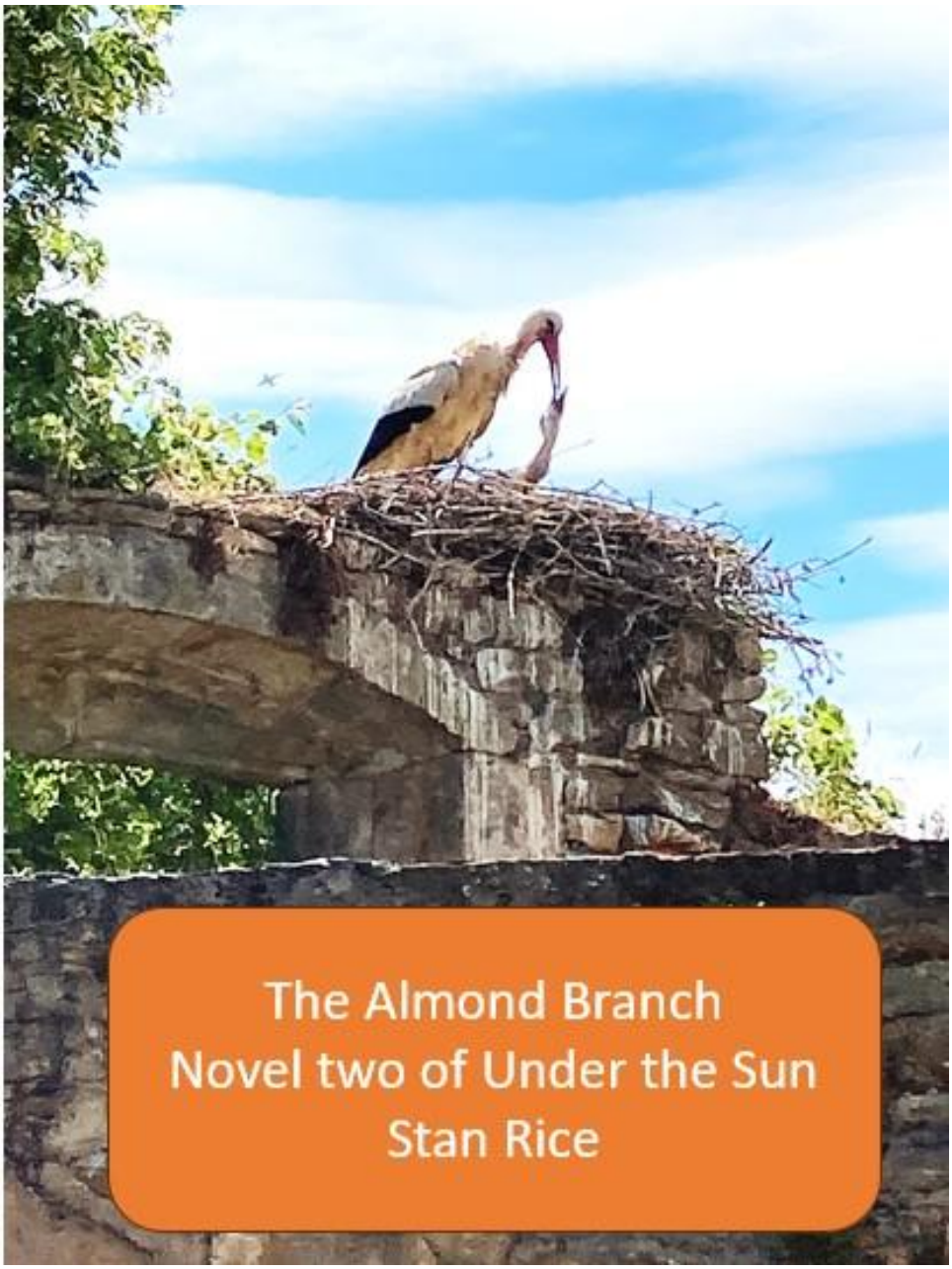
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THE ALMOND BRANCH

Novel 2 of the series Under the Sun

Stan Rice

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Table of Contents

Summary of The Almond Branch

Part One

Part Two

Part Three

Author's Notes on The Almond Branch

Author's notes on the Under the Sun novels

About the Author

Summary of The Almond Branch

In Jerusalem, immediately before its conquest by Babylon, Jeremiah is on his way to succeeding his father as a priest. Even when they are children, Miriam loves Jeremiah, but Jeremiah is clueless about human love even when he grows up. He is borderline crazy and keeps alienating himself from his society. He thinks God speaks to him through puns. Jeremiah's father has pagan images in addition to Jewish ones, to appease Jebusite neighbors, but Jeremiah destroys them. And it keeps getting worse, until Jeremiah has to live in a cave with the other prophets. Miriam is torn between a marriage proposal from an older but very good man, Saad, and Jeremiah's invitation for her to join the prophets, though not as his lover.

Even after Miriam marries Saad, Jeremiah still seeks her comradeship. The king counts on Egypt's help against Babylon, only to be disappointed. A wealthy businessman and his grim brother, modeled after Trump and Pence, cannot save Jerusalem either. While Jerusalem suffers starvation and cannibalism during the Babylonian siege, the king throws Jeremiah into a cesspit, from which he is rescued by a steward modeled after Obama and a court jester modeled after Biden. Jeremiah rejoices when the tension is broken and Jerusalem falls, and all the skilled people, including Saad, are deported. Miriam stays behind and rescues the Old Testament wisdom literature—which is still an embarrassment to conservatives—from being lost.

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Part One

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Chapter 1

Wherever Jeremiah is now, if he is still alive, I wish for him the happiness that he deserves but will never have. When I knew him, he could never just relax and enjoy life. Contentment? Not a chance. He could never just look at something; he would *behold* it. To him, every thing had a meaning beyond its surface appearance. He lived in a world that none of the rest of us could see. Sometimes he saw a world of beauty. But just as often it was a world of suffering and destruction, filled with the judgment of God. He had the purest soul of anyone I have ever known. It was as if Heaven shone a strong beam of light directly into his eyes and hypnotized him. When we were young, I loved him but was afraid to tread in the circle of light that surrounded him. That is still how I feel about him.

He was the only son of Hilkiah, the high priest of Anathoth, a city near Jerusalem. I was the youngest daughter of Ahaz the cloth merchant. I was the sister Jeremiah never had, as he was the brother I never had.

Everyone knew Jeremiah was very strange. We played with the other children just outside the city walls, throwing rocks, and making spears from sticks and blow-guns from reeds. But then, in the middle of playing, Jeremiah would suddenly stop and become very serious. He would look at farmers coming home from the fields at harvest time, during beautiful weather and with a bountiful crop, while the late sun made the hills look like bronze. He would say that someday these fields would be desolate like wilderness, and sown with salt. The other children would retreat from him when he was in one of these frightening moods. I would start to retreat also, but I always returned to Jeremiah's side.

Jeremiah and I were the only ones to take hikes out in the hills. I was fascinated by the way he noticed everything: every tree, every branch, every leaf, every creeping thing on every leaf; every bird, every song, every flutter of every wing; every rock; every shaft of light on the surface of the creek. This was unusual enough. But sometimes he would become utterly silent, looking at everything and at nothing. I learned that it was no use to try to talk to him at such times. I would just look at nothing and at everything until he turned his attention back to me.

As we grew older, Jeremiah and I knew the time would soon come when we could no longer play together. We knew that we were no longer children. We talked to one another about the changes that were occurring in our bodies, and we were not happy about them. One afternoon, the last warm afternoon before winter, we both suspected that it would be the last time we would be allowed to hike together in the hills around Anathoth. I felt very sad.

But Jeremiah came up with a solution to the problem that instantly restored cheer to my heart. We knew that he could not simply come to my house and ask me to go unto

the hills with him. But we could work out a system of communication, and come separately to a place we could meet. Like lovers meeting, I told myself, only this is Jeremiah that we are talking about. He pulled a stone out of a hidden pocket. It was an unusual stone, smooth, soft, and green. He said painters used it as a source of color for paint.

"When I leave this stone for you, then you will know that I am waiting for you on the trail near the big oak," he said. I knew the spot to which he referred. It was our favorite place. "Come to me if you can, and bring the rock. If you cannot, then leave the rock in its place."

"Leave it on the little ledge just inside of the wall," I said. "The corner near the millers' lane."

"I know the place," he said, putting the stone back in his pocket.

*

On a warm day early the next spring, I found the green rock in its place. During the winter, I had met with Jeremiah over dinner, once at my house, once at his. We had talked quietly, but had never been alone since the previous autumn. I could barely restrain my joy when I saw the rock.

My mother told me I could go out hiking in the hills whenever I wanted. She knew I would be safe. I was always utterly silent as I walked, and knew how to hide whenever there was anyone else on the road. If I ever were to be in danger, I could slide silently through the branches and vines. Since the oak trees on the hills kept their leaves all winter, there was always shade in which I could hide. Only the giant cottonwood and sycamore trees down by the Brook Kidron lost their leaves each winter.

