

SWEAT DROPPED FROM LAADAN'S FOREHEAD as he crouched behind the linen fence surrounding the tabernacle. A sooty torch flickered inside the fence, making shadows dance this way and that on the rippling white surface. He crouched even lower to avoid being seen. Mosquitoes buzzed annoyingly around his eyes and ears, but he brushed them away impatiently.

It was late—already the second watch of the night—but his mother had sent him with a message for Aunt Miriam. She wouldn't expect him to be back home just yet.

Suddenly, two moving shapes stepped into the torchlight behind the curtained wall, making clear silhouettes against the white backdrop. One person was bigger and the other more slender, but it was what their excited voices were saying that interested Laadan the most.

"Hey! Look what I've got!" rasped a boy's husky voice. "I stole it from my father's stash in the stone hut behind our house. Here, try some."

The other boy tipped what looked like a goatskin bag up to his mouth in the flickering light and then gasped. "Wow! That's really sour! It's sure got a bite to it." They both laughed.

“My father will never miss it,” the first voice added. “He’s drunk half the time anymore.”

Laadan was a little surprised. Actually, he was quite surprised. *What are these two boys doing inside the tabernacle courtyard?* he wondered. Only specially chosen priests and workers from the tribe of Levi were supposed to be in there.

To make things worse, the two boys were drinking wine! *What is happening to the nation of Israel?* Laadan wondered. *How can two kids be running around at night with a wineskin, getting drunk in God’s holy sanctuary?* The sacred ark of the covenant was in the sanctuary, too, and inside the ark were the Ten Commandments that God had written with His own finger. The ark was Israel’s most valuable treasure, and these boys didn’t seem to have a clue about any of it! Not really. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be here in this holy place, drinking.

Laadan wanted to shout at the boys and tell them exactly what he thought, but he squatted a little lower and listened a bit longer from his hiding spot in the darkness.

“Wanna have some real fun?” came the husky voice again. “My father is having a party tonight, and I hear they’re gonna have dancers they have brought up from Michmash. They say the soldiers at the Philistine garrison in Michmash always have the best dancers.”

“Dancers?” the other voice giggled like a girl. “OK by me. Let’s go.”

For a moment, Laadan was tempted to secretly follow the two boys to see if they really were going to a party, but then he decided that wasn’t such a good idea. Dancing parties weren’t something any worshiper of Jehovah should be going to. The boys were headed for trouble, and he wanted nothing to do with them or the kinds of things they did. There was nothing more for him here. He stood to his feet and turned to go, but tripped on a rock and fell sprawling into the dirt.

“What was that?” one of the silhouettes whispered behind the curtain.

“I didn’t hear anything,” shrugged the boy’s partner in crime. “It was probably just a dog or something.”

“No, I think there’s someone out there. Let’s go see who it is.” Both silhouettes were looking in Laadan’s direction now.

Laadan froze, and his heart nearly stopped. Now he was in a fix! What if the two boys found him here? What would they do to him? He could only imagine, but he didn’t want to hang around to find out. Whoever

they were, he didn't want them to know who he was, and he didn't want them to know he had been spying on them. Silently, he crawled away into the shadows, but he could hear the boys coming after him around one end of the courtyard. He had to get out of here—and fast!

He began to scramble in a panic across the ground on his hands and knees, and then finally jumped to his feet and ran away in the darkness. He could hear the voices shouting but didn't even turn to see whether they were still following him. When he reached the road to town, he raced ahead, leaving the boys far behind.

As he sprinted along, someone suddenly stepped out of the shadowy fig trees along the road. “Whoa there!” The dark shape grabbed Laadan's arm. “You act as if a lion is after you.”

Laadan's heart leaped into his throat again, and then he caught his breath. It was only Samuel, a young priest from the tabernacle. “What are you doing here this time of night?” he demanded a bit rudely as he stared at Samuel in the darkness.

“Me?” Samuel asked in surprise. “You're one to talk! You're running down the road away from the holy sanctuary of God at this time of night, and you ask what I'm doing out here? I could have been a Philistine sentry or a cutthroat bandit, and what would you have done then?” His voice sounded serious, but, in the light of the rising moon, Laadan could tell his eyes were laughing.

