

BEGINNINGS

A Novel by

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Book 1 of the Tomb, the Temple, the Treasure

PROLOGUE

The sounds of unearthly grunting mixed with the sounds of fighting and yells from his comrades below, were all too clear to the man standing ten metres above on the wooden scaffold. He strained with the weight of the large piece of square cut masonry he was carrying as he edged along the scaffold. Pausing, he leant over the edge and peered down. Though it was night, the full moon lit up the object of the man's attention. He edged forward a few feet until he was directly above his quarry. Hefting up the heavy stone above his head, he threw it. A guttural cry of pain from below, quickly followed by an angry howl signalled that his missile had found its target.

The man's smile of satisfaction quickly disappeared when the scaffold began to shake violently. Losing his balance, he fell to his knees. So forceful was the shaking, he had to hold on tightly to prevent himself from being thrown off and plummeting to the ground like the stone he had just thrown. Unable to resist the vigorous shaking for long, the wooden scaffold collapsed into a jumble of wooden poles and boards and crashed to the ground. The man screamed as he fell.

The partly built wall the scaffold had been beside to aid in its construction was next to topple to the ground. A ballooning cloud of dust, thrown up as the wall collapsed, rose into the air like thick morning mist. A howl of glee, from a large shadowy figure moving amidst the dust, was an indication of its delight with its destructive handiwork. Satisfied, it turned, and walked away. Although shrouded by the thick dust cloud rolling down the side of the hill, the shadowy figure could still be heard crashing through the undergrowth.

A man appeared out from the dust and walked over to the edge of the steep slope. He placed the large sword he held, point first in the ground and placed his hands on top. Benaiah Ben Yehoyada, Solomon's chief assistant, walked over to stand beside his king. Together they stared at the bushes and palm trees covering part of the hillside below being pushed aside, as something large and strong made its way through them.

'It's heading for the hills Benaiahu,' said Solomon. 'Follow him. I wish to learn where it dwells. It is strong, but perhaps it has a weakness we can discover to use against it.'

'It will be done Solomon,' said Benaiahu. 'I will learn all I can.'

Benaiahu quickly left to carry out the task.

Solomon turned, and as the dust drifted away, he saw the full extent of the devastation caused by the recent unwelcome visitor. Many weeks of hard work now lay in ruins. Recently constructed walls and thick stone columns now lay in pieces, little more than

piles of rubble. Although it seemed no one had been killed, indicating murder probably wasn't the creature's intention, the groans Solomon heard from around the site was evidence that some had been hurt in the attack. Sheathing his sword, he went to help the injured.

Benaiahu crouched behind a bush and peered into the clearing where the easy to follow trail had led him. He saw the large creature clearly for the first time walking around the clearing, bathed in moonlight. It wore a green full-length robe hemmed with gold and its leather-like skin was brown, with long fingers ending in sharp black claws. It sported a black pointed beard and had a large hooked nose and large staring eyes. Benaiahu then saw the two backward curved horns atop its head and recognised the creature for what it was - a demon!

Benaiahu watched as the demon walked over to a raised circular feature set just outside the cave entrance on the far side of the clearing. The feature was capped with a large round slab of stone. Resting on this was a large silver coloured goblet.

The demon laid his left hand on the stone slab and softly uttered a few words. The demon's face was briefly bathed in a red glow which made it look even more demonic, as the symbol etched into the slab glowed brightly for a few seconds. The creature then slid the slab aside and dipped the large goblet inside the opening. The goblet overflowed with water as he drew it out, put it to his lips and drained it in one go. The demon did this three more times before placing the goblet back on the slab and sliding it back into position. It placed its left hand on the slab and again softly uttered a few words. Again, the symbol glowed red briefly.

The demon turned and took a step towards the cave, then paused. It turned its head towards the bush concealing Benaiahu from its view and sniffed the air.

Benaiahu prepared to flee if the creature came towards him. It didn't. The Demon yawned, turned away and entered the cave.

Benaiahu let out a sigh of relief but remained hidden until he heard what he took to be the sounds of the demon's guttural snoring drifting out from the cave entrance, indicating it was deep in slumber.

Cautiously, Benaiahu entered the clearing and walked over to the raised pool - an idea was forming in his mind. He did not waste his energy trying to shift the stone slab, he knew it had been sealed with a spell only the demon could remove. He examined the symbol etched into the top. It was a capital 'A' set inside a circle. He now knew the demon's name, Asmodeus!

