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It was dark. It was always dark here. It always happened the same way: the feeling of complete nothingness, but completely aware. It was eerily quiet too. He hated this part, he could hear his heart beating. He had been here for hours already. Just as it became unbearable, a shape began to form in the blackness. A tree stood in the distance. It wasn't a tree specifically, it was more a collection of shapes that formed the idea of a tree, looming over the darkness. Its topmost branches seemed to disappear, giving the shape an infinite and unknown feeling. He shuddered. The relief that came from the sight of another object was fleeting. As the shapes condensed, it became apparent that at the base of the tree were two men, standing with their backs against opposite sides of the trunk, in chains. One of the figures he had never seen before. It was a man in his late middle ages. The man carried a firm composure, and seemed to resonate with an unseen force. The other, in the remnants of luxurious clothing stood a semblance of King Noah, dirtied and frightened. Neither figure stirred or spoke. Suddenly flames erupted around the base of the tree. It was very bright, and cut away the darkness. He watched in horror as it licked around the shapes, now real people, and consumed them slowly. Then the flame was all around him, attempting to claim him as well. He glanced around frantically, with nowhere to run, except to the tree. The flames felt hot and real, and he would have liked nothing more than to be away from them. Suddenly he heard a word echo out in the midst of the chaos: "Rise." With that word, he knew his only chance was to make it to the tree, and climb up into its upmost

branches, beyond sight, and get forever away from the flames and the darkness. With a rush of adrenaline, he dashed towards the tree, and launched himself into its lowest branches. His heart pounded. The flames fed off the lower wood, and burned hotter than ever. His clothes were alight, his muscles burned with his own weight as he pulled himself from branch to branch. As he rose, he felt lighter and lighter, and stronger and stronger. He began to launch himself off each branch, jumping higher and higher to the next branch. Before he knew it, he had reached the top of the tree. He felt strong and brave and light. Before he could fully comprehend his surroundings, a blinding light filled his sight...

Aaron snapped awake. His forehead felt wet with perspiration. He sighed. It was that dream again; that same old dream he had his entire life. Ever since he could remember, it had popped up every once in a while. Just when it was about to fade, it would come again, burning itself fresh into his mind. By now, he didn't mind it consciously, although it still terrified him asleep. While awake, he knew it from beginning to end. He had spent plenty of hours over his life thinking about it, while tending to his fields. It had become something of a central thread to his life, shaping his decisions and influencing his actions.

Aaron was a vigneron. His father had started farming the land of Nephi under the reign of Zeniff, but under King Noah, Aaron had repurposed the farm for winemaking. It was the token of success in these days. He enjoyed his work, as well as the prestige it brought him. Wine was an enormous commodity. Whatever wasn't taken for taxes sold well on the open market. Aaron took pride in his grapes and fermentation, and they hadn't let him down. He lived among the wealthier caste of society. His circle of friends and acquaintances was large. Outside of his work, he existed in a sphere of festivities and jovial affairs. Life was good.

He pulled himself into a sitting position, and sighed again. The images of the burning men raced through his mind again. Squeezing his eyes shut, he lurched forward and onto his feet in one fluid motion. It wouldn't do to let them affect his day. Pushing them from his thoughts, he quickly dressed, splashed water over his face, then left his little room to find something to eat.

The sun beat down hard on Aaron's bare back. His work was almost done for the day. He was tired. The vines had produced exceptionally well this year, and after the harvest, needed to be trimmed significantly. He had hired help, but it was never quite enough, and Aaron liked the intense labor. It took his mind off other things. Sweat dripped down his back and arms. He had been out since sun-up, and it had crossed most of the sky by now. The day was almost done. As he worked, his mind wandered back to the dream.