I took the rock and went to the place where the fig tree grew over the city wall. Fig trees are not big, but it seemed big when I was a girl, and it had grown with me. I climbed its branches and jumped down onto the trail, squishy with winter mud under my leather sandals. Within minutes, I found Jeremiah near the big oak.

On this day, Jeremiah wanted to go out into the fragrant shrubs of the open hillsides. The little trails, I assumed, were normally used only by foxes. We did not talk with one another. Jeremiah frequently stopped to inhale the leaves, still pungent although they had shriveled.

Then we heard some noises in the bushes. Jeremiah headed toward them. I realized it could be a dangerous animal or a more dangerous human, but I followed him.

As we approached a little grassy opening, we heard human laughter. We saw a man and a woman rolling around together, uncovering parts of their bodies we had never seen on the opposite sex. Jeremiah and I both knew what was going on, even though we had never seen an adult encounter.

Jeremiah turned and said quietly to me, “Miriam, God will pass judgment on this wicked and adulterous generation.” This was something he must have read from the old writings of Isaiah. He could not have heard it from his father or the other priests, whose sermons were designed to be inoffensive to rich but not always good citizens. The couple lay on a soft counterpane of red cloth with gold-colored decorations. We continued to watch the couple with a mixture of fear, abhorrence, and interest. A horse, decked in fine blankets, snorted nearby.

The couple finished, and fell into relaxation. The man’s decorated leather shirt was twisted about his square torso, and his red hair, tinged with gold, fell back like a wave from his sweaty forehead.

For a moment I wondered whether Jeremiah and I would ever someday touch one another and explore one another. I got my answer when I saw fire in his eyes, and it was not the fire of passion. It was zeal. “God will punish us all for this,” he said. Then he stood up and walked into the little clearing where the man and woman lay. I stayed back.

The woman screamed.

“By Sheol, get away from here, boy!” said the man as he sat up.

“God has seen you, and knows what you have done,” squeaked Jeremiah’s changing voice.

“It’s the priest’s son,” said the woman, whose voice sounded familiar but whose face I could not see.

“Get out of here, and forget what you saw, if you know what your life is worth,” howled the man. The woman sat up and wrapped herself clumsily in her robe. I now recognized my cousin Gomer, who was married to one of the king’s horse trainers.

“I could forget,” said Jeremiah, suddenly quiet. “But Jehovah will not forget.”

“Jehovah?” snarled the man. Then he smiled, I think. His smile looked just like a scowl. “I don’t care one way or the other about what, if anything, Jehovah might remember or forget. I’m an important person, and I don’t need any god to tell me what to do or to not do. I’m rich. And women know I’m rich. They like it when I grab them, and before you know it, we are out in the bushes. That’s why I have a bevy of them. But, let me make this clear. You are not going to tell your father that you saw me.”

“What would I tell him?” asked Jeremiah, with perfect equanimity. “I do not know who you are.”

“Everyone around here knows who I am.” The man spat his words.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Jeremiah. “God knows who you are. This woman is not your wife, or else you would be laying with her at home. This woman is not a prostitute, or else you would be hiding in her parlor. You are risking the rage of her husband or her father or her betrothed...” Jeremiah continued.

“Who will never find out, if you know what your life is worth,” shouted the man, baring his teeth.

"Human rage cannot compare with God's rage," continued Jeremiah, without slowing down.

Jeremiah's words were interrupted by the man's laughter. And the woman's. "Look, look up in the sky," the man jeered. "God never stopped us before. God never stopped anyone, as far as I am aware, from doing whatever he pleases. Do you see any fire falling down from heaven?"

Then Jeremiah did the most puzzling thing that I had ever seen him do. He looked up at the sky. What did he see? A beam of sunlight through the clouds? Stars in the daytime? He answered, "Yes. Yes, as a matter of fact, I do."

While Jeremiah was in his trance, the man crawled slowly over to a satchel, from which he drew a knife. "Listen, boy, you let God handle this. One word from you, to anybody, and your life will not be worth the dregs at the bottom of bad wine. You will be good only for fertilizing the fields. I hear that vines grow especially well when they drink the juices of a corpse. Maybe I should try it in some of my many, many vineyards."

Jeremiah did not flinch, nor did he retreat. "Very well. I *will* let God handle this." And he turned and began to walk away. "Come," he said to me, lifting me to a standing position from where I crouched, and led me with him.

My cousin, who had not seen me earlier, shrieked. She said to the man, "It's Miriam."

The man called down the trail as we retreated, "If you tell anyone that you saw us out here, I will tell them that I saw *you* out here, in the bushes, with this girl. Yes, what else could a young man and woman be doing out here in the bushes? Looking at leaves and rocks? Young you may be, but you are not a little boy anymore, nor is she a little girl. Now, who will people believe? Me, or you? People listen when I talk, you better believe it!"

*

The spring weather had turned abruptly cold, and a north wind blew strongly against a window of Hilkiah's house. I hid behind a curtain and looked out through the little hole in the shutter. The cold air probed my eye like an icy blade. The sunlight was bright, but I could see the shadowy outline of Jeremiah on the shaded porch. The wind disturbed his short dark locks and his loose robe. He was skinny, but strong for his age. His clothes were fine, though sloppily worn. He seemed oblivious to the cold. He was beside the cooking pot, where usually only the women go. What a place this was for the son of a high priest—not the priest of a little village, but of Anathoth, a refined city so close to Jerusalem itself! And as if this were not enough, it was when high priest Hilkiah had rich dinner guests, including my family. I felt embarrassed to know Jeremiah, but could not resist looking again and again at him.

The grown-ups did not know I could hear everything they said. My father Ahaz talked in the hallway with Hilkiah as the women prepared the banquet hall. Gossip time.

My father told Jeremiah's father that the young wife of Old Aharon had been caught in adultery with a young man. Aharon could have insisted that they both be stoned, as prescribed by Scripture. But Old Aharon just smiled and asked for money, which he got from the young man's family. Aharon had asked for precisely the amount that he knew would break the resources of that family, so that they would have to give him their land. They now worked for him as his shepherds and shovelers of fertilizer on that land. I imagined that my father smiled when he said that the young wife (the youngest of Aharon's three daughters) had been a wise investment after all. I wondered, as I listened, which sin was greater—that of the passionate young couple, or that of the old man who used this passion to his monetary advantage.

"I continue to hope," said my father, "that your son would someday become mine as well." One might think I would have been surprised to hear this. But it was not the first time our fathers had talked about the fact that Ahaz had only daughters, and that Jeremiah was Hilkiah's only heir. Ever since I knew what marriage was, I had assumed I would someday marry my childhood friend. For, after all, as Jeremiah had explained to me, in God's eyes, marriage was when a woman united with a man who was her best friend. "But..." My father's voice streamed into a disappointed confusion.

I heard a sigh, which must have been from Hilkiah. "Yes, I know. He lacks the social graces. I believe he will outgrow his strangeness."

"He has already made something of a habit of bothering everyone with whom he comes in contact," said Ahaz. "With all of his talk of God's judgment. If this continues..."

"It will not continue," Hilkiah assured him. "He excels in his studies of the scriptures and the laws. He is very smart, and very wise. Once he is fully a man, I quite naturally hope that he will be the new high priest and will know how to interpret the scriptures without insulting people."

"My friend," said Ahaz. "My daughter is beautiful, and there must be other young men..." He hesitated, which made my heart beat wildly in fear. Certainly, he could not be thinking of having me marry someone else, perhaps an older man. Why did he hesitate? Why? He continued. "...who would be glad to have her, and to reward our family greatly for her. And," he added as an afterthought, "who would be a blessing to my little girl, by giving her a child." Oh, yes, a child. Not to be a blessing by befriending me, as Jeremiah has, but by giving me a child. I had known barren women who wailed at their barrenness, and said they were desolate. But, actually, I envied them a little. I imagined how wonderful life might be if Jeremiah and I could live out in the hills, not raising a family, not having to cultivate land, not even bothering with the exertions that we had seen the couple undergo out in the bushes, but just to be as we had always been, friends of the sort that boys and girls are allowed to be but men and women are not.

"Yes," my father continued. "There are many men whom Miriam could marry." I thought, *By Sheol, Father, I am only fifteen years old! Can't you let me enjoy being a girl?* "But Jeremiah? Oh, I'm sure that if he does not develop proper manners..."

"He will!" said Hilkiah, more loudly than he intended.

"...the woman who marries him may have to be as ill-mannered as he is. No great light in society, she. There, I said it. I am sorry, my friend, but I had to say it." This time it was my father who sighed.

"Give the boy a chance," said Hilkiah.

