

Chapter 16

Being miles underground, Jacob did not wake with the morning sun the way he would have any other day. Here in this vast underworld, he lifted his groggy head off his satchel and found everything to be exactly as it was when he dozed off. The torch burned steadily propped up against a small stack of stones. The two paths greeted him in a stubborn, waiting silence. The carob seeds arranged neatly before him remained undisturbed. He wondered if he had slept for hours or days. Perhaps even weeks!

With this in mind, Jacob leapt to his feet and dusted himself off. He felt rested and ready to proceed but still was unsure of which path he should take. There was no time to get lost in these catacombs.

He waved his torch again down both pathways looking for a clue as to which might be the correct one. Deep down in the shadows of one corridor he thought he saw a piece of fabric

draped across a rock. Having spent many hours surrounded by rocks and stones, the rag caught his attention immediately and he wondered why he hadn't seen it the night before.

Cautiously he headed toward the strip of fabric for further inspection. As he grew nearer, Jacob saw that the visible strip of material was connected to a larger sack-like bundle of rags tucked behind a large rock. Closer still he began to make out that the bundle had a shape to it. The shape of a man. A lifeless man.

Among the shadows of the rocks, Jacob found the remains of another traveler. It looked to have been a small man wearing coarse, tattered robes. Wisps of hair clung to his skull and to where Jacob guessed a beard once grew. The flesh on his face was dark and shriveled like a date left too long in the sun.

Jacob shuddered. He took this huddled mass in the shadows to be a bad omen and decided he would take his chances with the other, less ill-fated route. But before he pressed onward, he felt he should take a moment to say something before he left. A prayer perhaps. Something to acknowledge this man's passing. He tried to remember the teachings of his father but the words for prayer would not come to him. He tried to remember the prayers recited at his mother's funeral but once again came up empty. Finally, he shrugged and said, "I hope your soul has found its eternal resting place, sir."

As if in response to these words, as if they had been an incantation to conjure up the dead, the head of the little man slowly began to lift upwards. Jacob stumbled backwards and gripped at his sword. Two small, hollow, sightless eyes opened on the little black face as if waking from a dream. They fixed on the boy who stood trembling with fear. Though he had never before seen such a grisly little collection of haunted human remains, Jacob knew at once

what he was looking at, a creature from stories told to frighten children, a ghostly, undead wretch.

“A dybbuk!” Jacob stammered.

The creature leaned forward slightly and in a gentle, hoarse voice whispered, “A child?”

Jacob had heard many stories of dybbuks. His grandmother often spoke of how these angry, unsatisfied souls wandered about possessing ordinary folk and forcing them to do their evil bidding. And in his mind, Jacob had thought these creatures to be large billowing mists of shadow. But as the squat figure before him righted itself, he realized that there are stranger things in this world than can be conjured up in the head of a young boy.

This dybbuk was small and frail and seemed positively harmless. Not quite a human in form. And most unlike the demon he’d seen earlier. It looked puzzled by Jacob’s presence in the caves. “Why do you come here, child?” it asked in a strange, thin whisper.

“My name is Jacob and I’m on a quest to reach the Holy Land.”

The dybbuk scratched at the stringy remnants of a beard. “Jacob?” he said confusedly.

“That’s right,” and then he added with a bit of trepidation, “Who are you?”

The dybbuk looked at him with empty eyes. “I don’t know.”

The pair of them sat in silence for a moment.

“Are you lost?” Jacob asked after he began to see that this spirit was much too wrapped up in his own confusion to bother with possessing anyone.

The dybbuk made a short coughing sound at this which Jacob took to be a sort of laugh. “Young sir, I have wandered these caves for centuries. I may not remember who I am, but I can recall every twist and turn of this underworld.”

“Do you know the way to the Holy Land?”

“Of course,” he wheezed enthusiastically.

Jacob knelt down so that the two were eye level with each other. “Dybbuk, will you help me find my way out?”

The dybbuk used a crooked finger to give his scalp a thoughtful scratch. Then, he walked back down the corridor to where the paths diverged and flopped down in the dirt. “Come here, boy,” he called to Jacob in a sigh. “There is something I must show you if you are to reach the Holy Land.”