



Chapter VII

On his way to Ninuwa, Yunus did not fail to visit Samaria hoping to meet his family. But there he could not meet them; his relatives told him that his wife and son had been taken to Ninuwa as captives during an attack a couple of years earlier. Accordingly, Yunus again declared he would not prophesy for Ninuwans, nor that he would help Ninuwans avoid their destruction. But, nonetheless he and his guide Migel hurried toward Ninuwa in order that Yunus could find and rescue his family as soon as possible.

Despite his impatience, it took them much longer to reach Ninuwa from Joppa than his voyage from America to Joppa. Soon after departing Samaria, they were attacked by bandits on horses, and lost most of their belongings. Yunus could only keep the ass and the emptied sheepskin bag. He became penniless and said to the companion that he could no longer pay him wages and that he could only give the ass to him. The guide agreed to accept the ass as the complete payment for his guiding him through to Ninuwa. Thus, from there Migel rode the ass and Yunus walked.

The next day Yunus bathed in a lake to cool and wash his body, but a large fish came to catch him. It started swallowing his left foot. Yunus yelled out for help to the companion, who jumped in the lake and dragged the prophet ashore together with the fish. He hit the fish's head with a stone and let it give up Yunus's leg. They killed and cut it into pieces, and cooked and salted the meat. Moreover, Migel singled out the fish's gall bladder and preserved it for medicine in Yunus's sheepskin bag. The fish meat lasted a couple of days and prevented the two travelers from starving. However, Yunus's left foot, which had been swallowed by the fish, began to swell and was not healed even by the fish's gall.

Two days later when their fish meat had been consumed and there was nothing left to eat, they met a caravan, consisting of twenty-odd men, bound for Ninuwa, and were recruited in it, thanks to Migel's knowledge of the better way to Ninuwa. The caravan provided free meal to the two; moreover, the chieftain of the caravan lent a camel to Yunus, for he had gradually become unable to walk properly due to his left foot sucked by the fish. So, he rode the camel and went by Migel on the ass, who guided the caravan.

However, on the next day, as they were traveling on a flat highland in the afternoon, a sandstorm rose from the east and they had to go down into a valley to let it pass over them. Only after the sunset the storm was gone. When they returned to the highland the next day, the landscape was altered and the path they had been taking was hidden by the sand brought by the storm; thus, they were lost. Migel, however, had found that the valley where they had spent the previous night was one he had once travelled through years ago. So, he led them down into the valley again and took the route downstream the dried sandy river of the valley.

In a couple of hours, they came into a wilderness and saw an object in the distance. The fine yellow dust left in the air by the sandstorm dimmed the view of it, but it was tall and thick. They wondered, "Is it a hill or a pyramid?" Migel did not remember seeing such a thing last time he was there.

The caravan headed for it and found it was a ruin of what seemed to have been an ancient fortress. It was a tall and huge donjon or a citadel having the shape of a truncated cone, built with courses of bricks, which were mortared together with bitumen. The higher the altitude was, the steeper was the tower's profile, such that if the caravaners had been modern-day Europeans, they would have thought it a nuclear power plant. Much of the lower part of the ruin was buried in the sand. It had a steep ramp formed on its side that went up encircling the structure four and a half times spirally and stopped where the donjon was truncated.

Migel said that he thought this ancient fortress must have been entirely buried under the sand for ages, but that it was exposed as the storm of the previous day passed there and took away most of the sand covering it.

In fact the sandstorm also took away enough sand from the area so that an ancient river-bed was exposed and a new stream had begun to flow not far from the ruin. The caravan decided to halt there to take enough water for the men and water the animals. Besides, they wanted to see if they could find some valuables in the ruin.

Hoping to find a way inside the donjon, some of the caravaners together with Migel climbed it along the ramp, for they had been unable to find an entrance to the donjon on the ground level. The ramp was also made of bricks firmly mortared and thus had a stepped surface. Over this surface were laid a pair of rails of hewn flat stones. The width of the ramp was barely large enough to pass a one horse-chariot, but there were occasional widened lengths, where two chariots could have passed each other or a chariot could have made a U-turn. There were extra bricks and hewn flat stones placed here and there irregularly on the ramp, as if they had been inadvertently abandoned there while being carried upward.