"Of course. There is no rush. By the way, where is he? Would it not be appropriate for him to be here, by his father's side? Is it not time for him to be accepting at least this social responsibility, greeting the guests?" My father sounded a little impatient.

"I do not know where he is," said Hilkiah. It may be surprising that a father would not know where his sixteen-year-old son was. But I realized that he could not even be sure that Jeremiah was in the house. The Jeremiah I knew might just as well have forgotten all about the banquet and be out in the hills.

My father continued, "What has made Jeremiah act like this? Surely you must know. Nothing comes from nothing, as the wise men say."

"He says that God had determined his pathway even before he was born, while he was being knit together in his mother's womb," said Hilkiah.

This astonished me. Why hadn't Jeremiah told me about this?

"And how could he know this?" persisted my father.

Hilkiah did not speak.

"Perhaps, my friend, he believes that he has received visions from God? God has spoken to him, in words?" my father asked. I agreed with my father that this was a reasonable assumption, but I knew it could not be true. Visions from God! God speaking to him! Certainly, Jeremiah would have told me if this were true. "And you know what that means," concluded Ahaz.

Hilkiah muttered, "Yes."

I wanted to hear more. Why wouldn't my father and the high priest say something that would help me understand? I waited, but when I heard the guests of honor arrive, I knew the serious conversation was at an end.

Quickly I slipped out from behind the curtain and ran out onto the porch, where Jeremiah sat. The wind took my breath away. Jeremiah turned his head and looked at me with that deep wisdom that frightened some of my friends but which was his invitation to me to come and talk with him. I knew that look on his face. It suddenly occurred to me that I knew him better than some wives know their husbands, except in that gross sense that we had beheld out in the bushes.

The reasonable thing for me to say would have been, *Why are you out here sitting by the pot?* And, as a matter of fact, I did not know why he was sitting there. But I had

grown accustomed to him sitting in surprising places, looking at what seemed to be nothing, and thinking strange thoughts.

I said, “It is a beautiful day. The sun is bright, now that the wind has blown the clouds away.”

“It will blow away more than the clouds,” he said. Here it comes again, I realized, the wisdom that I loved but which also annoyed me a little. “It is a wind from the north.”

“Yes?” I prompted him.

The vapors from the pot billowed across his face and permeated my clothing with the smell of lamb and onions. “This pot is the sin of Judah,” he said, “hot in its passion, and from the aroma of which no one can hide.”

“Yes?” I prompted again.

“The north wind is the armies of the north, the Babylonians, who will sweep down upon us, and destroy us,” he said.

I started to say, *Why are you thinking such morbid thoughts on such a beautiful day? The wildflowers are already starting to bloom, a few of them, anyway. And we are about to enjoy a nice meal.* I drew my garments more closely around me even while the cold wind penetrated down into his robe. I had seen Jeremiah very grave on sunny days before, just as I had seen him laughing and dancing in the rain. And I think it was safe to say that my friend may have been the only person in Judah who thought that we were in any danger from Babylon. As my father often said, we were profitable trading partners to the Babylonians. And as the most prosperous cloth merchant in the region, he should know. And was not the great and powerful King Josiah on the throne of Judah? Why would God send Babylonians to conquer us? Josiah had begun to re-institute the festivals prescribed by The Law that had fallen into obscurity. He held a Passover feast exactly as Moses prescribed it, and most of the families of Judah did the same. Here was a king whom even Jeremiah admitted was godly. I think King Josiah may have been the only person about whom Jeremiah said that. It was obvious to me that the border towns, near the territory that had once been our sister nation Israel before the Assyrians conquered it, might get raided. But... “You mean, even here? This close to Jerusalem?”

“Even Jerusalem itself, Miriam,” he said.

“Surely God will protect Jerusalem?” I asked, but he did not need to answer.

Then I saw my opportunity, and spoke. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” he asked. From any other man or boy this would have been a fake protestation of innocence. But from him, I knew it could mean only one thing: that there were several, or many, things that he had not told me. And he knew that I, at this moment, understood it.

“About God speaking to you,” I said.

“I have told you all of the things God has revealed to me,” he said.

"But you didn't tell me God had spoken to you personally." I realized that I might be the only person who would seriously consider the possibility that this had really happened.

"Because you know what that would mean," he said.

His voice at that moment sounded almost like my father's had a few moments before, so I screamed at him, "No, I do not. That's what the grown-ups are saying, too. Would somebody please explain it to me?"

I very seldom raised my voice. But when I did, it was always to him. He was the only person whom, at that time, I felt comfortable yelling at.

"That would mean, Miriam, that I would not be able to be a priest."

"But, how is that possible?" I asked. When he did not answer, I did what Jeremiah had often told me to do. *Think, Miriam, think.* He is the only person who ever had told or, I thought, who probably ever would tell me, a girl, to think.

I then had the answer. "It would mean that you could not be a priest because you would be among the prophets."

"Yes, Miriam," he said with a chilling seriousness.

"Isn't being among the prophets supposed to be something good?" I demanded. "You told me what you have learned from your father. There were the prophets, the priests, and the kings. Elijah and Elisha, much revered by the teachers, were prophets. And Isaiah, only a century ago. There was a woman who was a prophetess—Deborah was her name—who was a heroine from the days of the Judges. And even back to the beginning. Aaron was the first priest, and there were not yet any kings. Moses, the scholars said, was himself a prophet. Of course, there are some mysterious parts of scripture that I do not understand, such as the part about King Saul prophesying naked before the Lord. The scripture says, *Is Saul also among the prophets?* What is that supposed to mean?"

He said to me, "And this is why I could not tell you that God has called me to be a prophet: because if this is correct, then it would be very unlikely..." I saw him hesitate for one of the few times in his life, as far as I knew. "...very unlikely for your father and my father to approve of us spending our lives together."

Colorful bursts of light flashed before my eyes. One burst of light was bright green, and showed me a landscape of wooded mountains and flourishing vines and fertile fields, the mountain of the Lord, the way it should be, instead of this desert that stretches to the east from our city down into the Dead Sea; with towns in which adult men and women could be friends, even if they were the husbands or wives of other men and women, for friendship is not sex. Friendship is not adultery. One burst of light was brown, the dust of poverty in which some prophets lived, in little shacks out in the country, doing strange things, surviving on the charity of a few tender-hearted people. Not all prophets were poor—some of them provided prophecies of comfort and encouragement to the rich people of the city—but Jeremiah would be one of the poor

ones. Another burst of light was red, like the blood of some of the prophets who had proved inconvenient to earlier kings. One burst of light was white, the color of a wedding dress. Some prophets had wives, but no daughter of Ahaz would be one. At least, no daughter who was heir to Ahaz would be one. I could be Jeremiah's wife only by renouncing my family. The final burst of light was golden. I suddenly realized that perhaps the community of prophets was, in fact, that land of friends I envisioned in the first burst of color.

I spoke without thinking. "When did God first talk to you?"

Jeremiah stood and walked over to a tree beside the patio. It was the almond tree we had played under when we were children. "Remember back when we were children, Miriam? We were learning to read and write underneath this tree."

I remembered that day, an early spring afternoon just like this one, though warm. I did not realize at the time that I was one of the few girls in Anathoth who learned to write. The buds of the almond tree were just beginning to open, that day as today.

Jeremiah touched one of the buds. "I remember telling you that God spoke to me that day. He asked me, *What do you see?* I answered, *An almond branch.* Then he told me, *Very well: I am watching my word and will perform it."*

To those of you who do not speak Hebrew, I must explain what he said. The *almond branch* was *shaqed,* while *I am watching* was *shoqed.* Jeremiah wrote both words on the parchment—actually, they were the same word, as written, for we wrote only the consonants. We thought this was clever and funny. I just assumed my friend was playing with words.

I could not express the astonishment I felt, for I realized that perhaps, just perhaps, something was seriously wrong with Jeremiah. My stomach suddenly felt weightless, for I had practically built my entire life on trusting his wisdom. Was it all a delusion? For he had just told me that what happened that afternoon long ago was not just a word game, the prattle of children, but a calling from God.

Jeremiah looked up, over my shoulder. I turned around. Our fathers had just come out the door. *Oh, there you are,* said mine, and *Come on inside, the guests have arrived and we will soon be eating halvah and almonds,* said his.

I went inside the banquet room and sat on the smallest cushion, at the far end of the low table on which the dishes of the meal were arranged. Jeremiah's mother went out to the pot to bring some of the stew inside. Next, Hilkiah and my father entered. Jeremiah, we all assumed, was not far behind.

The guests entered. The servant women took their cloaks. The two men did not wait to be shown to their seats. They went straight to the places of honor. One of them was a man with short gray hair and a pinched face. I watched him briefly. The only way one could tell that he was smiling was that his eyes got narrower. The other guest was the bright-haired man Jeremiah and I had seen out in the brush. His robe was new, clean, and

sewn with intricate patterns. I tried to remain hidden. He looked right at me but showed no sign that he recognized me.

