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TORN LEVIS

I found my brother, slumped over the ceremonial dagger he used to kill himself. He looked as if he'd lost forty pounds. A pool of his blood had poured out beneath him, giving the air a scent of copper and rancid meat.

"Jacoby?"

I shook my head, feeling sensations similar to those from sleep deprivation. He had to be playing a joke on me.

"Jacoby, this isn't funny. Please!"

My reflexes disintegrated as my awareness sank back an inch into my skull. I stumbled to the door as soon as I realized he had truly killed himself.

"Noah, Avram, James! Jacoby- He..."

They came running, screaming as soon as they entered the house. Screaming over the loss, but screaming because they also felt the responsibility of his death.

The tragedy started as another hot Sabbath (was there ever anything else in Israel?), and I had my mind on dunking my large frame in the nearby pool, not on dad's constant droning. So far, he had sacrificed a lamb, three doves, and a half a dozen pigeons. Dad was crying out for Zion. Two of the Christian apostles were nearby, preaching a new order of things as handed down by their teacher, the Galilean. Heresy, dad called it. The rabbinical priesthood had a monopoly on spiritual issues, but that new teacher had spoken of a new national order- a new covenant.

The ceremony finally concluded and dad excused us. Dad and Jacoby would be busy for at least a half an hour securing the temple. We might be able to catch a few words from the men called apostles. Dad vehemently threatened us to never go near them, but I talked Noah and Ahaz into joining me. It's not like dad would have ever noticed what we younger sons did.

"The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood-" the huge man called Simon was saying, "before that great and notable day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved." Strange doctrine, considering these men were calling Jesus the carpenter's son, the Christ, but you couldn't deny the power of these men. Their shadows healed the lame, and they spoke with unknown languages- heavenly languages they called them. Ahaz, Noah and I were hooked. We longed to do the things they could do. Their Galilean master even said that common men would do greater.

Many times before, people had come through the area claiming power, but this time something was different. We watched as necromancers from the area came and burned their magic books in enormous pile, embracing the Galilean's teachings instead.

We knew that we had to discover the secret to tapping their power, which, we concluded, couldn't have been evil. Their master made the point that evil couldn't cast out evil, which made sense. We had decided to follow at a safe distance and capitalize on their

insights. We would finally be able to show Dad that we could handle weighty spiritual matters. He had so little confidence in us, his seven sons, especially Jacoby.

"No, no Jacoby. Step back to the entrance and start over. The censer must swing past your hip on each side. How many times do I have to say it? Haven't you been studying your Mishnah?"

"Yes, Father," was all he ever said.

I knew animosity had already entangled his heart.

"Now your steps aren't right! One cubit, Jacoby. Each step has to be exactly one cubit. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob won't accept less than perfection."

"Yes, Father."

Jacoby never openly challenged Dad, but in secret, his anger was obvious.

"I hate that old man, and I hate all the ceremony!"

James was the only one who could be assertive with him. "Easy, Jacoby."

"Easy? It's easy to say easy, when Father is easier on you, than he is me!"

The argument was old.

"We have already established that you get the lion's share of grief regarding Dad's pressures."

"Oh thank you so much for your pitiful acknowledgment of my plight. You have no idea what pressure is."

We stayed out of the fracas. Once the two eldest collided, the only thing we five youngers could do was try to make peace after the contestants were spent.

"Look brother, there's no reason to get hateful with me. I didn't birth you, nor did I choose my place in line."

"But you do admit you like it just fine, don't you?"

James didn't reply.

"Father's vented so much of his frustration on me, that I'm sure if I were gone for good, there'd be no venom left for you."

"Don't talk like that Jacoby."

"At least I don't speak to you like Father speaks to me. He treats me worse than a Samaritan."

"Then quit."

"You're drunk." The phrase was Jacoby's worst insult. It referred to the sons of Eli the priest, who defiled the temple with their depraved behavior. "How do you quit being born first?"

"You know what I meant."