Benaiahu walked around the pool to examine its earthen sides. After he had gone full circle, he knelt and scraped at the hard compacted earth. He managed to make an impression, and with the right tools, he knew he would be able to dig through it. He left the clearing and went to report to his king about what he had found, and the plan he had to defeat the demon, Asmodeus.

The following day, Benaiahu led Solomon and sixteen men to the demon's lair. They had brought with them all the items they needed to carry out Benaiahu's plan. He had a reputation for his sharp mind and craftiness - which was why Solomon had chosen him to follow the demon - and although Benaiahu's plan to capture the demon was a simple one, it was also devious and clever.

Benaiahu stealthily walked towards the cave entrance and listened. He heard the faint regular breathing of the sleeping demon inside. He motioned to the men (who had remained hidden in the bushes) to come forward. Two, armed with spears, nervously stood guard outside the cave to ward off the demon if he should suddenly awake and exit his lair.

Benaiahu directed the other two men to dig two holes in the side of the pool's wall, one high and one low. When the man digging the lower hole broke through into the pool, water poured out and drained into the ground. Benaiahu handed him some rags, and the man stuffed them in the hole and then compacted it with earth.

Solomon motioned to more of the men waiting in the bushes to come forward. Already informed of their task, he watched as each of them took turns to pour large jugs of strong wine each carried into the higher hole. Before long, the wine overflowed out of the opening to indicate it was full. Benaiahu then plugged the hole with earth.

With part one of their plan now completed successfully, they all hid behind the bushes and rocks surrounding the clearing and waited to put part two into action.

As dusk fell, sounds of the creature stirring could be heard coming from inside his lair. There was then a loud rasping noise. Even with the apprehension the waiting men felt, they sniggered and then balked at the stench that wafted out over them, but they remained in hiding as the demon walked out of the cave.

Asmodeus yawned as he stretched out his body to relieve the tension of sleep.

He then walked over to the pool.

The men held their breath as the demon laid a hand on the stone top and recited the spell to unlock it. As soon as the demon slid aside the heavy stone cover, he smelt the strong stench of wine wafting out: he knew someone had tampered with the pool.

Asmodeus let out a deafening roar of anger as he paced around the pool in frustration; he then stopped and peered at the red pool of wine.

He dipped a finger in and then put it to his lips and licked. He grimaced at the sour taste and banged on the stone lid with a fist. He was thirsty and needed to drink. The demon snatched the goblet in frustration and dipped it roughly into the wine to scoop out a cupful. He sniffed the contents and then held it away and roared in anger again. He then quickly put the vessel to his lips and gulped it down in one go. He licked his lips and decided maybe it wasn't so bad after all. After a couple more he began to get the taste for it. Before long, he had drunk a third of the pool of wine. He now had a glazed look on his face. He scooped out yet another cup of the strong wine, and with a drunken swagger, he walked around the pool. He drained the goblet and then looking at his reflection in its shiny surface, his eyes rolled and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

Solomon and the men emerged from their hiding places and walked cautiously over to the demon. Solomon nudged it with his foot. The demon groaned and shifted his head. The men stepped away in case he awoke, but he continued his deep slumber.

'Quick, bring the chain and bind him,' ordered Solomon.

Solomon put his hand on his chief aid's shoulder. 'You have done well Benaiahu. It was a good plan.'

'Thank you Solomon. Let us hope the next phase works just as well.'

'I am sure it will. If not, we will have to think of another way to defeat him.'

The chain was quickly bound around the demon and locked in place. Solomon then ordered the men not involved in the next phase to hide. Solomon, Benaiahu and four men, who had positioned themselves around the demon, were all who remained in the clearing.

Solomon stood at the demon's feet and Benaiah, holding a pitcher of cold water, stood at his head.

Solomon nodded to the four men. They immediately lit the incense burners each of them held. The incense had been replaced with powdered sheatfish livers, collected from the rivers of Assyria. The demon hated the smell and would hopefully be repelled by it.

Solomon waited until he saw smoke drifting from each of the four burners the men swung from side to side to help release the foul smelling fumes from the smouldering fish livers. He then nodded to Benaiah, who emptied the pitcher of cold water over the demon's face and quickly stepped back.