"What does it mean? Who is the calm man? Why does it continue to come to me?" He asked. These questions came every single time after the dream. By this point, he had stopped even trying to answer them. Mostly he didn't even care. Sometimes, if he was in a mystical mood, he would try to analyze it and look for signs. Sometimes he would pretend he was one of the men tied to the tree. Sometimes he would change the story in his head, and save burning people, and imagine the life of riches and luxury he would receive for valiantly saving the king's life. But in the end, it always came back to these questions. Today was no different. One question in particular pressed him: "Who is the calm, composed man standing across from the king?" He couldn't help but feel it was important, and today it dominated his mind. Legions of men he knew flashed through his mind. He tried to sort through them, first by age, then height, then eyes, then feeling. Nothing. He couldn't remember anyone matching more than one or two

of the descriptions, but never all of them. And he certainly couldn't remember ever coming into contact with anyone with such a feeling of power and command.

He stood, straightening himself and wiped his brow with his forearm. The time had come. He had an engagement with friends later in the evening, and he still needed to prepare. Walking back to his small cart of tools, he picked up his shirt and wriggled into it. He poured a small amount of water from his carry-jug into his hands, then rubbed them together to rinse a portion of the dirt off. Then, with a swig from his jug, he picked up his cart and set off towards home. Little did he know, that his life was about to change forever.

It was only the next day, on his usual journey to the markets, that he first saw the man. He had woken late, from a long night of drinking and entertainment, and was hurriedly on his way to his favorite street vendor, to sell the remainder of his latest batch of wines. He knew the man well, and knew exactly the bribes necessary to fetch the highest price per jug. The bustle of the markets was overwhelming, but comforting to him. It had always been his job to take his father's wares to market, and it had always been his favorite day of the week. This love remained with him, and he devoted himself to it. He pushed through the crowds with his cart, nodding to acquaintances and basking in the frantic atmosphere. Most vendors already knew his business was extremely selective. Elderly men and women, offering jewelry or telling fortunes stepped aside. Those whom he supported called out to him in greeting. He acknowledged them, but continued on his journey. Shopping was not his objective today, and he knew only too well that if he stopped, he would return home unnecessarily poorer with useless items. His mind wandered contentedly, taking everything in.

Suddenly he was jarred out of his dreams. A gathering of people had gathered, and shouts of anger and rage rang out. It couldn't be the royal guard making trouble. They always bullied vendors quietly; or at least everyone knew better than to make noise about it. You could occasionally hear an especially brave vendor cry out in indignation when their goods were seized, or their spot was taken for "royal purposes." These noisemakers often mysteriously gave up their market trade soon after and took to various forms of farm labor, and some vanished entirely. It was just an unspoken rule to surrender willingly anything to the king and his guard, whenever they asked for it. As long as one was able to adhere to this simple rule, the market thrived happily, and life was pleasant for everyone.

Aaron set his cart to the side of the road, and carefully picked his way through the crowd to the focal point of the group. Shouts of "liar" and "blasphemer" rang out. A rock flew over his head. Alarmed, he pushed faster. At the center of the gathering, stood a man in his late middle ages, with a firm composure. Aaron's heart seemed to stop dead. A sense of power and strength emanated from the man's being. Aaron stood in a shocked daze, staring at the man. This man. He was here, the man from his dream. Aaron didn't understand. In his dream, he had always felt so kindly toward this strong kind man, but now, he seemed to be hated. Without knowing what he was doing, he stepped forward up to the man, and turned to face the crowd.

"CEASE FROM THIS!" he shouted as loudly as he could, echoing over the rubble. "CEASE IMMEDIATELY!" the entire marketplace fell silent. Suddenly he felt extremely self-conscious. "W-who are we, to behave this way? We are not savages, we are not like the brethren of our forefathers, the Lamanites."

A cry rang out from the back of the group. “You support this man! Traitor!” It was quickly echoed by others, and soon the entire crowd was shouting again. Aaron flushed red. He glanced around nervously, then behind him to the man he had defended.

“Who are you? What is going on?”

“I am called Abinadi, and I am called of God.”

“Why is everyone so angry with you? I don’t understand. I have seen you before, in dreams, and you were nice, and you told me to climb a tree—” The words spilled out of his mouth, faster than he could cut them off. “—and why aren’t...” he trailed off. Abinadi looked him in the eyes and smiled. The powerful feeling pierced Aaron. He felt safe and warm.