"I don't know anything, except that I'm surrounded by fools who couldn't possibly relate to my woes and responsibilities. I need some air."

Jacoby stood up and walked out. He had one confidant at times like this: Caleb, the Levite.

Sweat glistened off Caleb's bald head and his eyes shone red as he answered the door. Caleb had been praying, but prayer was nothing new for an intercessor.

"Can I come in?"

"Your father again?" Caleb stepped out of the way of the open door. "Come on in."

Jacoby dropped himself into the sling chair made of small logs and a tanned hide. "I'm sorry Caleb. I know this is less than convenient, having to nurse me along."

"It's not inconvenient as long as we get somewhere. I'm not young any longer. People don't harass me about spiritual things now. But they used to. There were times when I couldn't do anything right."

"He's not like you. He has no forbearance, no patience. He's cold and exacting."

"I was taught my patience. My father and I never had the weight of the entire rabbinical priesthood crushing down around us. Your father makes decisions that affect the entire nation. He's grooming you Jacoby; to take his place some day."

"I don't want his place, and I don't want his sentiment."

"Many men would envy the spiritual inheritance and position waiting for you."

"Let them have it."

Caleb tried to change the topic. "Concerning spiritual matters, I hear your brothers are curious about the new preachers sent by the Galilean."

"They're fools."

"The preachers, or your brothers?"

"Both."

"I love you and your family, so I'm going to tell it to you straight. You be careful of ravenous wolves. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob handed down our ceremonies from Mount Sinai. It's heresy to preach otherwise."

"They'll come to their senses."

"While your dissent with your father dulls yours. They'll listen to you if you don't approach them flying "Animosity" as your banner. They know how rough Sceva has made it for you. I sense you haven't lost their respect. Yet."

The picture of surrendering his brothers to false doctrine deflated Jacoby's hatred.

Better to be governed by harsh truth than by soft, accessible lies.

Jacoby yielded. "You always know how to reach me."

Caleb grinned. "Somebody has to sit on your shoulder."

Jacoby returned hours later. We were refreshed to see him in better spirits. He related the detail of his discussion with Caleb, focusing on the warning from the Levite priest.

"These men are heretics, and need to be avoided."

Avram cut in. "We have heard the one called Paul of Tarsus speak at the school of Tyrannus. He used to lead the persecution of these men as a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin; now he's one of them. His testimony is hard to discount."

I couldn't stay out of the exchange. "Jacoby, we have seen miracles. Ahaz, Noah and I. Great signs and wonders follow these men."

Jacoby turned to me. "A clever invention, little brother."

James had been attending Tyrannus' school with Avram. "I'm not as taken with this Tarsean buffoon as Avram. Tell me, Stephen, what wonders did these charlatans bring to Israel?"

"Nothing bogus. With my own eyes, I saw a man healed of leprosy."

"Leprosy, says little brother!" James walked over to me and stuck a single finger in my chest. "And you are a physician? Do you know the man really had leprosy?"

"Leprosy is an unseen disease." Nahum added. "It takes away the feeling in a man's limbs. It isn't a rotting disease, as some people have supposed. You couldn't see someone receiving his sense of feeling, or being healed of the malady."

"There." James gestured to Nahum emphasizing his comment. "What do you have to say to that?"

I looked over at Jacoby. He was heavily weighing each comment. "I saw the effects of the leprosy healed. The ulcerations dried up. All signs of the disease vanished."

"Mendacities. Frippery," James mocked.

"We may not care for Father's methods," Avram concluded, "but he does have discernment concerning spiritual matters. We have been warned to keep away. None of us would disagree that there is one God, and one method of access to him."

"Well I can't explain it," I said, "but something draws me to these men."

"A succubus," James cut in.

I ignored him. "They have power. And I want to find out why. I speak for Noah, and Ahaz, as well. We are going to hear them again."

"As you wish," James said. "You've all been confirmed. It'll be your funeral when Father finds out."

I rushed into my brothers' house days later, unable to contain my excitement. "James, Nahum, everyone- I have it!"