Hilkiah rushed toward the guests and bowed. How great an honor, and so on. The two guests rose.

"May I introduce you to Ahaz, son of Deodar, one of the most important merchants in the area," said Hilkiah. "Ahaz, may I introduce you to the great Trom-panazzar, and to his brother Pen-sanazzar." Ahaz bowed deeply. The gray man bowed shallowly. The red man Trom-panazzar did not bow.

"Trom-panazzar and Pen-sanazzar are important merchants," Hilkiah said to Ahaz."

"And that is not all," Pen-sanazzar said.

Hilkiah looked confused. "I regret that I do not follow you," he said.

"My brother Trom-panazzar is not only a rich merchant, but has been chosen as a prophet by the hand of God," said the gray man.

I was astonished. Trom-panazzar did not resemble Jeremiah in any way, nor any of the other prophets of whom I had ever heard. Hilkiah and my father were silent.

"It is by the hand of Trom-panazzar that the Kingdom of Judah will be delivered from destruction. He is the savior of the kingdom. Moses said that God would raise up a great prophet at the end of days. Well, here he is." Pen-sanazzar rested his case.

"But," mumbled Hilkiah, "your brother is not an Israelite."

"Not only that," said Trom-panazzar. "I don't even believe in God. But...let my brother explain this to you."

"God can raise up and use anyone He wishes. The man's ancestry, behavior, and personal beliefs are entirely irrelevant," said Pen-sanazzar.

Events quickly rescued Hilkiah from having to continue the discussion, either as host or priest. We heard the crash and the shatter of something in the hallway.

Hilkiah turned and rushed toward the noise, Father not far behind. They went into the hallway, where I had stood behind the curtain earlier. I slipped out of the banquet hall and followed them.

Jeremiah stood beside a little pile of terra cotta rubble that had once been a shrine on the wall. He held a wooden hoe.

"What have you done?" said Hilkiah in an intense low voice, right into his son's face.

Jeremiah muttered something in response.

"I didn't hear you, boy! This requires an explanation!"

Jeremiah's mother approached. "What happened?" she asked.

"Jeremiah has shattered the Asherah statue," said Hilkiah.

"Why, it was an expensive one!" gasped Jeremiah's mother.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to get another one," said Hilkiah.

"I'll just break that one too," muttered Jeremiah without betraying any emotion on his face.

"Why, son, why?" wailed Hilkiah. Father looked away in shame. "Especially right now, with important guests in the other room!"

Hilkiah then looked at me. "I wish to apologize to you, also, Miriam. I know Jeremiah is your friend, and I regret that he may have brought embarrassment upon you also."

"The guests are waiting," whispered Hilkiah's wife.

The priest and my father hurried back to the guests. "My son had a little accident," Hilkiah said to them. "I fear that he will not be joining us today."

But right then, Jeremiah walked into the banquet hall, standing right in front of the guests. His face betrayed no emotion. He announced, "I have just destroyed the Asherah."

The gray and red men looked at one another. The gray guest faced Hilkiah and said, "This isn't going very well, is it? I feel that we may be intruding on a family quarrel."

Jeremiah said, "A statue of the Queen of Heaven? A goddess married to El? This is idolatry, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a jealous God whose fire of anger is stoked by anyone who worships other gods or goddesses." He still spoke without anger. "Even now the wind blows from the north. God is ready to call forth the forces of Babylon to conquer us if we do not quit playing the harlot before Asherah."

After a stunned silence, Hilkiah chuckled a little. He said to the guests, "I believe my son is taking his religious instruction a little too far. It's all new to him. He will get used to our modern practices. I think he is taking the zeal of King Josiah a little too seriously."

Then Hilkiah said to his son, "*Worship?* Son, the little gestures of respect that we show the goddess can hardly be considered worship. Certainly not 'playing the harlot.' Don't take it so *seriously!* It's just a *custom!*"

"It is not necessary for your heart to be poured into the custom in order for it to be worship, and in order for it to offend the everlasting gaze of the Lord of Hosts," said Jeremiah. "Behold what happened to the nations of the Canaanites round about us, as a result of their worship of their gods and goddesses, especial Ba-al and Asher-ah. The Lord smote them by the hand of Joshua."

"Well, this is a bit inconvenient," said the gray guest.

"Let me handle this, brother," said the bright-haired guest. He looked at Jeremiah. They must have recognized one another, but they did not let it show. Trom-panazzar said, "Do you have any idea who I am? If not, you are the only person who does not."

"It does not matter who you are, or who I am. All that matters is that pagans such as yourself are defying the God of Heaven, and our people are going along with it."

Trom-panazzar ignored Jeremiah and continued. “I am Trom-panazzar. Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair! I am *The Man* in these parts. Even King Josiah does not tell me what to do. Nor do the kings of the surrounding nations. Besides being God’s chosen prophet, I am a merchant and landowner, and all the little kings, Josiah included, know that they need me.

“I came here to make a lucrative business deal with the draper, here, and it would have meant prosperity for everyone in Anathoth,” continued Trom-panazzar. “I came in good faith, but I expect a certain degree of respect. As you can probably tell, my ancestors were not Jewish. For your information, young man, my family is Jebusite. We remember perfectly well what your ancestors, your beloved Joshua, did to our ancestors, in this very place.”

“Please, sir,” said Hilkiah. “That was hundreds of years ago. Please ignore my son’s indiscretion and know that I do not share his feelings. You are welcome in Anathoth.”

“Anathoth?” roared the man, this time at the priest. “Why should we care one way or the other whether we are welcome in Anathoth? What business do you have welcoming us to what used to be our own land? It used to be a fine place, but you have turned it into a pit of filth. Oh, you are very careful to not have any pigs here. But pigs are the only kind of filth that you do not have.” He stood up. He was holding a piece of bread, which he threw down with great force. “I do not demand that you stop worshiping Jehovah. What business is it of yours if we worship Ba-al? There aren’t any gods anyway.”

“You are no prophet,” said Jeremiah.

“And you are?” asked Trom-panazzar.

Jeremiah remained silent.

“God, if any, will reveal which of us is a prophet.” Trom-panazzar turned to Pen-sanazzar. “Brother?”

“We can find our own way out,” said Pen-sanazzar quietly.

“Joshua’s acts were the hand of God, and God’s hand will strike again,” said Jeremiah as the men left.

In the silence that followed, the priest nearly wept as he told his son, “This is a fine mess you have made, son. This deal would have made Anathoth quite a bit more prosperous than it is.”

“The man is a liar,” said Jeremiah. “Why trust his offer of prosperity? As the Lord lives, this man would have found some way to make this deal, as you call it, work in his favor and against all of us.”

“You do not know that he is a liar, my son,” said the priest. “All that we are trying to do, with regard to our Canaanite neighbors, is to have some purely decorative shrines to show that we do not harbor the hatred that our ancestors had for theirs. We were certainly not ‘playing the harlot.’

"Further," continued Hilkiah. "You seemed to be especially upset with the idea that God—El, or Jehovah; even we call Him by different names—could have a female counterpart." He anticipated what Jeremiah was about to say. "Just because scripture does not mention Her does not mean that She does not exist. Why, just think of all the things that are in the world for which there is no room in scripture! I do not suppose the world could contain the books."

"Father, there is no Mrs. God to share His glory. Female spirits there may be; I cannot know. But the first female of which there is any record was Eve."

"Eve was the first woman, not necessarily the first female," ventured my father.

"Moreover, son," continued Hilkiah, who was like any priest trying to suppress his emotions by lecturing. "You seem to act as if the intimacy between male and female is somehow, well, sinful." He glanced very briefly at me. "Remember that God commands us to enjoy it. *Be fruitful and multiply,* you know."

"He didn't say to enjoy it, just to do it," answered Jeremiah, without glancing at me. "It is an animal instinct. We were created on the sixth day, just like the beasts and creeping things."

"I fear we are just making things worse," said Ahaz to Hilkiah. "Although, with the departure of our guests, without so much as tasting the halvah, it is not possible that things can be worse."

"Oh, yes, they can be much worse," said Jeremiah.

"Son, be silent."

Jeremiah obeyed the fourth commandment.

Hilkiah continued. "Now, listen to me. I forbid you to again speak in such a manner to guests in this house, or who come to the House of the Lord."

"I will say whatever Jehovah tells me to say," said Jeremiah.

"Well, say it out in the wilderness, then," sighed his father. "I cannot keep you from speaking. But I can determine what is spoken in this house, and the High Priest can determine what is spoken in the synagogue." His voice was now almost a whisper. None of us, not even I, a girl, could mistake his meaning. This was virtually an announcement that Hilkiah's son would not succeed him as the leader of the religious community of Anathoth.