Abinadi looked at him closely, then turned back towards the people gathered. He took a deep breath, then spoke: “Behold, thus saith the Lord, and thus hath he commanded me, saying, Go forth, and say unto this people, thus saith the Lord—Wo be unto this people, for I have seen their abominations, and their wickedness, and their whoredoms; and except they repent I will visit them in mine anger. And except they repent and turn to the Lord their God, behold, I will deliver them into the hands of their enemies; yea, and they shall be brought into bondage; and they shall be afflicted by the hand of their enemies. And it shall come to pass that they shall know that I am the Lord their God, and am a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of my people. And it shall come to pass that except this people repent and turn unto the Lord their God, they shall be brought into bondage; and none shall deliver them, except it be the Lord the Almighty God. Yea, and it shall come to pass that when they shall cry unto me I will be slow to hear their cries; yea, and I will suffer them that they be smitten by their enemies. And except they repent in sackcloth and ashes, and cry mightily to the Lord their God, I will not hear their prayers, neither

will I deliver them out of their afflictions; and thus saith the Lord, and thus hath he commanded me.¹”

Aaron felt numb. He couldn’t quite comprehend what he had just heard. First, he was safe, then suddenly he was – he wasn’t sure. He still felt the power, but now he was somehow afraid of it. Slowly, he backed away, back into the crowd. He continued to back away until he was out of the group. Only then did he turn, still stunned. He slowly returned to where he left his cart. It was gone, stolen in the tumult. He sighed, and turned towards home.

Darkness. Again. Every part of him groaned. This was not the night for this, he wanted anything else. Anything that wouldn’t bring him back to face Abinadi again. It was inevitable though. Slowly, after hours, the tree formed. Eventually the figures appeared under the tree. He wanted to scream. “ANYTHING ELSE! ANYTHING ELSE!” No sound came out. It was perfectly silent, as always. Suddenly, he began to move towards the tree against his will. His mind struggled to break free, but he was pulled nevertheless. Instead of approaching from the side, he approached Abinadi directly. He drew very close; their noses were only an inch apart. Abinadi’s face was stone cold, unmoving. Aaron’s heart let out a scream, and it found its way to his mouth. Again, he screamed in agony, and this time sound echoed forth. However, it sounded like a cry of rage. It echoed around and around the darkness, until it sounded like hundreds of voices, then thousands. Shouting, screaming, angry voices cascaded upon him. “Liar!” “Blasphemer!” “Burn him!” He looked around in fear of what was about to happen. He was too close to the tree, if it went up in flames, he would be consumed as well, but he couldn’t move. He waited, but nothing happened. Slowly the echoes faded, until only one voice remained. “Burn him.” It was

¹ Mosiah 11:20-25

calm now, and definitely not Aaron's voice. Then it spoke again. "I am your king. I command you to burn him." King Noah's voice echoed loud and clear, but sinister. Aaron wanted to respond, to tell him that if anything happened, it would kill all of them, but his lips were sealed again. Suddenly he was holding a torch, gazing deep into the eyes of Abinadi. Then, with no control over his motions, he held the torch to Abinadi and scourged him with it. Again and again he poked and jabbed at Abinadi until he was in flames. Aaron's mind sobbed, powerless over the situation it had created. Abinadi stood quietly, never moving, never speaking, calm and resolved. However, as the flames caught, a single tear rolled down the silent cheeks. King Noah spoke again, "Well done my son. Come with me now. I will keep you safe." Aaron again found himself dragged around the tree to be face to face with the king. Noah held out his arms, and embraced Aaron, silently wrapping a chain around him, tying him tightly to Noah, and to the burning tree. There was no power, no light, no voice telling him to rise. He couldn't move. He sobbed uncontrollably as the flames closed around him...

