

Sacred land

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Dedicated to Konrad who responded to the distress signal.

Birds were taking off, startled by the kids running down the grassy hill. Shouting and laughing, the children reached the camp in the valley.

"They're coming! They're back!" announced the boy who led the group.

People working between the tents stopped for a moment.

"Easy, youngster," said man repairing a cart's wheel. "Don't get so excited."

"But they're finally back!"

"Like every time before. Calm down." Man shook his head and returned to work.

Kids gathered around the fire at the center of the camp. Few adults joined them and watched the two men coming down the hill. The sun was setting in the cloudless sky.

"Will we be moving again?" little girl asked her mother.

"Maybe. We have to be patient and wait for the decision."

"But I don't want to move, mommy..."

When the two wanderers finally got to the camp they were greeted by the tribal chief, Gedaliah.

"What news are you bringing?" he asked.

"We found a good place," said older one, called Jahdai. "There is a small lake and the forest not far away."

"But first we want to talk with the Highest Priest," said younger wanderer, Adonijah.

"I understand," said Gedaliah. "People, back to your work before it gets dark."

Crowd dispersed and even the kids did not ask questions knowing the gravity of the matter. Three men walked to the biggest tent. Jahdai and Adonijah removed their backpacks and placed them on the ground.

"Your Holiness, the scouts are bringing the news," said Gedaliah, loudly.

They heard gentle voice from the inside: "Oh, they're back? Come in."

Gray-haired man was waiting for them sitting in a cushion. In the light of oil lamps they saw smile on his avuncular face.

"Praise be!" he said. "What did you find out there, my children?"

"Well, there is a good place for a camp, Your Holiness," said Jahdai. "There is lake and a forest. It's beautiful. And there is something more."

"What is it?" asked Highest Priest.

"As always we scouted the surroundings. When we went east through the hilly area, well..." Jahdai paused for a moment. "After an hour we reached mysterious place."

"Mysterious place, you say?"

"Yes, Your Holiness. There were stone columns marking some kind of a border."

"There were writings on them but we didn't understand the language," said Adonijah. "But they looked really old."

Highest Priest thought for a moment.

"I'd like to look at this writings. Maybe this is what we are looking for," he said. "You think that's a good place for a camp, right?"

"Yes, Your Holiness," said Jahdai.

"We'll be moving, then. How far is that place?"

"With the whole camp we should arrive there within two weeks."

"Good." Highest Priest put his palms together. "Let's pack up."

"I'll instruct the people tomorrow morning," said Gedaliah.

"Excellent," said Highest Priest.

Scouts looked at each other. Jahdai took a deep breath and said: "Your Holiness..."

"Yes, my child?" asked Highest Priest.

"There is something else. Behind that columns..." said Jahdai. "We saw something really strange."

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Two weeks later, after the morning service, Highest Priest gathered both scouts.

"Do you have everything you need?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Holiness," said Jahdai pointing at his backpack. "We're always prepared."

"Good," said Highest Priest. "So... show me that place, my children."

"Follow us, Your Holiness," said Adonijah.

When they left the tent, Jabin, the old man who was not born in the tribe, approached them.

"Where are you going, Your Holiness?" he asked looking the priest into eyes.

"For a walk, good man," he replied.

"For a walk..." Jabin tilted his head sideways. "May I join you, Your Holiness?"

"Well..." There was a note of uncertainty in Highest Priest's voice.

"Don't try to put me off. After all those years, all that travels..." said Jabin.

"I observed you, your behavior. You're excited. We are finally in our sacred land, aren't we?"

Highest Priest was silent. Jahdai and Adonijah were looking at the two men with curiosity.

"My youth is long gone. How much time I have left?" said Jabin. "Would you let me see the sacred land?"

"I haven't expected such a dedication from you," said Highest Priest. "I remember you being rather... quiet on the services."

"Please understand, Your Holiness. I still sometimes feel like an outsider... But I'm thankful for everything."

"You have been with us for several years now. However, I understand what do you feel. Things must have been tough for you before we crossed paths." Highest Priest smiled. "Unfortunately, I don't know what that place really is. I have to visit it first before showing it to the tribe."

"It doesn't matter. I want to see it. Let me see it, please."