James stepped out from his bedroom. "Have what, upstart?"

"Proof. All the proof you cynics need."

Jacoby entered through the back door. "What's all the trouble?"

"The larva here says he has proof that the Galilean's disciples are what they claim to be."

"I didn't say that. But I do have proof that they cast out evil spirits, and I know how."

"Really?" James folded his arms across his chest and fell back leaning his weight on the wall. "Bore us."

Jacoby cut a disapproving glance at James. "Go ahead Stephen. You're going to anyway."

"This time I am." I pulled a stool between my legs. "I stayed out on the fringes of the crowds of the Galilean's followers, and that Saul, or Paul or whoever he is, showed up."

"Paul."

"Okay, Paul. He started preaching after too long; I don't know about what. But some people brought a lame man to him and he pulled out a cloth."

"Cloth?" asked Jacoby.

"He talked about it at the school," James answered. "It sounded foolish then, too."

"Well it's not foolish," I continued. "Paul touched the man with his sweat rag, and the man rose up and walked!"

"He was feigning you, Stephen."

"That doesn't sound much like proof," Jacoby agreed.

"I knew you'd say that, so I waited a while longer. And you know Hymeneas, that demented beggar that hangs out in the temple square every day?"

"Who doesn't," James remarked.

"Well, he's not deranged anymore. His relatives brought him, and Paul used the rag and healed him."

James' eyes widened. "That's impossible."

I took the opportunity to dig James. "Still bored?"

Jacoby moved over closer to me and pulled up a stool of his own. "Do you realize what you are saying?"

"Yes- that these men wield tremendous spiritual power. And that now we can have this power too." I pulled a cloth from my cloak. "With this."

"What is that?" Jacoby asked.

James spoke slowly. "It's one of Paul's handkerchiefs."

"Very good," I answered.

Jacoby jumped back. "WHAT? Get that thing out of here! It has to be infested with demons!"

"It can't be," I argued. "Evil can't cast out evil. We already decided that. It operates on another power. The power of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob- I believe."

James had turned pale. "This is too much to absorb. This cloth supposedly banishes evil, and to have access to that power, you stole it?"

"Well, not really," I explained. "At their meetings, the Galilean's men are always emphasizing how they have all possessions common. They pass baskets, and those who have money put money in, and those who don't, take money out. They invite others to take freely. I needed one of his cloths, so I went into Paul's tent and took it."

Jacoby walked back toward me. "And why do you need one?"

"To cast out the demon we are going to fight."

"We?"

"Ahaz, Noah and I."

"Stephen, you have lost your mind."

"Jacoby, I'm going to tell you something you haven't figured out because your rage toward Dad has blinded you: bad attention is better than no attention at all."

Jacoby just stared at me.

"Sure he's rough on you, to the point of hatefulness sometimes. But Noah, Ahaz and I constantly live in the shadow of you four. You're the high priest's first-born and his replacement; James and Avram study at the college and Nahum is in line for a position as a judge. Dad never even notices us. But he will now."

"You can't."

"We can, and will. We have had our minds made up for days. There's a man who lives over by the river, who rarely comes out of his house. I heard the apostles talking about him. He has fits because the spirit inside him controls his actions. We're going to make a declaration of our intent, and be sure that word gets back to Dad; we are going to exorcise that spirit."

They both looked at me. At least I had been blessed with size. The two of them together probably couldn't have taken me.

"You're talking nonsense," Jacoby finally said.

"We're going."

"All right," said my eldest brother.

I knew he saw the flame in my eyes.

"I have to wash. I'm going to go with you. Someone will have to pull your backside out of the fire."

"Not this time," I said.

My other brothers joined us, presumably Jacoby and James had rounded them up, and we went to the river to join Ahaz and Noah. The two youngest had been keeping vigil.

"Is he still in there?" I asked, spying the demoniac's house.

"Still there," whispered Noah. "He's been wailing all afternoon."

