

# 1

Nem was small for his age, but he could run fast and that was important some days.

‘Jew! Scum!’ The words screamed after him as he ran through the dusty streets. ‘Vermin!’

A stone shot past his ear perilously close but thudded harmlessly into the road ahead of him. Nem flew past it without a sideways glance. The next stone didn’t miss: it jabbed into his leg painfully but he didn’t stop, if anything his legs seemed to blur as they picked up speed. He was getting good at running.

In the early days, he hadn’t been able to run very fast and they had nearly always caught him, shoved him around a bit, boxed his ears and sent him home blubbering; snot, tears and dust streaked muckily across his cheeks. He’d stop at the washing pool near Daniel’s tomb and clean himself up before going home – if his mother had seen him in that state there’d be no end of grief – and she could go on for hours!

But he wasn’t caught very often these days. Self-preservation had taught him to run and it had taught him to be wily. He knew all the ‘cut-throughs’, every alleyway this side of the river and all the shops where he could dart in the front and straight out of the back: That was so long as he wasn’t hauled up by some grumpy shopkeeper who grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and dumped him back into the street to be left at the mercy of his tormentors.

Nem could hear the lads chasing after him, shouting out more abuse and venom – the more profane the better as far as they were concerned. For a split second he considered taking the longer route near the palace – it was the less obvious option and if they didn’t see him take the side road, they wouldn’t expect him to go that way - but they were too close, it wasn’t worth the risk.

Another stone nicked his shinbone. Stifling a yell of pain, Nem stumbled momentarily but fear kept him going. He shot into the noisy marketplace and

darted through a rack of clothes to the annoyance of traders and buyers alike. He got a cuff around the head and there was a shout of anger but he still didn't stop. He knew his persecutors would get the same treatment, if not worse. It was tempting to dive under one of the tables in the marketplace and hide, but the traders weren't to be trusted; some of them didn't like Jews any more than his pursuers did.

Dodging around a cage full of squawking chickens, he shot out of the market and back into the open square, racing for the main street that led down to the river. He cursed in irritation as he heard the thudding footsteps behind him; they were getting closer. As he sped into the bustling street, he veered off into the first alleyway he came to and neatly slewed left as if to go down a back street, but at the last minute, doubled back on himself and sneaked behind a rack of precariously perched earthenware pots. Gingerly he edged past the pots praying fervently that his persecutors wouldn't see him as they charged past the shop front.

Quietly, Nem slipped into the pokey little shop and sidled into a dark corner, wedging himself behind a dusty stand chock-full of wares that clearly hadn't been touched in years. His heart was thudding wildly and sweat prickled down his back as he heard the lads calling out to one another in anger in the alleyway outside. Nem knew there was no back entrance to the shop – if they caught him in there, he was done for.

He looked up to see the shopkeeper scowling at him from the back of the shop.

'I said you weren't to come in here,' he grunted tersely.

'I know,' Nem nodded his head his head vigorously. 'I know... I will go... I will leave,' he was jabbering, 'as soon as... as soon as they go.' He nodded towards the door.

The surly shopkeeper grimaced and peered out of the door of his shop watching the scene outside. Nem rubbed his leg and shin where he'd been hit by the stones; they were stinging now. Suddenly a voice called out from the shop entrance; it was one of the lads. Nem froze.

'You seen a runty little Jew-boy at all? Looks like a weasel...' the voice sneered.

Nem's heart stopped. Would the man hand him over? It wouldn't be the first

time. The shopkeeper scowled again. 'All boys are trouble,' he replied thickly, 'now get out of my shop!'

There was a sound of receding footsteps and Nem let out his breath slowly and gratefully, after a few moments the shopkeeper turned to Nem and jabbed a dirty finger towards the door.

'Out!'

Nem nodded and slunk out of the shop. Warily, he crossed the alley and dropped down a crumbling flight of steps into the back of another shop. This one was larger than the last one and Nem was able to slip out of the front of the shop unnoticed.

He was almost home when he heard a whistle and half turning saw three of them out of the corner of his eye sat on a wall; they had been waiting for him. Realising it was a trap; he swung around blindly and lunged forward straight into the arms of the fourth one. Nem flailed, kicking and biting like a wild thing, and the oaf who was holding him swore loudly and released him.

'Ugh! 'E bit me! Little swine! 'E bit me!'