I started to follow Jeremiah as he left the room, but I could tell that our two fathers still had something to discuss. As usual, they talked as if I were not even present. My father said, "Our problem remains, Hilkiah. Your son is quite inconvenient. And he has considerably hurt my personal fortune. Had we been able to make this deal, I could have said that money did not matter, with regard to Miriam. But, as it is, I might have to make a more profitable arrangement for her."

My father said nothing to me as we went home from Hilkiah's house, and he said little to me other than perfunctory pleasantries for the next couple of days. I gradually got used to the idea that I was going to be someone's wife other than Jeremiah's. I had no

doubt of Jeremiah's friendship, and no one would ever keep me from being his friend. But, after thinking about it for a couple of weeks, I admitted to myself that Jeremiah would be an inconvenient husband. Look at what he did to my family's fortune and, therefore, to me! Did he even think about what might happen to *me* before he opened his mouth and trumpeted out the words of the Lord?

I looked at my image in the brass mirror. It was, through some process I do not understand, mostly a faithful image of my appearance, though backwards. But it is, in places, tarnished, smudged, and warped. I could not trust it completely to tell me about myself. The image in the brass certainly had no feelings or thoughts or passions of its own. If I could not even be absolutely certain what I am like, were I to view myself from the outside, then how can I be certain about what is in Jeremiah's heart? Maybe he is, in fact, an unstable man who has no business anywhere except in a cave with the other prophets. Not to mention that God never told *me* anything.

Chapter 2

The next day, my father told me he had to talk to me. Of course, I already knew what it would be about.

"Miriam," he said, "Hilkiah has brought some unfortunate news. He told me that Jeremiah was never going to be admitted to the priesthood."

"This is news?" I asked.

"It's official now," Father answered.

"I cannot say that I am surprised," I said. "He will just have to find something else to do."

"Jeremiah?" asked my father, almost laughing. "Other boys have already been apprenticed in their fathers' trades. All of Jeremiah's scriptural studies will do him no good outside the priesthood."

"Unless he is a prophet."

"That's not a job, Miriam."

"I know."

"Besides, can you imagine Jeremiah doing any manual labor? Not that he is lazy, or weak. But he would start, and then he would get that dazed look on his face and gaze into the sky, leaving the work undone. Nobody would hire him."

"I know."

"In addition," my father began. He shifted his weight a little, and breathed deeply. "I don't know how to say this any way other than directly. I will never give my consent for you to marry him."

Ever since Jeremiah told me that this is what was going to happen, I had begun to make myself ready to hear this.

"I understand, Father. It could hardly be any other way. If, at some point in the future, I should decide I need to be with him, I would have to leave this family. And you could not stop me. But if I remain in this family, I will respect your authority, which I know is well-intentioned."

"This being the case," my father began. What now? This, I was not prepared for. "Since you and Jeremiah are no longer children, I believe I will have to forbid you to see him again."

I stood bolt upright. I think I knocked something over on the floor as I did so. I said, quietly but firmly, "No."

"I have the authority to impose this decision," he said.

"Of course, you do," I said. "My marriage you can control; my friendships, you cannot. I am just saying that the only way you could keep me from seeing Jeremiah is to shackle me in this house, something I very much doubt you would do."

My father was silent. Then he sighed, “No, I suppose I would not do that. But please consider, Miriam. Running around in the hills with Jeremiah? You have your chastity to consider.”

“Father!” I shouted. Then I lowered my voice. “Can you think so little of me? Besides, let me tell you something about Jeremiah. He is the chaste one. Not only has he never said or done anything that made me suspect that I may be in any danger, but I am nearly certain that he has never had a sexual thought in his life.”

“That’s not possible,” my father said.

“That’s what I thought, but we are both wrong about him. He is as pure as sunlight.”

“I was not expecting this,” said my father. “But nobody is going to believe it. Remember that I, myself, am not entirely convinced. I trust your sincerity, but not your maturity. Nobody would believe you and Jeremiah are running around in the hills as innocent as children.”

“God sees us,” I said. “For many people, this is just something to say. But Jeremiah is utterly serious about it. You know that he believes God has chosen him for a special calling.”

“I am only too aware of this, my child. But it doesn’t matter what Jeremiah does, or what you think, or what I think. No man would believe you to be chaste. If you run around with Jeremiah, or at least if you are seen, you will be unlikely to find a husband.”

“Maybe I don’t need one.”

“Miriam, Miriam,” said my father. “Your feelings are very strong right now. Just remember that what you do now, in the intensity of emotion, might have permanent effects on your future.”

“All I know,” I said, “is that I cannot imagine any emotion as powerful as the friendship I feel for Jeremiah. Do you not remember what the scriptures say about King David and his friend Jonathan? David loved Jonathan, with a love *surpassing the love of women.* King David knew plenty about the love of women, but friendship—that was something else.

“I am just telling you,” I continued, “that I will not respect your desire for me to stop seeing Jeremiah. He and I will remain innocent. You just have to trust us.”

A week later, the green rock was in the corner of the wall.

Chapter 3

It was a beautiful afternoon when I left the house and ran to the fig tree. Soon I was on the trail through the woods and climbing the hill outside of town. Jeremiah was not at the tree, but I saw him as he sat by the edge of the marsh. All of a sudden, it was as if we were children again.

"I was hoping you would come," he said.

"Were you waiting for me?" I asked. "What made you think I would be able to come this time?"

"I was hoping, but not expecting," he said.

I handed the stone to Jeremiah. "Jeremiah," I said, "I want to talk to you about what happened a few weeks ago at dinner."

Jeremiah looked at me sadly. "I regret that I embarrassed you," he said. "But God has spoken to me. He has called me to tear down the things that offend him, and to pluck up the things that are evil." He looked out across the marsh, avoiding my eyes.

I could not believe this. This was not the Jeremiah I thought I knew. "Jeremiah," I said, "I cannot imagine you living your entire life tearing things down."

He looked back at me with just a little bit of liveliness. "You know me, Miriam, don't you? Very well. That was only half of God's message to me. He also said that I had a mission to build and to plant. But only after I have finished tearing down and plucking up."

"I'm glad to hear this," I said. Suddenly very serious, I continued. "Jeremiah, can't you wait? You're so young. Let's just be kids for a while longer."

"God told me to not care if anyone despises me for my youth," he announced. "I am sure I will understand more when I am older, but nothing that will change the message itself. I will continue to watch and learn, even as I proclaim God's message. I have learned how to learn by observing things." He looked out across the marsh which, to me, looked like a motionless cluster of reeds. "Tell me what you see out there."

Jeremiah, as I indicated earlier, was the only person who ever said anything like that to me. He told me to look and think and look closely and think carefully. *Think, Miriam, think.* My mother told me these things also, but only as pertains to sewing. So, I looked out across the marsh. "Reeds," I said.

"What else?"

"Water."

"Do you hear anything?"

"I hear frogs croaking."

"Why do frogs croak?"

I looked at him. "Because they're frogs, Jeremiah. I don't know."

"Don't you think it is sort of dangerous for them to croak? You know, they reveal their location to snakes or to birds that might eat them."

"Well, maybe each frog is saying, *This is my patch of the pond and the rest of you stay out of it*." I surprised myself with this idea, which I instantly believed had to be right. I still do.

"Good answer," Jeremiah admitted. "But I think they are prophets."

"Did I just hear you say that the frogs are prophets?" I whispered to him.

"In their own way, yes. They announce the word of the Lord even though it puts them in danger."

I said nothing, hoping Jeremiah would just find something else to say. He did.

"Are you sure you don't hear anything else?" he asked me.

I listened. "Yes," I said. "I hear doves. I hear doves so often in town that I ignore them."

"Are you sure you don't *see* anything else?"

"Well, there is an abandoned house over on the other side of the marsh. But I thought you meant something that humans had not built."

"I did."

"Well, it's just an old house. No, wait. What's that? There's a big stork's nest on it. Yes, there's the stork! Why didn't I see it before?"

"You did. Now look over there." He pointed at a clump of reeds.

I told him it was a clump of reeds.

"I'm just going to keep waiting until you tell me what you see in there."

I told him that I had better things to do.

"Like what?" I knew he would ask.

I decided to just look at the clump of reeds. I shaded my eyes and looked some more. Then something in my vision changed. There was a bird in there. And not a small bird. It was a bird almost as big as the reeds. It stood motionless. The feathers of its breast formed vertical stripes. It even held its beak straight up, like a reed. And it was looking right at me with beady little eyes. Once I saw it, I could not see anything else. When I gasped, Jeremiah knew I had seen it.

"It's a bittern," he said. "It is not enough to know its name. You need to see how it lives. Now, anything else?"

I looked at a bridge near the house. Small dark forms were darting from under the bridge and swirling up through the air. "Oh, swallows. I should have known that. Last time we were here, in late winter last year, I don't remember seeing any of these birds," I told him.

"They weren't here," he said. "They fly south in the winter. They've only now come back. I don't know where they go, but it must be south."

