



UR the fall

2004 BCE
early summer

Abram kissed his crescent amulet. “Holy and blessed Suen, protect your city from the evil ones. Protect your people. Protect us.”

Ur was ablaze. Flaming arrows arcing in waves over the east wall ignited reed huts and palm thatch roofs in a wide swath down that side of the city. Fires were quenched at first by the defenders, well prepared with water pots and wet fleeces. But the waves kept coming, and the only water sources were on the north and west.

Besieged within by Amorites on the east and Elamites attacking the south wall, the Akkadian Third Dynasty of Ur clung desperately to life. The defensive canal outside the east wall had been dammed up at the north end by Amorites. Now all that stood between Ur and two hostile armies was a muddy trench.

Haran patted Abram on his leather helmet. “Fret not, little brother. If Ur were to fall, the star gazers would have seen it.”

“And if they saw it,” said Terah, “who would they tell?”

Terah with his three sons, Haran, Nahor, and Abram were in a detachment of three hundred soldiers defending the royal palace against a potential boat attack through the north harbor.

All of these men were lean and fit as Bronze Age life required of all but the rich. Terah, in his forties, was barely less agile than his sons. A hard-faced man with clearly furrowed lines, he wore the no-nonsense scowl of a determined survivor.

Terah, squinted intently up at the partly clouded sky.

Also praying? thought Abram. *How unlike father.*

“Saru!” shouted Terah to the captain. “Skyward!”

Looking up with reddened eyes, the soldiers saw the next wave of smoke-tailed arrows heading for them.

“Raise shields!” commanded the saru.

Abram dropped the ceramic crescent amulet back down the front of his tunic. The company raised shields. Burning darts pelted the area like hail. Soldiers now dropped their weapons and grabbed water-soaked fleeces to beat out the flames.

Shields were leather stretched over a wicker frame. Arrows would stick, but not penetrate far.

“Why must we stay back here like women?” complained Lot to his uncle. “The fighting is at the wall.”

“His Majesty cannot close the harbor,” answered Abram. “And the Amuru have all the boats of the river.”

“Amuru are desert rats,” said Lot. “They know naught of boats.”

“The king commands it,” returned Abram. “Be content. If he feared not a boat invasion he would not have fled to the Ziggurat.”

From the south an envoy hurried toward them on a fiercely beaten donkey. Terah paused to watch as the envoy took his saru aside and spoke urgently to him in private.

“Seize your weapons,” shouted the saru. “To the south wall!”

“We have been breached,” said Terah quietly.

The company grabbed weapons and marched southward, then broke into a trot as the saru ordered double-time. It was a crooked and smoky route through the poor district of the east city. They detoured west to take advantage of the better streets near the center. Soon the noise of battle increased. Ghostly silhouettes of running men appeared through the haze. *Enemy?* thought they all, but no, these were battered comrades fleeing toward them.

“Turn, you cowards!” commanded the saru. “We are here to help you.”

Some stopped; some ignored him. A bloodied Sumerian staggered past Abram and Lot.

Haran grabbed his arm. “Turn and fight with us, friend.”

The Sumerian whirled, clumsily slashing with his bronze two-edge, then continued on his way. Haran was dazed by a tingling at his throat. His next breath flooded

his lungs with liquid. He coughed up a stream of blood and fell to his knees.

“Father!” shouted Lot.

The saru barked another hoarse command through the smoke, but few understood it and fewer cared.

Chaos.

Yet high atop the Great Ziggurat, in the temple of Suen, was neither panic nor disorder. The King and his priestly entourage went about ritual sacrifices calmly – or at least with that appearance – in willful disregard of the enemy at the walls. With the populace down to starvation rations, the gods would receive meals on time without interruption. The king saw to it, for this was his duty. And duty, specifically cultic duty, was all – all to the king, all to the priests, to the nobles, to every foot-soldier, down to every mother with child. As each new report brought diminishing hopes of victory, theocratic resolve intensified. Their final breath would be in service to their god.

A noble act of martyrdom? Possibly. A mindless act of stupidity for nothing nobler than group loyalty and dread of dishonor? Also possible. But should these questions even be asked? Is the self sacrifice of a hive for its queen noble or stupid? Neither, it’s instinctual. And whether by instinct or honor or peer pressure, Bronze Age men lived by the mentality of the herd. They did what was expected of them – some to be hacked apart at altars, while others, for the same reason, did the hacking.

Amid the tumult in the smoke-filled streets, four sweating and exhausted soldiers jogged panting to the gate of their home near the north harbor.

“Open it!” shouted Terah to the women inside.

“Quickly!”

His wife, Havah, untied the reed binders, and the men rushed in.

“Hitch up the cart,” ordered Terah. “The time has come.”