There was one place where the ramp was disconnected. Obviously there had been some bridge there to connect the disconnection, which probably had been blown away by the sandstorm. The explorers made use of one of the abandoned hewn flat stone long enough to span the void. Thus, they made an unsteady bridge, and each caravaner had to crawl on it carefully. Thus, it took no less than half an hour for the first arrivers to arrive at the summit of the donjon.

At the summit, the explorers found that the donjon was hollow inside, and marveled at the sight therein, much like a man does when he has climbed a volcano and sees inside the deep crater.

Within the hollow there was a plaza in the bottom, and a handsome shrine was in the middle of it. The storm

seemed to have sucked away most of the sand from the hollow of the donjon so that everything looked clear in it. Streets extended from the shrine radially to the inner wall. There were many layers of houses formed in the inner wall of the donjon, each house connected to respective common stairways reaching the streets. There was an aqueduct that extended through the plaza and entered a pool which seemed to have been a public bath. So, in the ancient time water must have been channeled into the aqueduct from a river. All the structures looked brand-new, probably because they had been preserved by the sand. With the water running in the vicinity of the fortress now, one would consider it a livable ruin.

However, the caravaners found the donjon itself had not been completed, for at the upper end area of the ramp there were many piles of unused bricks and hewn stones. Besides, they found a stone tablet carved in relief of what seemed a construction plan, according to which the building was intended to become a conical tower with its uppermost part (a small apex in the shape of a complete cone) cut off from the main body and suspended in the air. The tablet did not show how the apex was enabled to float in the air, except that it was shown emitting many rays in all directions. There were supposed to be ten flights of the ramp to reach where the tower is severed, according to the plan.

The explorers wondered whether the construction of the tower had been interrupted by a great sand storm that buried the entire structure. But they could not find traces of human victims in the place. At this Migel said there was something amiss, and that they should not expect much from the ruin. "Look," he said, "I see a large wooden gate there, the only exit from the donjon, and its doors are wide open. I think the residents abandoned the fortress in haste for some reason without even thinking of closing it."

The caravaners looked at the doors. The gate was in the wall facing the front of the shrine and its two doors were flung open. The caravaners wanted to go down inside the donjon; they sought a passage, but could not find any. So, they walked round the summit to reach the position below which was the gate. Then, they threw several coins to land on that part of the sand outside the donjon under which an external gate should be buried.

Thus, the men descended the tower and went to the place the coins landed. The caravaners began excavating the position and soon found and exposed a pair of huge handsome but dilapidated external gate doors fully open. They cleared the entrance way and found a tunnel, which was dark. Those who lit torches went into the passage, which soon forked in two ways right and left. Then, another fork and so on, and they found themselves in a maze. The chieftain of the caravan cautioned that they should come back at once lest they be lost in it. But already some went too far into the maze to know the way back.

A search was made to rescue them. Two rescuers were sent, one to the right way and the other to the left at the first fork. They were tied to a very long string so they themselves would not get lost. When they found a

lost one, they sent him back along the string. Those rescued did not fail to bring back things of value such as a handsome sword and armors which they found lying on the passages of the maze. Now, a few had gone too deep for the rescuers' strings to reach and they were shouting. One was saying he had come to an underground tomb where he saw many coffins, another was saying that he had reached a storehouse full of ancient goods. Then, one who had penetrated the maze and reached the plaza said that he found a golden statue of some god in the shrine. These words triggered the caravaners one after another to rush into the maze following the strings.

Thus, the caravan was trapped in this ruin, and it appeared it would be a long while before all the men in the maze or in the plaza could come out of the ruin and resume their journey to Ninuwa. So, Yunus and Migel, eager to reach Ninuwa as soon as possible, said to the chieftain of the caravan, who was the only one of the caravaners that resisted the urge to rush into the lucrative maze, "Please call your men to come out soon and continue our journey, or we shall have to go without you."