"Who told you all this?" I asked.

"I just watch them. That is, God tells me." He turned and gave his full attention to me. "The stork, the dove, and the swallow, all know when to go south, and where to go; and when to return north, and where to come. The people of Judah do not know how to

understand even the simplest things about God's will. They do not even have the sense that God gave birds.

"But I do," he continued. "I do, but only because I keep my eyes open and am ready to learn. I came out here for guidance from the Lord. As you are well aware, I have a lot of things to think about. One wrong decision, and my fate becomes inevitable, just like the waters of a little runnel going one way instead of another, and ending up in a stinking pond instead of a fresh brook. Once the water is moving, it is too late to change direction."

"I, too, feel pressured to make decisions," I told him. "Why will the adults not allow us to be free for just a little longer? The responsibilities of adult life come soon enough. What was that you were saying about the fresh brook? Let's go to the brook!"

Within minutes we were running down the trail toward what we called the Brook Kidron. It wasn't really *the* Brook Kidron, which runs from Jerusalem to the Sea of Arabah, but a tributary to it that ran past the city of Nob and joined the real Kidron. The trail, worn by generations of children's feet, penetrated thickets of broom, which turned bright yellow in the springtime, and undulated and twined through hills covered with small oaks and carobs and wild olives. We knew we were getting close to the brook when we saw the grove of Syrian pines. Soon we were skipping from stone to stone in the brook. The water flowed fresh and smooth, but was not deep. There was no place we could not cross dry-shod. In addition to the fresh smell of water, there was the spice of the bay laurels and the musk of the cottonwoods. We brushed ourselves against willows as we continued downstream.

We came to the only waterfall on the brook. It was scarcely as tall as a house, but a spring fed it all year. A gigantic sycamore grew right next to it, with bark that fell off in plates like the breastplates of little warriors. We arrived at just the right time, when the sun shone through an opening in the canopy, right upon the waterfall. Drops of water clung to, then dripped from, the leaves of one overhanging branch.

Jeremiah pointed to one of the water drops. "What is this?" he asked.

"Water," I said, looking into his face. I wanted to figure out what he was getting at before I fell into another one of his intellectual traps.

"It is a water *drop*," he said. "Why are there water drops?"

"You probably expect me to say that is the way God made water," I mumbled.

"You could say that. But what is water?"

"It is the primordial material from which the world was made," I said, referring to Genesis.

"But what *is* it?"

"I imagine you are about to tell me."

"No, Miriam. I don't know. But we can make a reasonable guess. Just like a flock of birds consists of many, many birds, each much smaller than the flock, perhaps water consists of very tiny beings, all swirling around together. Angels, maybe."

"Whatever these things are, they are too small to be angels."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, the angels that Abraham saw were people-sized."

"Yes, but maybe there are also very small ones. Anyway, the water gathers at the tips of the leaves and form drops. Each drop gets larger and larger. All these little angels are clinging to one another, as if they are afraid to fall. And when they do fall, they fall together, as a drop, rather than as separate angels.

"Have you ever noticed that, when you look at a water drop, you can see the world in it, upside down?"

"Actually, Jeremiah, I have. But it is not really a world in there, any more than my image in the brass mirror is me."

"How do you know? Maybe each water drop is a whole world that God has created, and it lives its whole history, from creation to the end of time, in what seems to us just a few moments."

"Scripture doesn't say that this is so."

"Nor does it say it isn't. I only regret that my life will be too short to discover the answers to all my questions. I will die without even knowing what a water drop is."

Then Jeremiah climbed up the bank. He always climbed to the same place—not the easiest place to stand, but the one place where the sun struck the water in just the right way to produce a rainbow.

To me it was always obvious that the rainbow is produced somehow by the sunlight shining on of the mist. But to Jeremiah, it was a miracle. That is, it was something that did not always happen when sunlight met mist, but only appeared when God put it there. The rainbow was the sign that God put in the clouds after The Flood, as a promise of His faithfulness, and which appeared occasionally in the sky before or after storms, as a reminder. This never made much sense to me—a rainbow in the sky after a storm had washed away houses and crops and children seemed a strange kind of symbol for faithfulness. But to Jeremiah, it meant that God was in this place, this exact place. He discovered this rainbow when he was very small. He trusted me, alone of his friends, to see it. So appreciative was I of his trust that I never contradicted what I considered to be outlandish claims that he made for this place on this brook in this forest in this land.

"God's presence is here. He has chosen Judah for his habitation," he would always say, or words to that effect.

But, I'll bet if you found a creek or river up in Syria or Lebanon, you would see the rainbow there also, I would think to myself.

"God's presence is so beautiful. But this nation is ugly with sin."

"Yes," I would always say. This part, I could agree with. I had seen the places where greedy men had cut down forests and destroyed God's beauty.

"If we anger God, he may take his rainbow away."

But, in order for the rainbow to not be here, God would have to make water no longer be water or light no longer be light, I would tell him with my heart.

This time, something new happened. Jeremiah touched my arm. I pressed myself against him. We watched the shimmering rainbow, vanishing and reappearing with the irregularities of the mist. We stood, adjacent. We looked into one another's eyes. We did not need to say, *Beware! Love is more powerful than many waters.* That was a line of poetry I had heard somewhere. We had both seen this brook when, after heavy rain, the water ran brown, and the rainbow was obscure *(See! It must have something to do with the light and the water, not with God!)* and knew that something like this could happen to us if we were not careful. In the presence of Jeremiah, I might fall into the deep pools and be pulled into the blue-green-black depths.



Chapter 4

The next time I saw Jeremiah, a little over a week later, was at the rock near the top of Mt. Gimel, where we had so often met as children. I was surprised to find him holding a lute on his lap.

"Where did you get *that*?" I asked.

"I saw a lutist in the town square," Jeremiah told me. "I could not stop watching how his fingers plucked these strings and produced beautiful sounds. How can plucking strings produce such beautiful sounds? Strings, sounds. They are two entirely different things. Perhaps it is a miracle? What power must be hidden in these strings, which a simple touch can release! I asked the lutist if the supply of sounds was ever depleted as he touched the strings. He said, no, the sounds will continue to come as long as the strings are undamaged. I suspect there is something divine going on here." I smiled as I thought about God in the rainbow at the waterfall. *Strings produce sounds because they are strings.*

"Back to my question," I said. "How did you end up with a minnim?"

"Father saw me talking with the player. He saw me take the minnim in my hand, and touch just one string, liberating just one note. He saw the look of heavenly transport on my face. And he bought it for me."

"I thought that your father had pretty much told you to leave the synagogue."

"Then this happened. He said that perhaps I could be one of the musicians. It's not much of a job, but it might provide just the excuse Father needs to let me stay at home. He doesn't want me to leave, you know."

"He just wants you to shut your big mouth."

Jeremiah smiled. "You understand perfectly."

"And what is the lutist going to do without his lute?"

"I think he made it, and can make another," said Jeremiah. "He told me about its construction, the strings of leather, the base of dense wood—oak, not willow—and so forth."

"When I came upon you," I said, "you were not playing it."

"No," said Jeremiah. "I am preparing myself for it." I started to speak, and he silenced me with his look. Then he plucked one string. He looked into the sky. I had heard stringed instruments so many times that I could not understand his fascination with just a single note. He plucked two strings next to one another, and the two sounds seemed to fight with one another. But two strings, separated by one string, blended nicely. Then Jeremiah stood the lute against the rock on which we were sitting, a rock that we had pretended was a throne when we played as children.

"No," he said. "I am not yet worthy to touch it."

"Worthy?" I asked. "It is just a musical instrument. I have heard it used in some rather unholy ways."

"Music is holy," he said. "The body is holy. Yet people touch one another's bodies in unholy ways. Food is holy. Yet people eat in unholy ways. The land is holy, yet people turn rich land into desert."

I knew I had him when I said, "Each breath is holy." I did not realize at first how close my mouth was to his face. "But you cannot wait until you are worthy before you breathe." He looked at me and I pursued my advantage. "You took your first breath when they pulled you out of your mother's…your mother. And the first thing you did with that breath was to cry."

"Very well," he said. "I shall learn to play it. And to sing."

"Excellent idea!" I said, bouncing with excitement. "You could write your own melodies."

"Well…"

"I bet you'd be good at it," I persisted. "What would you like to sing about?"

He answered without hesitation, "I will sing the scriptures."

"The priests already do this," I said.

"They sing parts of it. I will sing all of it, and differently than they do."

"All of it? The whole of the books of Moses?"

"Why not?"

"Why?" I asked. "Now, the first chapter, about the creation, that would make a wonderful song, different from the dreadfully dull one they sing in the synagogue. I'll bet you could do a good one."

"Something like, *The creation of Earth is like music?"*

"Yes," I said, even more excited. "That sounds wonderful. The creation scripture is already set up like music, you see? Six days, six stanzas, each one ending with *And God saw that it was very good*."