"You surprised me, my child." Highest Priest put his right hand on Jabin's shoulder. "Your faith is strong. Well, I can't forbid you going with us. Come."

The group went on through the grassland toward the hills. Once they were above the plain, Highest Priest stopped for a moment and looked at the camp. Several men were still putting up last tents while others were sitting on the lake shore with quickly improvised fishing-rods. Kids were playing nearby immersed in their own world. "What a lovely place," thought Highest Priest.

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"This is it," said Jahdai.

Stone columns were sparsely placed along the hill. Below, the wide valley was covered with the huge thorns. Spiky landscape stretched all the way to the distant slope. Men stood speechless while the wind was whistling over the area.

"Your Holiness," said Adonijah after a long moment of silence. "You wanted to see the writings."

Highest Priest gave him a blank stare.

"Your Holiness?" Adonijah was worried.

"I think..." said Jahdai when priest silenced him raising his hand.

"This is..." he said and closed his eyes. "This might be it." He opened his eyes and smiled.

"So, what now, Your Holiness?" asked Jahdai.

"I need to look at it," said Highest Priest and walked over to the nearest column.

Jahdai and Adonijah went after him, but Jabin stayed behind. They waited in suspense while the priest was staring at the ancient letters.

"I can read it, my children!" His eyes were moving quickly. "It says... It says: 'This place is a message... and part of series of messages. We were considered by

God as right and just culture...’ ”

”What’s next?” asked Jabin.

”Unfortunately the text ends here... The column is damaged,” said Highest Priest. ”I’ll look at the other columns later. That text is enough. This is the place!”

”The place is a message?” asked Adonijah.

”A message from God!” Highest Priest was joyful. ”That place is a temple containing a message from God. We found it!”

”But all this...” Adonijah pointed at the strange landscape. ”It’s scary.”

”It has to be scary,” said Highest Priest. ”That spikes are here to protect this place from demons and unbelievers.”

”So this is it?” asked Jahdai. ”God finally led us to... His home?”

”Yes! Yes, my son!” Highest Priest smiled broadly. ”I taught you well.”

He stretched his arms up and looked in the sky.

”Thank You, God! Thank You!”

He looked around and said: ”Now we have to find an entrance. That place is really old, so the entrance to the temple could have collapsed long time ago...”

”There is a cave nearby,” said Jahdai. ”We saw it before but didn’t explore it.”

”We have our torches and ropes,” said Adonijah. ”We can check it out now.”

”Oh, children.” Highest Priest put his palms together. ”Do it. Do it. We will meet in the camp later. Come and tell me everything.”

”Yes, Your Holiness,” said Jahdai.

”What a beautiful day.” Highest Priest was watching the scouts making their way through the shrubs. ”It’s the greatest moment in...” Turning around, he realized that Jabin was gone.

”Hello?”

No one answered. Growing suspicious, Highest Priest left for the camp.

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Reaching the camp, Highest Priest heard tumult. He hastened his pace and saw a crowd. Somewhere in the middle Jabin was speaking: ”Yes! Cursed place! We can’t stay here.” The voice was shaky. ”His... Holiness brought us to a trap.”

”What’s going on here?” Highest Priest pushed his way through the crowd and stood before Jabin. ”What are you talking about?”

”You know what I’m talking about.” Jabin pointed at him. ”You brought us to a cursed place.”

Facing the crowd Highest Priest said: ”My children, why are you standing here listening to him?” He turned his head to Jabin. ”Man must have lost his mind.”

”There is an old story kept in my family since long time ago...” said Jabin.

"You better stop now, before you say something you'll regret."

"Old story which says that we should fear places with spikes because they're cursed and dangerous!"

"Enough! That's a heresy!" Highest Priest turned to the crowd. "My children, I'm certain that we have finally found a sacred land. Our journey ends here. That place might look unwelcoming to the unbeliever," he said looking at Jabin," but it is in fact hiding a temple with a word from God. I asked Jahdai and Adonijah to look for the entrance."

"But..." said Jabin.

Highest Priest gave him a hostile look.

"Soon we will all visit the temple. You have to be patient. What did I teach you?"

"Our God wanted to save humanity. He died and then resurrected to redeem our ancestors," replied crowd in unison. "But people were still living in sin. So God had chosen few right and just people and ordered them to build temples. Then he sent a string of disasters and wiped out sinful civilization. The survivors were promised redemption if they find just one of the temples."