“Well, I was just passing by the sanctuary, and”—Laadan was embarrassed now—“I heard some boys and saw their shadows inside the courtyard, and I think they were getting ready to have a party.”

“A party? Really?” Samuel shook his head. “Must be Adiel and Iddo, the sons of Hophni and Phineas. I'm not surprised. Those guys are barely teenagers and already they're a disgrace to their family—and the whole tribe of Levi, for that matter! It makes me ill just thinking about it.” He squinted toward the sanctuary in the darkness. “Just like their fathers. Always looking for a good time after hours, except the things they are doing after hours aren't so good anymore. They may be from a family of priests, but they're part of a gang now in town. Bullies, that's what they are! A wicked bunch. Evil. All of them. There's no other way to put it.”

Laadan stared at Samuel in the light of the yellow moon that was now rising above the sleepy town of Shiloh. He had heard things about the family of priests, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know what kinds of

things the two boys and their fathers were doing.

“I fear for our people,” Samuel added; his voice sounded tired. “As the leaders of our country go, so go the people.” He grew quiet. “I’m afraid for Priest Eli and his family. Bad things are coming for our nation, but Eli’s family will feel it most. They are reaping what they have sowed.”

Laadan glanced at Samuel again. There was so much truth in what Samuel had said, it was scary.

Samuel took a big breath. “And now, young man, it’s time you were getting home. Isn’t your mother expecting you?” He grinned at Laadan fondly as though Laadan could be his little brother.

“Yeah, I should be getting home.” Laadan shrugged and turned to go, but a sudden commotion erupted down the street. It was coming from the narrow lane leading through the trees to the tabernacle. Dogs were barking, and he could hear muffled voices shouting and cursing.

“Adiel and Iddo,” Samuel said almost automatically, as if he could read Laadan’s mind. “Singing and drinking and partying.” He turned to Laadan. “Why do I get the impression you’re not surprised to see them?”

Laadan blushed in the darkness, but he never got a chance to respond.

“What are you two donkeys doing here in the middle of the road?” Adiel shouted. “Isn’t it way past your bedtime?”

“We’ll forgive you this time!” Iddo chimed in. He held a wineskin tightly in his hand as he stumbled into the light of the torch his cousin held high in the air. “You wanna join us?” he sneered. “That is, if you can handle a little wine.”

The two cousins looked at each other and began to laugh hysterically. It was obvious they had already drunk too much of the sour wine. Adiel was the bigger of two, though he wasn’t any taller than Laadan. Iddo was wiry and a troublemaker, too, but it was obvious Adiel was the leader. Both had jet-black hair, and both knew how to curse and swear.

“Don’t you care that your grandfather is the high priest of the Lord our God?” Samuel asked quietly. “And your fathers? They’re priests too.”

“Yeah, well that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?” Adiel retorted. “They’re the high priests, so we can do whatever we want.”

“You should be good examples for the young people in Israel,” Samuel scolded them.

Adiel and Iddo glanced at each other, got funny looks on their faces, and then burst out laughing again. “Why should we?” Adiel snorted.

“Our fathers are both drunker than a rooster in a winepress right now. We’re going to join them at a party in my uncle’s house.”

“What!” Adiel added, nearly losing his balance as he noticed Laadan staring at him. “You got something to say too?”

“You boys are crazy,” Laadan blurted before he could stop himself. “Plain crazy!” *How can these boys treat Samuel like this?* he wondered with disgust. Drinking was bad enough, but Samuel was a much-respected young priest at the sanctuary, and they were treating him like he was nobody.

“Crazy?” Adiel growled. “You think you’re pretty tough, don’t you?” He lunged at Laadan and then caught himself as he almost stumbled on to the road. Iddo reached out to steady him, and then they both started laughing again.

“Hey! Crazy is better than being holy and having no fun,” Adiel snorted. “Who are you, anyway?” He lifted his torch so he could see Laadan’s face in the light.

Samuel stepped toward Adiel and Iddo. “The days for your family are numbered, boys.” His face was stern. “If I were you, I’d start thinking of ways to save your fathers from destruction because that’s the direction your whole family is headed.”

“*Aww!* You guys are no fun,” Iddo slurred and then took another swig from the wineskin in his hand. “Go jump in the Jordan!” and the two cousins sauntered off into the night.