"I like it," he said. "The words are God's, the melody mine."

"And," I continued. "you could create a new melody for Miriam's song about how God drowned the Egyptian chariots. The original Miriam, that is."

"Yes, I could. But I would not write a triumphant song for those words."

"But they are triumphant words."

"No. I would sing a sad song. You see," he turned to me. "God hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and his horsemen and charioteers. Then he drowned them. Is that not sad to you?"

I looked at him in silence. "Yes," I finally said. "You could write a sad version of Miriam's song. Don't expect the people to like it, but you could do it. But, the whole five books of Moses?"

Then, as if he had forgotten everything he said about the holy strings of the holy lute, he picked up the instrument and strummed it tunelessly. "The commandments. *Thou*

shalt have no other gods before me." His voice squeaked a little as he tried to be profound.

"Thou shalt not kill," I invented a meaningless tune.

"Thou shalt not steal," he sang sadly.

"Thou shalt not commit adultery," I sang, watching the funny look on his face. Then I said, "But, Jeremiah, there are a lot of passages in those books that are…well, like this one, if I can remember it right." I cleared my throat. When I began to sing, I vaguely followed the outlines of *Dove in Far-off Terebinths,* and it didn't sound too bad, but it quickly fell apart. *"And of the blue and purple and scarlet stuff they made…finely wrought garments…"*

"Finely wrought garments…" said Jeremiah, blending his voice with mine.

"…for ministering in the holy place; they made the holy garments for Aaron…"

"…for Aaron…"

"…as the Lord had commanded Moses. And he made the ephod of gold…"

"Of gold!"

"…blue and purple and scarlet stuff, and fine…"

"Fine!"

"…twined…"

"Twined!"

"…linen. And gold leaf was hammered out…" I tried to create a melody that sounded like a hammer. Jeremiah answered me antiphonally before I had finished. *"…and cut into threads…"*

I stared laughing uncontrollably. "Jeremiah, this will never work. You can never get through all of that stuff. It is boring!"

"The word of God? Boring?" he asked me.

"Well," I said. "I'm sure it had its place, back when the fine workmen were still making Aaron's ephod. Whatever that is. Fine. But it's done, and we don't need to read the instructions again. I think God intended us to sing about something more interesting."

"What can I sing, other than the holy words of God?" he asked me.

I lifted my eyes then my hands. "Look all around you! Look at the hills and the forests, think about all the things we have seen as we hiked these trails. Think about the Brook Kidron! So many beautiful things to sing about."

Then he began to sing again, from the books of Moses. *"If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days…"*

"Jeremiah!" I shouted as my eyes flashed at him.

"…not at the time of her impurity; or if she has a discharge at the time of her impurity…" His jaunty little melody infuriated me.

"Jeremiah, quit acting like the furrow of a camel!" I shouted at him.

That stopped him. He put down the lute.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you, Miriam, but they are the words of the Lord."

"You are one sorry, clueless little boy, aren't you," I said. I started to feel some of the zeal that he sometimes felt, only mine was turned against him. "You're going to get yourself into trouble someday. You already have! You have no idea about the place and time to say things. Like right now, bringing up my discharge of blood." We froze in silence. "About which I already told you. Anyway. And like the other day, weeks back, when my father and I were visiting. You just blurted things out." I stopped to make myself calm. "Jeremiah, what you just sang really hurt me."

"The word of God hurt you?"

"There, that's the point. You think that any random piece of the word of God is appropriate anywhere at any time with anyone. Well, it doesn't work that way. It doesn't show respect for the word of God."

His face fell. "I hadn't thought of that."

"And what you sang didn't show respect to me. Jeremiah, listen to me. Look at me. There. I am not a little girl anymore. I have started to have those very discharges that you sang about. They are very disturbing. You will never know. They are disturbing for what they are, for what they do to a woman, and for the disgust that men feel toward us at those times. You will never know. I am not a little girl any more. I don't want to grow up, Jeremiah, but I have no choice."

"Please forgive me, Miriam. Remember, I am growing up also. We've told each other about it many times. And I find some of the changes in my own body disturbing."

I stood up and almost screamed. "Well, maybe I should make up a song about it! Hairs. You are probably getting those too, just like me. Yes, and swellings that you can't control. *Jeremiah woke up in the morning, and there were sticky sticky sticky sticky sticky sticky places all around his bed…*" I did a little dance. Then I almost collapsed. "I'm sorry, Jeremiah. Let's just not talk about this anymore."

"Maybe I should write songs about something else, other than scripture," he said. "Do you have any ideas?"

"You could write," I said, "a song for me."

Chapter 5

Then my father announced to me that we were having dinner with Saad of Bashan. I was happy to hear this. Saad was one interesting man. He was a huntsman from the hill country. He was about midway in age between my father and myself. His hair and beard were light brown, which he attributed to some of his ancestors from the far north. We children grew up listening to his tales of hunting. From him I learned that hunting was not a brutal, sadistic pastime. It required strength and precision: his muscular arms had to hold the bow and arrow steady, without wavering, while he aimed. He had to aim slightly high. And he had to anticipate where the animal would go when it heard the twang of the bow. Then he had to run fast after the wounded animal, and aim again. And then when he caught up with the animal, usually a deer, and saw the fire of defiance in its eyes, he would speak to it and explain that he needed its flesh for food, and how much he appreciated the animal's sacrifice. Sometimes he would have to slit the animal's throat to terminate its suffering. It was a ritual of respect. Hunting was a kind of wisdom.

Saad also knew a lot about the hills. He knew most of the trees, the oaks and the elah trees. He knew how to listen for the cries of birds that would alert him to the proximity of wolves or lions. He told me that he could sit for hours and just listen to the birds and the susurrus of the wind. To him, he said, this was religion. He mentioned one time that he consented to the religion of the Jews—he was, after all, of the tribe of Gad—but that he saw little essential difference between the God of Jacob and the Ba-al of his Canaanite neighbors. In the soughing of the wind, their voices sounded the same to him. I did not have to imagine what Jeremiah would have to say about this. I had told Jeremiah about him, and Jeremiah dismissed him as little better than a pagan. For reasons I could not explain, I could not agree with Jeremiah about this. To Saad, it seemed to me, religion was not a set of beliefs but an attitude of appreciation.

I had heard some of his stories before. My sisters, now married, had heard them with me, and I enjoyed hearing them as he told them again just to my father, my mother, and myself.

I was surprised, however, when my father left Saad and me alone after dinner. Enjoying Saad's stories as much as I, my father had never left us alone before. And on this night, Saad seemed more interested in me than in telling stories. He looked at me fully.

"You are no longer a little girl," he said.

A fact of which I was only too well aware.

"And, no two ways about it, you are beautiful."

I had to admit that he was probably right. I was slender, but not weak. I knew from the mirror that my face had a fine, even noble, outline. My oldest sister's nose was too big, the next sister's nose was too flat, but mine was just right. My lips were small but, I think I am using this word correctly, voluptuous. My dark hair is not straight like

that of a woman in an Egyptian hieroglyph, nor is it curled like the eddies of a pond, but sweeps in long arcs downward like a waterfall. The only part of me that might not be desirable to men was my breasts. They had just barely begun to grow, then they stopped growing. I began to think that I would have the breasts of a little girl all of my life.

"And if the parts that I can see are so beautiful, I could only imagine, if I allowed myself, the parts I cannot see. Your mother assures me you are without flaw."

I opened my eyes in alarm and looked at him. He has already been talking with my parents about me? I then realized that my eyes must have looked beautiful to him right at that moment, tearfully reflecting the light of the candle, its glow bringing out the flecks of brown in the green of the iris.

He smiled. "So," he said, "I have told you a lot about myself. I want to hear about you."

I had no idea what to say next. I could think of nothing to say. I just looked down.

"What do you like to do?"

What could I say to him? There was hardly anything I could say that was worthy of his experience of the wide world. I knew Anathoth, and my own house, and something about my father's business. And, of course, the arts of housewifery. I don't know what made me say it, but I said, "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I want to know about *you*, Miriam. I already assume you know how to sew and to cook and all of the things that women learn to do. Most men just assume that clothes are ready to be worn and food shows up on the table. But I know that women's work requires a lot of skill. I have done a lot of cooking myself, and I know how much easier it is to do it wrong than to do it right."

"You cook?" I looked up at his smiling face. If I talked to him about cooking, maybe he would forget all about telling me I was beautiful.

"Of course," continued Saad. "I don't just hunt. I also prepare the meat that I bring back. My cook prepares most of the meals, but for venison, I like to do it myself. I prepare quite a delicious stew. I know where to find the spices out on the hillside. In this way, I follow the tradition of Israel's brother Esau."

"The hunter," I said. I looked at his hairy arms and his beard. He might indeed have been Esau.

"I respect the work of women, Miriam. I am sure you do all of it very well. But, as for something you can do that most women cannot. Your father has told me that you also read and write."