“Make ready the children,” Nahor ordered his breast-feeding wife.

“Where is Haran?” asked Zilha, the man's widow.

Terah ignored her. “Gather up all your shoes.”

“Where is Haran?” she insisted.

“Seize what you can find to eat,” commanded Terah.

“Where is my husband?” she cried.

“Father is dead,” snapped Lot to his mother.

“Be silent, Beardless,” returned Terah. “Fetch his bow.”

“Grieve afterward, Zilha,” whispered Abram to his sister-in-law. “We must hurry.”

Abram was the youngest of Terah's three sons, all by his first wife. Now at the age of twenty, he wasn't quite sure of it, the counting of winters being the job of mothers, and Abram's being long since deceased. Average of height and build, Abram was nevertheless a man you would notice in a crowd, not because he was particularly handsome – the long hair and beard of the time made masculine beauty irrelevant. And why even care about appearance when marriages were arranged by status minded parents? No, you would notice Abram because of his clear and innocent eyes – not piercing, because he was careful to avoid that sort of thing. People didn't like it, so he didn't do it. Abram seemed to know instinctively the right thing to do, and generally did it. But he never could figure out exactly *why* it was right. This question – “why?”

troubled his heart, yet somehow didn't seem to bother others. As a child, Abram had found adults strange, but figured that he would

The heart was believed to be the seat of all mental activity until at least the Renaissance.

understand them once he became one. Now as an adult, he still found them strange, and now this too troubled him. Abram couldn't possibly know that his mind was evolving a strange new appendage. Whereas *their* identities were effectively crimped by culture into little more than the sum of their roles, Abram was developing an incorrigible sense of self. Like a sane man born into a lunatic asylum, he would require more than the usual period of adjustment, whether to embrace his society or reject it.

The wicker cart, now full of most needed possessions, was hitched to a donkey and pulled out into a street fast becoming choked with more of the same. Traffic, congested as lava, flowed toward the east gate of the city wall – the only exit from which they might escape by land.

To their right stood the Ziggurat where victorious Elamites panted their way up the long steps, while comrades loaded with sacred spoils descended. Soon the most holy of all treasures was ripped from its temple and dragged outside. This statue of imported limestone now appeared at the top terrace for all Ur to gaze upon. The image was of an old man with floor-length beard and a crescent moon behind his head, its upward curving ends being easily mistaken for a pair of horns. This was the god Suen. Though just his image to the more enlightened, this white rock was the god himself to the majority, for the commoners perceived no distinction.

Traffic slowed as fleeing citizens turned to gawk at this spectacle through streaks in the haze. Some, including Abram, stopped dead in their tracks to take it fully in. All else faded from his consciousness. Here was his god, the Blessed One, the Holy One, the center of all things worldly and divine, now nothing more than a prize captured by laughing demons. The scene eclipsed all thought.

“Abram, hurry,” interrupted Sarai, his wife. “Father waits not.”

By “Father” she meant literally that Terah was her father, not just Abram's father. The daughter of Havah, Sarai had been espoused to her half-brother Abram when they were children. There had been no courtship and never a doubt as to whom each would marry. Had Terah suspected how attractive Sarai would grow up to be, he would surely have held back her hand as bargaining goods for social advancement.

Squeezing through the east gate, Terah strained to see above the throng. Which way were they going? Which way was the enemy? It didn't really matter. They would have to stay with the crowd regardless.

Abram turned for a final glance at the Ziggurat. His god, now supine on skids made of palm trunks torn from its own garden, slid slowly down the steps from its heavenly perch. The image burnt into Abram's memory to be preserved for the rest of his life. Then he too was pushed through the gate as through a birth-canal.

Northward along the wall seemed to be the decision of whoever led this herd. Bodies of citizens dead and dying cluttered their path. These were pierced with arrows from the Amorites massed on the far side of the

muddy trench. But now the Amorites had lowered their bows and just stood there laughing and jeering.

“They could slay us all.” Said Sarai. “Why do they spare us?”

“So as not to block the gate with bodies,” said Abram. “The sooner we leave, the sooner they can enter.”

At the north end of the trench the refugee column hurried across on the dam built by their enemies. Now they were fair game and the Amorites resumed the arrow barrage. The right side took several hits. On the left many were pushed westward into the reed swamps of the river edge – those in first trampled by those that followed. Still the column stumbled relentlessly over once beautiful farmland up the river toward the afternoon sun. As shadows lengthened, the glare forced all eyes downward, as if heaven itself demanded further humiliation.

Dusk. Their oppressors had by now lost interest, preferring the greater spoils inside the city. The battered fugitives rested at the river bank, tending wounds, gathering food, cooking, and preparing for night. Widows and orphans wandered among family units hoping to see a friendly face. A girl not yet pubescent approached Havah’s stewing fire.

