goat. Across the middle a reed screen hung from three poles, dividing the space into two compartments, one for the man, one for his wife. These two were all that dwelt in the tent. There were neither children nor grandchildren. There never had been.

A vagrant wind slapped the side of the tent so that it billowed inward, but the man didn't move. He was gazing into the finger-flame of the lamp.

Old man. Perhaps eighty years old. Nevertheless, this present weariness did not come from age. In fact, the man had a small wiry body as light and as tough as leather. Nor was his eye diminished. It watched with a steadfast grey light, awaiting interpretation. It was not an old eye, but a patient one.

Not age, then. Rather, the man was made weary by this day's travel and yesterday's war. His only relative in the entire land of Canaan even from the Euphrates River in the east to the Nile in Egypt was a nephew who had chosen the easier life. Though the old man himself lived in tents, Lot, his nephew, dwelt in the cities of the Jordan valley, the watered places, fertile places, desirable, sweet and green. But lately four kings of the north had attacked and defeated five cities of the valley. One of these was Sodom, the city Lot had chosen. Among the prisoners whom the northern kings carried away, then, was Lot.

As soon as the old man heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he armed three hundred and eighteen of his own men, mounted donkeys, and pursued the enemy with a light and secret speed. In the night he divided his forces. He surprised the northern kings by striking from two sides at once. He routed them. He drove them home. And all their plunder, all their prisoners he brought back to the cities that had been defeated: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, Zoar. Lot was free again, and again he chose Sodom for his dwelling though the men of the place had a reputation for extreme wickedness.

That was yesterday.

Today the king of Sodom had offered the old man all the plunder he'd returned, but the old man refused.

Today the Priest-King Melchizedek had come forth with bread and wine to honor the old man, and he honored him saying:

Blessed are you!

Blessed, too, be the God most high
who delivers your foe into your hand!

And today the old man had come back to his tents, again, near the oaks of Mamre, tired. Today, in the evening, his wife had baked him a barley cake, though he ate scarcely anything and she herself ate nothing at all.

"Is the young man safe, then?" she had asked.

“Yes,” he told her.

“And his children?” she said, looking dead level at her husband. “How are the children of the man who lives within the walls of houses?”

“Safe,” said the man.

“They are home, then?” she said. “Lot sits contented among his children, then? Lot looks upon the consolation of his old age, then, because he has an uncle who saves him when his own choices get him into trouble?”

The old man said nothing.

“Because he has a good uncle?” she continued. “A generous uncle? An uncle whose wife never did put the first bite of barley cake into the mouth of her own child?”

It was then that the old man arose and left his food unfinished. He trudged through the dusk to his own side of the tent and entered and pulled the flap down behind himself and lit the lamp and fell to staring at the single flame, the straw mat only half unrolled in front of him. He was very tired. He was kneeling, sitting back on his heels. He maintained that same posture, unwinking, unsleeping, through the entire first watch of the night. All sound had long since ceased outside. The encampment slept. His wife, finally, had fallen asleep on the other side of the reed screen. She was sleeping alone. Then, in the middle of that night, God spoke.

Fear not, Abram, God said, calling the old man by name. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great.

Abram did not move. He did not so much as shift his eye from the orange lamp-flame. But his jaw tightened.

God said, Abram, northward of this place, southward and eastward and westward all the land as far as you can see I will give to you and to your descendants forever.

Still motionless and so softly that the wind outside concealed the sound of it even from his own ears, Abram breathed these words: “So you have said. So you have said. But what, O Lord God, can you give us as long as we continue childless?”

A wind took hold of the tent-flap and lifted it like a linen. The lamp-flame guttered and went out.

God said, Come. Abram, come outside.

On his hands and knees the old man obeyed.

God said, Raise your eyes to heaven. Look to the stars, Abram. Count them. Can you count them?

The old man said, “No. I cannot count them. They are too many.”

Even so many, said the Lord God, shall be your descendants upon the earth.

With the same gaze as he had earlier turned upon the lamp-flame Abram gazed toward heaven. Now there was no wind at all. The air was absolutely still. Nothing moved in the land, except that the man could hear the sighing of his old wife inside her compartment.

He said, “Is it required then that a slave born within my household must be my heir?”

God said, Your own son shall be your heir.

Abram said, “How shall I know that? How can I know, when you have given us no offspring?”