The demon instantly reacted. Spluttering, he opened his eyes and wiped the water from his face. He then saw Solomon standing at his feet and tried to stand, but the chain bound around him restricted his movements. He then sniffed the air and screamed in revulsion as the strong pungent smell of the burning fish livers entered his large nostrils. He began writhing on the ground like a demon possessed.

'Asmodeus,' shouted out Solomon. 'Be still and I will free you from the smell.'

Asmodeus glared at the man who had spoken and shook his head in an attempt to free the scent from his nostrils, it failed. He growled at Solomon and then became calm. 'Release me,' he pleaded.

Solomon nodded at the four men and they backed away, but remained ready to dart forward if the need arose.

Asmodeus climbed awkwardly to his knees and looked at the chains that bound him. 'These chains cannot bind me,' he laughed. 'I will break free and I will continue to prevent you from building your temple. You are powerless to stop me,' he growled.

'Do it then,' said Solomon confidently.

Asmodeus expanded his body and tried to pull the chains apart, but failed. 'What trickery is this?' he spat.

The demon rose awkwardly to his feet and again attempted to break the chains binding him, but could not.

Unbeknown to Asmodeus, the chains were inscribed with Shem Hameforash - the true name of God.

Solomon held his ground as the demon stepped towards him. 'The word of God is upon you. You are now under my command. You will do as I say.'

Asmodeus leant forward until his face was only inches away from Solomon. 'What makes you believe that is so. I obey no man. I am the king of demons. I am Asmodeus!'

Solomon didn't flinch as the demon's foul breath washed over him. 'I too am a king. I am King Solomon, and you will obey me.'

Asmodeus became angry. 'I obey no man, king or not.'

Asmodeus examined the chains and saw the words inscribed upon them. He screamed in anger and glared at Solomon. 'You have tricked me human. You are deceitful. Remove these chains and I will leave. I will let you build your temple in peace.'

Solomon knew Asmodeus was lying and would not stop his efforts to hinder the building of the temple he was constructing.

'I do not believe that your words are the truth. You are a demon after all. I will not release you. Not yet. You will work for me. You will help to build the temple you have tried so hard to destroy.'

'Never!' shouted Asmodeus defiantly. 'You may have bound me but you are not my master.'

Solomon held out his hand to show Asmodeus the ring on his finger. 'You will obey me.'

The demon examined the ring and on seeing it, knew he was thwarted.' He looked Solomon in the eye. 'You have beaten me this time Solomon, but I now know your ways. You will not trick me again.'

'You will do as I command?' asked Solomon.

Reluctantly the demon nodded.

'You must say it.'

'I will obey you King Solomon.'

The men cheered. The plan had worked.

Solomon took an end of the chain and led Asmodeus back to the Temple Mount and into the centre of a large courtyard. They stopped by a large basin of water. Solomon ordered Asmodeus to crouch down. The demon did as he was told. Four men walked forward, picked up the basin of water, and placed it on the demon's shoulders, resting it between its horns.

'The Holy Water in the basin binds you to me. While it is on your shoulders, you are unable to move. I will return in the morning and you will begin your task of repairing the damage you have caused.'

Asmodeus watched Solomon and his men leave the courtyard. Although aware of his surroundings and his senses were intact, he was unable to move, he was nothing more than a statue. One day he would have his revenge on those who had performed the trickery against him this day.

For the next six years, Solomon forced Asmodeus to help build the Temple. He hauled large blocks of stone from the quarry and hoisted them up into place on the wall. He dug foundations and tunnelled out the rock.

The Temple was completed in 964 BC.

Solomon, Benaiah and Asmodeus, stood on the Temple wall and looked down at what they had created.

‘Finally it is finished,’ said Solomon.’

‘It is a job well done my king,’ replied Benaiah. ‘The men, and even Asmodeus here, have worked hard to achieve this splendid result.’

Asmodeus huffed in contempt. ‘Know this Solomon. This glory of yours is temporary. You have had me to torture for a while with your petty building schemes, but soon I and those like me shall disperse among you humans again. We shall be worshipped as Gods because men do not know the names of the angels who rule over us.’

Solomon and Benaiah stared at the demon and then at the newly finished Temple.

‘If you release him Solomon, he will likely turn against us again.’

‘Yes my friend, I believe you are right.’

‘So... what happens to him now?’

Solomon glanced at Asmodeus. ‘I have no idea Benaiah, but I will think of something.’