"I put the word out in Jerusalem that we would be confronting this lunatic at sunset.

There should be quite a crowd."

There was. I stood on a little rise in the earth and addressed the group. "Israelites, today we shall see a great demonstration of the power of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the house in the distance, lives a man possessed of an evil spirit. We shall deliver this man today from the evil forces that have him prisoner. Let all the people know that the sons of Sceva have declared it."

I started for the man's house, Noah and Ahaz directly behind me, Jacoby behind them and James, Avram and Nahum bringing up the rear. Strength in numbers, I guess. I certainly didn't need all the help. I had seen Paul of Tarsus do the same thing.

"Lunatic! Come out here!"

No answer.

I turned to Noah. "This looks bad little brother. Are you sure he's in there?"

"Where would he go. He was screaming his head off just before you got here."

The cracking wood sounded like thunder, as the lunatic's door exploded off its supports.

The crazed man filled the doorway. He shuffled slowly out past the overhang of his rooftop, his attention scattered. I felt my heart palpitate as I moved toward the man.

Even if the cloth didn't work after all, we still had Jacoby.

I pulled the prayer cloth from my cloak, and held it in front of me, trying to remember Paul's exact phrasing. "Evil spirit, burden this man no longer. We adjure you in the name of Jesus, who Paul preaches."

The man's attention suddenly centered on me, his face contorted into a carved, hardened visage. The man's lips were covered with a thick layer of spit which made strings across his mouth when he opened it. His voice was a guttural demonic throb. "Jesus I know and Paul I know, but who are you?"

He was on me faster than an adder, his strength inhuman. Even with my size, he effortlessly picked me up and threw me into a nearby bush. My brothers reacted. Noah rushed up and tried to grab the maniac from behind, but the enraged man whirled around clawing Noah and opening three large, bloody channels across his face. At the same time, Ahaz tried to beat the man with his fists. The man caught Ahaz' hand in mid-air and twisted my brother's wrist, snapping it like a twig. Ahaz fell to his knees holding the broken arm close to his chest. The lunatic kicked him in the stomach. My brother doubled over as the man-demon began stomping his shoulder.

Jacoby stepped into the maniac's full view. "Stand still, evil spirit, I command you! I have ceremonially washed and you cannot touch me!"

Without hesitation, the maniac rushed Jacoby, tearing the clothes from my brother's body and pulling a large patch of hair from his head. Blood ran down his face where the hair had been torn out. Avram, Nahum and James tried to rescue Jacoby. Avram received a broken nose. Nahum ended up with deep, bloody bite marks across his arm and chest. James received a caved-in groin, his pelvis broken. We all pulled ourselves up as soon as

we could and scattered. We were all lucky to escape with our lives and the clothes he left us. I carried James, while gritting my teeth against the pain of two cracked ribs.

Father was forced to remove Jacoby from the Levite priesthood because of the incident. The position would have to be taken by one of Caleb's sons. The incident was the epitome of humiliation for Dad; he made a point to remind us nearly every day. The pressure became too much for Jacoby. I never thought he'd take his own life, but that's how I found him. I can't help feeling like I, myself, pushed the knife in. My heaving sobs caused me excruciating pain in my ribs, but I couldn't stop crying for hours. None of us thought we could handle Jacoby's memorial service, but we would have never forgiven ourselves for not attending. Dad didn't. He moved to a small village, disowning us boys in the process. Nahum choked his way through the eulogy. A deep depression settled over our household in the days that followed. While we wallowed in what seemed to be endless despair, something that Simon Peter, the apostle, had said kept gnawing at me. He had spoken of something impossible: forgiveness in an unforgivable situation. I tried to shake it, but couldn't. Day after day, the words dug at me, along with dad's seeming hatred for us. I decided I couldn't take the anxiety any longer. Since no one was around to tell me that I couldn't see the Galilean's men, I decided to go see Simon and ask him to explain to me what seemed impossible. There had to be something to what they taught. A former member of the Sanhedrin, thought so.