Highest Priest smiled.

"We found such a temple. We can repent our sins and be with God again. But you have to be patient."

"No, no, it's not a temple," said Jabin. "Temples shouldn't prevent you from entering it. It's something else... A cursed place."

"You had your time," said Highest Priest. "You're a heretic. Everyone is a witness. Throw him in the cage."

People in the crowd looked at each other.

"Throw him in the cage, he's a heretic." Highest Priest tried to maintain composure.

Gedaliah stepped out from the crowd.

"You heard His Holiness. Ready the cage. Move it!"

* * *

Next day, Gedaliah went to the meeting with Highest Priest.

"You wanted to see me, Your Holiness?" he said entering the tent.

"Yes." Highest Priest was in a pensive mood. "How's our heretic?"

"He receives meals and water," said Gedaliah. "I don't think there is anything wrong with him after one day in a cage."

"Good. I can't believe that for all this time he was hiding his true intentions."

"Your Holiness, do you think that we should have left him in that desert where we met him?"

"No, of course not. He fooled me, but I forgive him." Highest Priest shook his head. "But will God forgive him?"

"May I ask..."

"I talked with the scouts."

"Ah, I saw them in the morning but didn't have an occasion to talk to them. Any news, Your Holiness?"

"They found the entrance to the temple. It's time to gather the people and go there. Everyone who doesn't have urgent responsibilities should go."

"I'll arrange for that, Your Holiness. It's... I'm speechless."

"I know. It's a great moment for all of us."

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People were coming down the rope ladder. Those who could not climb down by themselves were lowered in harness. Adonijah was controlling the whole operation and flow of people. Newcomers were being divided into groups of five. First and last person were receiving torches and each group was directed to follow the previous one. Shadows were dancing on the walls covered with pictures of scary faces while the steady steps echoed in the corridor.

Highest Priest and Gedaliah were waiting in the large chamber when Jahdai approached them.

"We're bringing people down, Your Holiness," he said. "Everything is in order right now."

"Good," said Highest Priest. "Good."

Soon, first people entered the room.

"Please come closer, my children," said Highest Priest. "Don't be afraid, all the disturbing pictures are to scare unbelievers."

Crowd steadily was becoming larger and larger. Feeling the growing tension, Gedaliah glanced at Highest Priest who emanated calm and peace.

Finally, Adonijah made his way through the crowd and said: "Everyone is inside now, Your Holiness."

"Good," said Highest Priest. "Very good."

He gazed at the tribesmen and said: "Listen my children. We're in a sacred place. It was built by the people before us, chosen by God. As you know, they were the only ones who were spared God's wrath during the Judgement Day and taken to Heaven. But our God has mercy and when He saw that there were few survivors of the Armageddon, He gave them a chance to redeem themselves. And today we, the descendants of that survivors, finally completed the quest. Our long journey is over. This is God's temple and here we can redeem ourselves. Our sins will be forgiven. Sins of our ancestors will be forgiven. Rejoice!"

Crowd erupted in shrieks of joy.

When the people calmed down, Highest Priest said: "Look at this symbol." He brought his torch closer to the huge drawing on the wall. "That object with the three leaves up there – this is God. Now look at the bottom. God is resurrecting a man! That's right! This is a transition from a dead man to a healthy man full of life. In this place everything is possible."

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Later that day, on the way back to the camp, Adonijah collapsed. Gedaliah immediately ordered few men to carry him and the rest of the walk passed in silence.

Outside the healer's tent, where several concerned tribesmen gathered, Highest Priest was comforting Adonijah's mother.

"Everything is in God's hands now," he said. "Trust Him."

Gedaliah looked at the pale Jahdai and asked: "Is everything alright?"

"I feel dizzy..." He bent in half and threw up.

Quickly, he was grabbed by two bystanders and brought to the tent.

"What is happening?" Gedaliah gazed at the scene.

Highest Priest beckoned to him and they went aside.

"We have a serious situation," said Highest Priest when they entered his tent. "I think I know who is to blame."

"What do you mean, Your Holiness?" asked Gedaliah.

"The sudden illness of our brave scouts might be the punishment for the heresy."