“I can spin and sew and weave beautiful baskets. I am exceeding strong.”

Havah glanced at Terah. The answer was no. The girl moved on.

Abram’s attention drifted to a blind old woman sitting in a cart and ignored by her despondent kindred. She now offered the only thing she had left to justify her keep – her knowledge of cult stories.

“And Anu said to Tiamat, ‘Wherefore shall these our children make this noise? They disturb our sleep. Let us destroy them all.’ And the gods trembled in fear of Anu, their father. And they said, ‘Who can save us from the wrath of Anu and Tiamat?’ And Enlil, mightiest of the gods, opened his mouth and spake, ‘I will go up and smite the ancient ones.’”

Abram listened passively, his mind numb. The story, often repeated by his deceased mother, had been etched into his mind as sacred truth. Now it sounded hollow and remote, like one of many solicitous harangues in a market place.

A boy gave the old woman a bowl full of something hot. The woman ate. Abram, however, was not hungry. The day's events required all the digesting he could manage. As the four Terahite men sat circled around supper dishes, Abram alone did not dip bread. The women and children sat in another circle huddled around the newly widowed Zilha, whose wailing and rocking and breast-beating had passed their pitiful crest and were now becoming tiresome.

Terah broke silence, “Lot, fetch more reeds for the fire.”

Lot complied without hesitation, though clearly no more fuel was needed.

Terah then turned to Nahor, his eldest son now that Haran was gone. “Would that Zilha be not over grieved. The Blessed One forbid she should set her heart to follow her husband.”

“All gods forbid it!” agreed Nahor, then taking a large bite of dipped bread.

Apparently little affected by the day's tragedies, Nahor's face was calm and blank – his usual look. Detached emotionally, he was the perfect Bronze-Ager, in fact the most common creature of all ages, a natural born conformist dedicated to nothing in particular. Nahor remained firmly grounded in the needs of the present, whatever they might be.

Terah, hoping for greater acknowledgement of those needs, pressed forward. "Skillful on the spindle, is she not?"

"None finer."

"Earns her mutton, that one."

Feeling the drift of the conversation, Nahor declined to respond.

Terah continued, "I would greatly miss her date-nut cakes."

Nahor nodded in agreement. "Would that I were older, I would clutch her to my own bosom."

"It is your right."

"Ahh, would that I were older."

After pausing to be sure that Nahor would not change his mind, Terah spoke again, "Zilha. Be comforted. You shall be my concubine."

The statement was neither rude nor shocking. It was what all the women expected and some hoped for, though Zilha would have rather heard it come from Abram. With timidly raised brows, the new concubine made eye-contact with the wife. Havah opened wide her arms, and the tension was broken. The two collided into their assigned roles with a fresh round of tears.

Abram breathed a sigh of relief.

Nahor now turned to Terah with a counter offer, "I would happily unburden you of her daughter."

“In due season,” returned Terah.

“Surely,” agreed Nahor.

Two days of monotonous marching lengthened the column as the stronger moved forward and the weak lagged behind. Custom now separated each family into two groups, the men ten paces ahead of their women and children. The evening of the third day brought the first sliver of new moon to the sky. All gazed toward it, some in tears, some in whispers, most in silence.

Lot prodded Abram. “Abi, the moon returns as before. How can this be?”

Of all the men in Terah's family, Abram and Lot were closest – Abram being the only one with a rudimentary sense of humor, and Lot being the only one to laugh in the right places. Lot was three years younger, unattractive, and socially withdrawn. Having little identity of his own, he allowed Abram to do most of his thinking for him. But a moon rising without its god was beyond even Abram's understanding of cosmology.

“Father,” said Abram. “What does this mean?”

“Surely, it means the Blessed One lives. Rejoice in it.”
But there was no joy in Terah's tone.

“Does it mean he escaped from the Elamu?” asked Lot.

“Perhaps.”

“Do you think he now hates us Akkadu and loves Elamu?” asked Abram.

“Perhaps that too.”

“Will he be angry at us?” asked Lot.

“Am I a priest?” snapped Terah. “Make of it what you will.”

Terah and Nahor exchanged a peevish glance indicat-

ing their mutual disdain for such “childish” questions. Abram caught it.

Why do you roll the eyes? he thought. *These are needful and heavy things to know.*

On the following day many families split off from the main column and headed eastward.

“They go to Larsa, father,” said Nahor. “Shall we join them?”

“No. Follow the river.”

“The children are weary,” said Havah.

“No,” repeated Terah. “If mighty Ur fell, can Larsa be far behind?”

“Then where shall we go, father?” asked Abram.

“The one place I have kindred – Haran.”