Aaron woke in tears, shaking and weak. His mind was racing, full of regret, fear and despair. He tried to sit up, but found himself too weak with sorrow. He consigned himself to laying down, and attempted to reason with himself. He wept for a time, then retreated into his mind to examine his thoughts. All he could think about was the day before: walking home angrily, and thoughtlessly working himself up. He had taken most of a jug of his strongest wine, and in the intoxication that followed, he had gathered a group of angry men and women and confronted group of the royal guard, and told them of the heinous crimes of a public menace named Abinadi. All he had wanted was to see him suffer for the terrible things he had said about their kingdom. They were a happy people, prosperous and powerful. Any divine power had

blessed them with such riches, not cursed them. They had beaten the Lamanites, not fallen to them.

Now though, all he could think of was despair. He remembered too vividly pressing the burning torch into Abinadi, and the feel of the chain Noah had wrapped around him, condemning him to burn alongside the king and the prophet. That was strange. He hadn't thought of Abinadi as a prophet before, but now it seemed obvious.

A jolt of terror shot through him, and he sprang to his feet. The guards may not have arrested him yet, and if not, he had to be warned. Aaron felt it was his duty personally do all he could to protect the man he had betrayed. Quickly he dressed and left his house for the marketplace.

On his arrival, the marketplace buzzed in its usual way, but today it annoyed him. He elbowed his way through the crowds, looking for any gatherings or commotions, straining his ears for shouts of discontentment. Nothing. Just the usual chatter and noise of bargains being struck, fortunes being told, and general contentedness as everyone went about their day. He grimaced. How could he locate the man again?

"Aaron!" a voice called out behind him. He turned to locate the source. An elderly bearded man with poor complexion and poorer teeth smiled up at him. "Aaron it's done my boy. They got him!" His voice was rough, but carried excitement and an air of victory. "For once, our guards did a real job eh?" he laughed, and his laughter buried the sound of Aaron's defeated groan.

The next few days Aaron battled with himself. Part of him knew he needed to visit the palace, and plead Abinadi's innocence. Another part of him knew that siding with an enemy of

the king would destroy his livelihood. He spent hours arguing, back and forth. He tried to rationalize it away. Others would have reported him if he hadn't, right? But it *was* him, and he would live every day for the rest of his life knowing it.

Finally, he made up his mind. He wasn't entirely sure what he could do, but he had to at least go and try. It was with great hesitation he approached the great steps of the palace. It was an intimidating sight. He had seen it before, but never up close, and never as a potential traitor. The great doors were plated in gold, and surrounded by spiraling pillars. Intricate carvings adorned every surface, from the mightiest beast, to the smallest flower. It was magnificent and awe-inspiring. He stopped for a moment to breathe it in. Suddenly he paused. He didn't actually know how to talk to anyone about a matter like this. His chances of an immediate audience with the king were next to none. In an instant, all his courage fled from him, and his heart turned towards home. Then just as quickly as it came, it passed, and with a shake of the head, he began up the stairs.

As he approached the top, the great golden doors flung open and a man stormed out looking angry and alarmed. He was a great man, adorned in the priestly robes of King Noah's elect. As he passed, Aaron heard him mutter under his breath, about "the worst decision you could have made," and "now the Lord's destruction is made sure." Intrigued, he called after the man.

"Wait!" he turned after the retreating man. "Wait." The man turned to him briskly.

"Now is not the time. Any requests or complaints can be reported to the guard. I am very busy." He turned away again and continued.

"No! Why is the Lord's destruction made sure? What are you talking about?" Aaron had a sick feeling in his stomach.

The man stopped. Without turning, he slowly spoke. “The King, let him live healthy and forever, has made a very poor decision today. He has sentenced a servant of the Lord to be killed.” He clenched his fists. “But you heard nothing, nor saw nothing from me.” He began to walk again.

“No, no!” Aaron cried out. “I know he was a holy man. I came to offer a testimony for him.”

“You have come too late.” He stopped again, “but it only would have sealed your fate as well. Abinadi spoke grave tidings against our kingdom. Things the King will not hear now, nor ever in his lifetime.” He looked down. “What is your name?”

“Aaron, son of Aaron. I tend a vineyard here. And, may I ask yours?”