"That man, Jabin, is responsible?"

"Without a doubt. His words must have angered God."

"What should we do, Your Holiness?"

"Remember that our God has mercy. We have to appease Him."

"How?"

"Tomorrow we will go to the temple again and pray for forgiveness. Gather as many people as possible. Make sure to bring everyone who wasn't there today, especially children."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

* * *

The passageway was completely blocked by the debris. As Highest Priest was wondering what was on the other side, Gedaliah walked up to him.

"Your Holiness, people are ready."

"Good. I will join them in a moment." Highest Priest pointed at the impassable corridor. "Look at this. We will have to find the way. We need to reach the heart of the temple."

"Clearing that will be a big task."

"Maybe there is an alternate route. After their first escapade, Jahdai and Adonijah told me about a huge crack in the floor somewhere. They said they marked it, but I couldn't find it."

"It has to be somewhere, Your Holiness."

"We'll find it. But now we have to pray."

Men entered the chamber filled with the anxious people. Gedaliah joined the first row.

"My children, we need to ask God for forgiveness," said Highest Priest.

Crowd kneeled on the floor. Highest Priest raised his hands and closed his eyes.

"Dear Lord, we – sinners – stand before You to beg for forgiveness," he said. "Please, hear us. We are thankful for Your care during our journey and for leading us here. We are not perfect, but You didn't left us. You gave us everything. Please, forgive us the sin of heresy. Have mercy on us, Lord."

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Adonijah died in the evening and Jahdai in the following morning. By order of Highest Priest, their bodies were covered in sheets and brought to the temple. After spending the whole day on praying alone, he felt weak.

"You should go back to the camp." Gedaliah entered the room. "You should see it."

Surprised, Highest Priest turned around.

"I didn't hear you coming," he said. "What should I see?"

"Children are vomiting. Everyone is sick." His voice sounded like from the bottom of a well. "Why is that?"

"Calm down, my child. Calm down..."

"Look at this!" Gedaliah pulled out clump of his hair. "See?"

"I understand your anger." Highest Priest coughed. "Remember that God has His plans..."

"I vomited on my way here. You call it a God's plan?"

"I think it's because of that heretic." Highest Priest's vision was becoming blurred. "He didn't believe and we all suffer."

"All? He's the only one who didn't get sick! How is that possible?"

"How can anyone understand God's plan..."

"If something happens to my son and wife..." Gedaliah clenched his fist.

"Are you... threatening me?" Unexpectedly, formulating sentences became harder for Highest Priest. "You can't... scare me. God shall... protect me."

"We trusted you." Torch in Gedaliah's left hand was slowly becoming heavier. "We trusted... But our God... hates us!"

"That's a blasphemy!"

Highest Priest tried to stand up but lost his balance and fell. As he lay motionless, Gedaliah came up to him.

"Get up, liar."

There was no response.

"You can't leave us like that." He dropped the torch and fell to his knees.
"That's... unfair."

* * *

Wooden cage was just outside the camp. Lying on his back, Jabin contemplated starry sky behind the bars. He tried not to think about his thirst and hunger. It was several days since someone brought him food and water, and emptied the chamber pot. He had noticed then, that the couple who had came had been sick. Since then no one ever showed up and camp was completely silent. He closed his eyes. As he was waiting for death, a saying from an old legend, kept in his family for generations, echoed in his mind:

"This place is not a place of honor. No highly esteemed deed is commemorated here. Nothing valued is here. This place is a message and part of a system of messages. Pay attention to it! Sending this message was important to us. We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture..."

April, August – September 2015

This short story was inspired by the 2010 documentary film "Into Eternity". It's really worth seeing. I also suggest visiting the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant website "WIPP Exhibit: Message to 12,000 A.D.": http://www.wipp.energy.gov/picsprog/articles/wipp%20exhibit%20message%20to%2012,000%20a_d.htm [accessed Sept. 1., 2015] – saying from Jabin's legend is taken directly from the top of the page. Warnings, "Landscape of Thorns", everything is there. If you want to see what the Highest Priest interpreted as the "symbol of God resurrecting a dead man", then check out the ISO 21482:2007 Ionizing-radiation warning. And remember: prevention is better than decontamination. Also, stay away from the false prophets.