To this, the chieftain replied, "Yunus and Migel, my friends, I am not their commander. I am only authorized to judge and settle a dispute when it arises among them, such as about which person is the right owner of a property. If one wants to leave the caravan he can do so anytime freely, and he can rejoin us anytime he wishes after paying us an amount. And it appears they are now more inclined to stay here than to go to Ninuwa, for we seem to be able to gain more wealth here than at Ninuwa far from here. You may stay with us here to earn some wealth yourselves or leave us and continue your trip to Ninuwa; only, my friend Migel, promise to come back as soon as you can to lead us out of this wilderness."

By then many caravaners seemed to have reached the plaza, for they were heard praising the golden statue or various other precious items they had come to possess.

Migel went into the maze with a torch, took the right fork of the passage, and went as far as the lifeline string could guide him. Then, he shouted into the passage beyond the end of the string, "Fellows, are you not going to Ninuwa?!"

To this the caravaners only laughed.

Migel continued, "You must remember that you are still in the middle of the wilderness, a great maze created by Allah, where no wealth can buy you an exit. I led you here, so I am responsible for taking you out of here. Be satisfied with what you already have acquired and come out soon!"

Then, the caravaners in the plaza were heard to start discussing among themselves. Some said they should get out of the donjon for now. Others said they had only arrived a moment ago and had not yet collected enough;

and still others said they needed to find better things. Then, the discussion died away and the men seemed to have resumed their contest of plundering the ruin.

Migel came out of the maze and shook his head.

The chieftain said: "If you must go now, you may need some weapons during your long lonely journey, so take with you some which my sons found and brought here. You can also pick some armors too. And that camel also," he said to Yunus, "which I lent you. You will need that too. It's also a present from us for your precious help to bring us to this ancient ruin. Only," he now took Migel's hand, "please do come back here at your earliest convenience to lead us out of this wilderness. Our food may last ten days or so. We will reward you greatly." Migel promised that he would be back perhaps in a week.

So, Yunus and Migel started preparing for departure from the camp. Meanwhile the chieftain brought the camel laden with armors to them. But, at that moment, a shout was heard through the maze, saying, "It's me that found the golden statue you are holding! So it's mine and you better give it to me now!" And to this the accused one shouted back, saying an opposite thing. Similar quarrels followed as to who the right owners were of certain precious things. The more they quarreled, the more they spoke nonsense. The louder their languages got, the less were there meaning. Thus, among the plunderers the words lost wings and became babbles.

Soon, sounds of metals hitting upon metals started with shouts and groans. The turmoil continued and pitiful voices and weeps echoed.

At this the chieftain said, "I must go and rescue my sons," and lit up a torch and ran into the maze, although Yunus and Migel tried to stop him.

The chieftain put down a coin at each corner where he turned, after he had passed the end of the lifeline string, so as to show himself later which turns he should take to come out of the maze.

A few vultures came and started circling above the fortress. Then, the clamor in the fortress was hushed by a howling of a wolf, which showed up at the top of the donjon. After a moment or two, sounds of men, running and shouting and crying re-started. But at length the sounds went weaker, and only groans and crying were heard.

Although they had finished packing, Migel and Yunus lingered to see if anyone would come out at the gate. When the sun was setting, Yunus collected wood pieces which were parts of the gate and put them between the open doors of the gate and made a bonfire so as to show the caravaners where the exit was as well as to

prevent wolves or other animals from entering the maze.

Then, a sound of slow but heavy footsteps approached out of the maze. The prophet said, "I am here. Come out, my friend." But no voice came to him. Yunus stepped into the passage, and then a man appeared in the passage and faced Yunus. The light of the bonfire showed that the man was the chieftain and he was holding a golden statue of a god in his folded arms. He was oddly aslant forward. Yunus ran to him. The caravaner said nothing and, handing the statue to Yunus, fell with his face on the ground, when a handsome lance, thrust deep in his back, flung up behind him. He was dead. The statue was heavy in the hands of the prophet although it was small.

Yunus, looking at the statue, said to himself, "Ah, how strange it is that only this ancient idol that cannot walk a step on its own could come out of the maze intact!" Angrily he threw it in the bonfire, added more wood to it, and saw the idol melt down onto the ground.

Migel and Yunus dug a hole and buried the body of the chieftain together with what had been the golden idol.

Then, the two men called into the maze and asked if anyone was trying to come out; but no reply came from the darkening maze, which was now loud with the noises of the vultures fighting for corpses.