“Ah, Aaron. I have heard of your wines, although I am afraid I couldn’t tell you if I have partaken. My name is Alma, priest and councilor to King Noah. Or at least, I was. Walk with me, for I should not be found here any longer.”

“I can take you in for a while if you need somewhere to stay. I live alone, with a good house.”

“Only for a short while. I fear I may be called on to depart these lands entirely. I may attempt to return to our brethren in Zarahemla. I can only hope they have not become so corrupt like we have.” Alma shook his head. “Aaron, I have to continue Abinadi’s work. I can’t explain to you in so short a time the things he said to us in there. But I can tell you, everything he said was true. This land is cursed for our wickedness. You and I too, unless we can separate ourselves, and save as many of our brothers and sisters as possible. I can’t explain to you the feeling I have. It’s powerful.”

“Like a warm safety?” Aaron smiled sadly. “Abinadi was filled with that power, and I always felt it when I saw him. Unfortunately, I didn’t realize it in time.”

“Exactly, and a burning in my chest, compelling me to rise, and carry on his work.”

“I want in.” Aaron burst out. “I want to help.”

Weeks passed. Aaron and Alma had spent most of their time in hiding, but quietly gathering people sympathetic to their cause, and anxious to join their search for truth. They had begun meeting at Aaron’s house, but as their group expanded, they had found a small place outside of town, called Mormon. Here a clean river came up from the ground, and it was around this fountain that they met. Alma was their leader, having heard the gospel from the mouth of Abinadi, and having received his own revelation from God. He led them well, and they were happy, at least together.

Life in the town was difficult for everyone. They were treated differently. Those who knew of Alma’s little band looked down on them, and those who didn’t couldn’t understand their secrecy and isolation. It was only a matter of time before they were investigated by a band of the guard, and ordered to cease their illegal worships. It was then they knew they only had one option: to flee from the land completely.

It was late the following night they arranged to meet and depart. That day Aaron had spent all his time spreading the word to followers of Christ. When the time finally arrived, they quietly snuck out of their homes, gathered on the outskirts of town, and slipped off into the night. Emotions mixed as families left behind all that they owned and prepared to start anew. Aaron however, was thrilled. He had true purpose, and had fulfilled his vision. He had risen to a higher

standard of life, and was prepared to carry the message of the Lord forward until he was summoned home on high at last. He smiled and breathed out a sigh of relief.

It was dark. However, it wasn't frightening, and he wasn't alone. Behind him stood Alma, and behind him, the entire group of followers of Christ. It wasn't quiet either. They talked and sang praises to the Lord. As they sang, the sky brightened, until it was dark no longer. In the distance, stood the tree, as it had always stood. Chained to the base stood Abinadi and King Noah, as always. The sense of power still radiated from the prophet. King Noah, however, had no composure: wailing and crying silently and gnashing his teeth together, raging against the light, raging against the sense of power and peace that abound across the open plane. For the first time, he could see the tree clearly, and that cut into the trunk of the tree were handholds and footholds, and a rope hung down the side of them, offering assistance up the tree. Again, the calm voice, the voice of Abinadi, echoed. "Rise." Slowly, one by one, each and every person approached the tree, and began to ascend, securing themselves to the tree with the rope and holds. At last only Alma and he remained. Alma turned to him, and smiled. Then he gestured to Abinadi, turned back towards the tree, and began to ascend. Only Aaron himself remained on the ground. He looked around himself, then at King Noah, then at Abinadi. Slowly, he walked a circle around the tree, towards the king, and ending with the prophet. He looked on at his ruler, and felt nothing but sorrow and compassion for the proud monarch. Then he came to Abinadi. His calm, composed face remained motionless, peaceful. Suddenly, he smiled at Aaron, and nodded, then closed his eyes forever. Aaron stepped back and bowed slightly. Then he straightened himself, turned toward the rope, and proceeded to climb the tree. As he climbed, the base of the tree lit with flames, and began its journey towards the destruction of the two men.

Aaron however, was far above, and only looked upwards as he continued. Light filled his vision.

Not painful, blinding light, but awakening, powerful peaceful light.

He never had the dream again.

The End.