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Short Story: Scapegoat

Nemuel tugged hard at the rope to keep the goat moving. It was hard going through the gravel and dust of the wadi and he knew they had a ways to go yet. Aaron had been quite clear: get this goat so far away, out into the wilderness, that he will never find his way back. Ever. Aaron was ancient, hardly able to stand on his own now, but the glare in his eyes was enough to strike the fear of El into Nemuel. And there was something else there, a kind of pain that said “let’s not make any mistakes, like we did that first time.” Truth be told, Nemuel didn’t much care whether the goat stayed out here in the desert or not, but those priests – they know things. So it’s better to do it the way they say to do it.

Besides, it was an honor, really. That’s what he’d told Zuar from the start. Zuar was what he’d decided to name the goat after their first couple of hours of walking together. “Zuar,” he’d said at noon, when they stopped for a break in the shade of a huge boulder, “it’s an honor, really, to be the one to drag you out into this Nephilim infested wilderness. A true honor.” And he actually had felt honored when the priests had come to his tent, nine days earlier, and said “Nemuel, son of Simeon, the lot has fallen on you.” But after struggling through the empty desert all day it didn’t feel like an honor anymore. And now the sun was setting and it was going to be a long trip back to the camp, even if he would be able to travel faster without this wretched animal balking all the way.

He struggled to the top of a low ridge, small rocks scattering under his feet so that he nearly fell. He surveyed the wide plain of rock hard dirt that spread out before him and stretched on to a high range of red cliffs in the distant. Here, this would have to do. If the goat found its way back, well Aaron could just get up off his dusty, bony, old butt and do it himself next year.

Nemuel slipped the rope from around the goat’s neck and shouted “Git! Go on!”

And in that moment Nemuel felt something he had not felt since he was a small boy: he felt compassion for an animal. The goat actually seemed to be looking at him, as if to say “so, this it then? you’ll just be leaving me here to die of thirst and starvation?” Nemuel felt tears well up, unexpected, sudden, with a sob that he barely stifled – even though there was no one around to shame him if he did cry. “Git outta here!” he shouted, his voice cracking slightly. “You’re nothing but a piece of meat with legs, and the priest cursed you, so go! And you stink! And you’ve got one crooked ear!”

Now Nemuel felt a terrible rage that boiled up out of the hot water of his stifled tears. He thought of Mahlah, and how she’d turned him down when he asked her to marry him. He thought of the long hours he spent laboring over his carving, only to have the masters say “not quite good enough, yet; maybe next year.” He thought of the dust, and the heat, and the fear of living in a tent in a desert all his life. How dare this stupid animal make him feel weak! He picked up a fist of pebbles and hurled them right into the goat’s eyes. Then he spit on him and kicked him. “Go! you miserable sack of hair!”

And then the goat turned, with some strange animal patience, and began walking slowly down the far side of the ridge – away from Nemuel and in the opposite direction of the camp. Nemuel felt a great release of frustration wash over him. The tightness in his chest vanished and his limbs felt

warm and slightly weak. It was over. That cursed goat was going to stay away and he could go back to the camp and everyone would be glad to see him, alive and well; maybe even Mahlah would be glad to see him.

At that moment the air itself suddenly began to vibrate. Right in front of Nemuel and the goat the air seemed to catch fire, glowing with a brightness that made Nemuel lift his hand to shield his eyes. At that moment a real, live, demonic Nephil appeared right before them. Nemuel stood rooted to the ground, paralyzed except for the sudden spray of urine running down his bare leg and soaking his robe.

The demon was like the darkest terror of his worst nightmare: it was covered with eyes, in front and in back; it had the face of an eagle and six wings. Suddenly, there were three others there with it – one had the face of an ox, the other the face of a lion, and the last the face of a man. They were all covered in eyes, there were even eyes under the wings, so there was no doubt in Nemuel’s mind that they could see him quite clearly.

He clenched his stomach but his guts went loose anyway and the stench of his soiled robe seemed to fill the air around him. The demons were reaching out to the goat, they laid their hands on it and shepherded it toward the brightness glowing all around them. The goat bleated cheerfully and walked toward them. And then they were all gone, the Nephilim and the goat, vanished into thin air.

Nemuel came to himself and looked around. He could move again. The terror was gone and he was alive. Tears rolled down his cheeks unhindered. The relief he felt now was like plunging into a cold oasis pond and feeling all the dust and grime of weeks in the desert wash away in one moment. He stood for a little while, soaked in urine and feces and tears, and just caught his breath. “So,” he chuckled to himself, “the goat will not die of thirst and starvation, alone in the desert. He will be roasted and eaten by demons.” His chuckle burst into a full fledged laugh that rolled away into the darkening desert.

Nemuel turned and headed back up the wadi in the general direction of the camp. “Those priests,” he mumbled to himself, “they really do know things. It’s best to listen to them.” Aaron had said, “when you get back, make sure you wash thoroughly in the water of the large basins at the edge of the camp and put on new clothes before you cross the border back into the community.”

With the smell of his stained robe all around him, Nemuel was looking forward to that bath.

~ Jonathan Stepp