After availing themselves of some of the food stock left by the caravaners, the two, now both in ancient armors, left the camp, Yunus on the camel, holding the lance upright in his right hand, and short but sturdy Migel on the ass, inspecting the stars for navigation. The new moon rose above the valley ridge, and its sharp light together with the starlight showed the two travelers the beautiful dune ahead, on which the elongated pale shadows of them were cast.

On the next day they reached another valley where the shortest cut Migel had mentioned started. This passage mainly consisted of a dried river in the bottom of the valley. So they went down to the floor of the valley and traveled along the dried bed of the river downstream. Thus, having arrived in the area familiar to Migel, they now traveled only daytime.

At a place Migel halted his ass, and pointed to a pit and said to Yunus, who was following him on the camel: "From here, you should never step aside the path I am taking, for there are plenty of pits like that one in this valley. They are bitumen pits, and many are hidden under plants or sand surface. Once a person falls in a deep one, it would be most likely the end of him for usually it is impossible to pull the body out of the sticky bitumen or tar. Only if the pit is shallow you may be rescued." He also said that owing to this dangerous passage, people had avoided entering this valley.

Migel, although he had knowledge of many of the risky points in this valley, borrowed the lance from Yunus to sound the path to avoid the pits, just in case.

When they came to a turn of the valley, they saw a bird of prey circling above; then, they heard a pitiful crying of an animal. They went round the turn and found that it was a mountain cat trapped in a large pool of tar. In front of its blood-stained mouth was a dead body of its prey, a horned deer, more than two thirds of which was submerged in the tar. The cat was trying hard to pull its legs off the tar, but the more it stirred the deeper it sank. Then, the bird of prey swooped down and landed on the bloody carcass of the deer. "Aha!" Migel said, "here comes another to perish." The cat growled to scare away the thief; the big bird tried to fly away but already its talons were dipped in the tar and could not be taken off. Migel said, "They will all perish. If not from drowning, from starvation."

Thus, Yunus went with much care following Migel closely until they came out of the valley of tar before dark.

The next day, another great storm came and this time it was a storm of locusts, which lasted nearly a week. They could not see more than several meters ahead even at daytime. But, Yunus and Migel kept going on slowly but steadily along the wadi, for the guide could know which way to go when the wadi branched into two ways or so. When they ran out of food, they caught and burnt the locusts and ate them. As for water, if they dug the dry bed of the wadi to make a hole with a sufficient depth, and waited long enough, they could acquire some water in it.

When they came out of the valley the wadi disappeared, for the sand carried here by the sandstorm had buried it and there was no water to drink. The swarms of locusts had devoured all the vegetation that grew in the wilderness. The locusts rested on the bodies of the two travelers but thanks to the armors, they were not so much harassed by this. However, the flying insects sprayed dark liquid in the air as they flew, and Yunus got it in his eyes repeatedly and it kept hurting his eyes. Finally Yunus came to lose his eyesight and asked the companion to stop.

Migel inspected his eyes, and found they were covered with a white translucent film; he took out the gall bladder from Yunus's sheepskin bag and squeezed some of the pasty material from the bladder onto the tip of his left forefinger. Then, he spat on it and kneaded it between the forefinger and the thumb. When the paste became fluid enough, he applied it to Yunus's eyes. In several minutes, the white film on his eyes hardened and warped and came off the eyes, whereupon Yunus recovered his vision. Now, however, they decided to camp there until the locusts were gone.

Then, on the next morning Yunus was awakened by the braying of the camel and saw through the crowd of

the locusts, which had gotten much thinner now, a green hill in a distance. It had a truncated pyramid-like shape with a dazzling white statue standing on top of it. Yunus knew what the hill was. It was the famous hanging garden of Ninuwa. It was only about a couple of kilometers from where Yunus was. It was strange that only the garden maintained the greenery despite the attack of the locusts in the area.

“Migel!” shouted Yunus, “we are already at Ninuwa!” But then he found the ground under a tree where his companion had been sleeping was vacant. Nor could he find the ass. They seemed to have gone away while he was asleep. He was left with the camel, which he had planned to give Migel as the bonus when they got to Ninuwa. There were not even foot steps to show which way they had departed. Could he find Migel in the city or not, he wondered.

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