Satisfied he had done some damage, Nem sped off again and narrowly swerved to avoid an old man leading a horse and cart down the road. With his blood pounding in his ears, he charged into his own street and flung himself into the first house he came to, nearly knocking the girl who stood in the doorway off her feet.

The four thugs flew round the corner after him and skidded to an abrupt halt as they saw him disappear into the house. The girl who was stood in the doorway was stunningly pretty and they gaped foolishly at her, breathing heavily. Coldly, she folded her arms and scowled at them; they began to shuffle about and scuff their feet in the dirt. Eventually Pars, the biggest one of them all, a thickset lad with fluff starting to sprout on his chin, shrugged his shoulders and swung around, calling to his mates to follow him. Their quarry had escaped them this time, but another day would do just as well.

The girl knelt before Nem and put some vile smelling cream on his cuts and bruises. It stung and he tried to pull away. Firmly she pulled him back.

'Stand still Nem.'

He reached out and picked up one of the thick black curls that had escaped her head band. It was soft and felt nice.

‘Haddy...’

‘Mmm?’ She didn’t look up.

Nem continued to play distractedly with her hair. ‘How old are you?’

‘Um...’ She stopped to look at her handiwork. ‘I’m 7 years older than you Nem. How old does that make me?’

Nem shrugged disinterestedly, sums were for school time and school was over. Eventually Haddy finished rubbing the cream into his legs and looked up; she pulled Nem towards her and folded him in her arms. She smelt nice and clean and Nem felt safe in her arms, but he was getting older now – too big for a girly hug. He fidgeted and then pulled away: he was about to disappear, his mind on the biscuit jar, when she grabbed his arm and pulled him back. Holding him at arms length she watched him for a moment.

‘I’m taking you to and from school from now on.’

‘No.’ He shook his head adamantly. ‘I’ll be alright.’

‘Yes Nem. No arguments.’

‘You’ll make it worse Haddy. They’ll call me a baby – they’ll say I need a nursemaid.’

She grimaced. ‘You don’t need a nursemaid Nem, you need a bodyguard – look at the state of you!’ She stared at him. ‘I have shopping to do most days – I can make sure I am coming back at the time you come out of school. Ah!’ She held up a hand to silence his protest. ‘That way you can carry my basket for me.’

Nem scowled at her pretty face and she grinned in response. ‘You look like Mordecai’s old donkey with that face on!’

‘Who looks like my donkey?’ The deep voice floated in from the outer room, and a tall elegant, well-dressed man came into the room. Mordecai was Hadassah’s cousin. He was considerably older than her and had looked after her ever since her parents had died when she was very young. He took one look at Nem and raised his eyebrows.

‘Ah,’ he nodded understandingly, ‘I see.’

He moved towards Hadassah and bent to give her a peck on the cheek. ‘Hullo

sweetheart. Are you giving this man a hard time?’

She smiled in response, but the smile soon faded. ‘Have you seen Nem’s legs Mordecai?’

Mordecai raised his eyes questioningly before looking down at Nem’s sturdy brown legs. His expression changed and his face darkened angrily. He looked at Nem.

‘Did this happen on the way home from school again?’

‘Uh-huh.’ Nem shrugged nonchalantly, he was getting bored with all the fuss. He turned to Hadassah. ‘Is Deborah in?’

Hadassah smiled. ‘Yeah, she’s in the kitchen, but only one biscuit mind. You’re mother’d kill me if she knew how many biscuits you get through.’

Nem slipped out of the room, the recent events erased from his thoughts.

Mordecai sighed heavily as he sat down. ‘It’s getting worse you know. Everywhere people are complaining about the Jews. If their food is off, a Jew sold them bad meat, sick animals - it’s because of the Jews, no money - the Jews are charging too much interest! When the King has problems up on the northern border – it is because of the Jews... Always... always it is us! Always the Jews! Even at the palace, it is getting worse.’

Hadassah stared at her older cousin, a worried frown creasing her forehead. Mordecai saw it and immediately regretted his outburst. He smiled tiredly at the young girl.

‘I am sorry. I should not be bothering you with all of this. It is not so bad really and the Lord is looking after us anyway, so we don’t need to worry.’

Hadassah stared at him, her dark eyes troubled. ‘What should we do?’

‘Pray Hadassah. The Lord will find a way through it, he always does. We must trust in him.’

Hadassah smiled uncertainly. Trusting in the Lord had always sounded so straightforward but the vision of those lads chasing Nem with such loathing on their faces somehow made believing that God was on their side a lot harder.