"I do."

"That is a rare treasure."

"Rare, yes, but a treasure?"

"Yes. Books are a way of finding out about the world far beyond the limits of your family and your city. I have traveled a lot, but I'll bet there is a lot you know that I do not. I wish to learn from you."

"From me? A girl?"

"Just tell me something. Anything."

"Well, I know where purple cloth comes from."

"Indeed! I do not. See? I was right. There *is* a lot I can learn from you."

"There are some squishy animals from the sea that men in Tyre and Sidon trample on to get the purple dye into the cloth. These sea animals are very rare."

"I always wondered why only kings could wear purple. See, I learned something from you already! I assume that these men have feet that are permanently stained purple."

"Yes."

"And if one of them walked into Anathoth, everyone would think they had some kind of dark leprosy."

I laughed nervously.

"You and I," Saad continued. "We will never wear purple. But the robe that you are wearing. It has an intricate pattern on the hem. You sewed that yourself?"

"Yes."

"It looks like the complex filigree patterns of henna on the skin of women..." When he saw my confused expression, he said, "Never mind." He touched my robe admiringly. "You would make any robe beautiful by wearing it."

It was at that moment that I really began to panic. Sitting on the blanket, I hugged my knees to my chest. I began to tremble and called for my father.

"Yes, my dear," said my father as he entered the room.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Why, I thought you and Saad would have a good time talking, and I made no haste to return. But here I am." He sat down on the blankets.

"Father, what is going on here?"

"We are entertaining the most interesting guest we ever have," my father answered truly but without really telling me what I needed to know. He sat beside me.

"Yes, he is interesting," I said. "I and the other children have admired him all of the years he has been visiting us. But…" I looked at Saad, who was smiling as he still looked at me directly. I jumped up. "No, father. He is so old, I mean, I am so young, I mean, I am not ready…" I finally had somebody other than Jeremiah to yell at.

"Miriam," my father said, gently pulling me back down. "I am forty-five. Now that is old. Saad is twenty-seven. That is not old. You are almost sixteen. That is no longer young. And as far as being ready? One is never ready."

"I'm not ready to marry!" I exclaimed.

Both of the men laughed. "Not *now,*" said my father. "Not tomorrow, or next week or next month. But, who knows? I just want you to start thinking about it. And Saad? He cannot wait forever."

"I can wait a pretty long time, for Miriam," Saad responded. Then he added, "There is one other thing I should like to discuss with Miriam. Alone."

"No time is better than the present," said my father, who left the room.

I again sat on the floor with my knees drawn up, my face buried in them.

"Miriam, my child," Saad began.

"That was exactly the wrong thing to say," I yelled into the fabric of my robe.

"Sorry. It was just a manner of speaking. I have spoken to you this way so many times. I must learn to not do so again. Miriam, my beloved."

"Saad, please understand that I really like you, and always have." I removed my face from my knees, but kept my eyes closed. "But to love you as a woman desires a man? I don't even know what that *is* yet."

"Not even with Jeremiah?"

I turned my face toward him, my eyes wide open again. I was ready to yell, but my voice came out as a squeak. "Not even with him." I began to silently weep.

He lay his hand comfortingly on my childlike shoulder. "I know that you have a special bond with Jeremiah," continued Saad. "I just want to say that, as long as this bond remains friendship and nothing to do with the body, then I have no problem with it. You are welcome to see him from time to time. Of course, in our society, you cannot do so alone. But I should be happy to talk with him as well, when he visits us as a guest."

I was crying so hard that I could not speak.

"Now, listen to me, Miriam. I just want you to understand how unusual it is for a bridegroom to permit his bride to continue a friendship with another man. I do not believe you would receive a similar offer from any other man in Anathoth, or perhaps in the whole kingdom. Indeed, I myself might get in trouble for it. Busybodies who have uneventful lives of their own would love to spread rumors about you, and expect me to restrict you."

I kept weeping.

"Miriam, please tell me that you understand what I have just said."

"Yes," I peeped, between sniffles. When I looked up at him, all I saw was a jumble of lights and darks through my tears. "I heard everything, and please don't think I am ungrateful. But I am simply not ready to talk to anyone about this right now."

*

Mother found me in my room, crying.

"I fear your father was a bit hasty in bringing up the subject of your *eventual* marriage," Mother said.

"But," I said, "why Saad? I mean, he came into my life as an adult while I was a child. In that capacity, I love him. Who could not? But I just cannot think of him as a husband, even an eventual one. And besides," I cut Mother off. "Father is thinking of his business, which is our business, which is my business, I know. Why would he want a huntsman as his son-in-law? Eventually."

Mother smiled. “There is much you do not know. I was hoping that you would invite Saad to tell you more about himself. You see, he is not just a huntsman. He travels widely and has many contacts. Including in Damascus. You must let him tell you about it sometime. No hurry.”

“He already told me, and the other children,” I said.

“Stop calling yourself a child,” Mother said. “I know better, remember?”

“I was a child, with the other children, when he told us about Damascus. It sounds like a big, stinking, noisy city. Oh, they make fine metals there. But to make beautiful metals requires a lot of poisonous water and stinking smoke.”

“Well, you may be living there sometime,” said Mother.

I became quietly fierce. “Mother. That was precisely the wrong thing to say.”

“I am sorry if I have disturbed you, but I do not regret saying it. I think now is the time for us to talk.”

“About what?”

“Is there anything you want to know about Saad? You have the right to know. You do not need to ask him; we will do that for you. And is there anything you want Saad to know about you?”

I decided to answer the second question. “Well, he says I am beautiful.”

“Yes, Miriam.”

“He said something about the parts of me that he could not see.”

“Miriam, I have already told him that your breasts are small and may not get much larger. Although, since you are not even sixteen years old, one cannot know.”

“Mother, there is something else I have been wondering about. I told Father that Jeremiah was totally innocent. He said this was impossible. Very well. Saad is twenty-seven years old. I doubt that he is innocent. Or inexperienced, in matters of the flesh.”

“You are correct, Miriam. We asked him about this. We have a right to know. *You* have a right to know. He travels a lot. And wherever he goes, he finds women who are very nice to him.”

“And nearly all of them,” I said, “must be more sexually appealing than I am.”

“I would not make that assumption, Miriam.”

“At least, they have bigger breasts.”

“You are probably right about that.”

“So, he wants a wife, not just for pleasure, but to start a family.”

“Of course, Miriam. A man without offspring is already dead.”

“He probably has bastard children all over the place.” If my mother was surprised that I knew the word *bastard*, she did not show it.

“He admitted this when we asked him.”

“So, you have talked to him about everything to do with my eventual engagement to him.”

“These are things you talk about before, not after, an engagement is set.”

"And, after he marries me, he might want a second wife? A third?"

"It is legal for a man to have more than one wife," said my mother. "But Saad will not."

"How do you know?"

Mother had prepared what she would say next. "Your father and I wrote up a contract with Saad. No one has signed it yet, but there will be no surprises. In this contract, Saad has to agree that you will be his only wife, and that you and your children will be his only heirs. Unless, after a few years, there are still no children."

"Why does he want to marry someone as young as I?"

"We talked about how he has been with many women. I think you could probably make a map of the kingdom just with his women. A man has an almost unlimited number of seeds to sew. And he can keep doing so until he is considerably older than Saad is. Not so with women. If he married a woman his age, she might only be able to have a few children before she becomes too old. But you could bear him many children."

I was in a daze. It was almost as if I were talking about some woman, or girl, other than myself. I asked, "And suckle them?"

"Miriam," my mother relaxed and took my hands. "You keep talking about your breasts. It is well known among women that small breasts can produce enough milk for a baby. Or, if not, Saad can hire a wet nurse."

"Oh, that's what a wet nurse is."

"And that's why there is work for them."

I thought about weddings I had attended, and what the bride looked like during the wedding and in the months and years after. They never again looked as happy as during the wedding. But they did not look miserable either. Most of them, anyway. But one thing bothered me. "Mother, I am not going to wear a nose-ring."

"Why not?"

"Because it would make me look like a cow, being led around everywhere."

Mother laughed. "Yes, I suppose it does. You will notice that I have never worn one, except during the Feasts. Well, we can put that in the contract if you like. No nose-rings."

"Mother," I said firmly. "I am not ready to decide."

"Well, when you are, eventually, the contract is prepared. And there is a place for you to sign it."

"Me?" I nearly screamed.

"A woman's signature is not usually of any use on a contract," Mother said. "But your father wanted your signature, and Saad agreed."

When Mother left, I sat stunned. I left my room and the house. I walked around in the garden, dejected. I looked at everything and saw nothing. Then I looked up and saw the green stone in the corner of the wall.

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Chapter 6

When I met Jeremiah at the oak tree, he smiled fully at me. I, of course, did not smile at him. My eyes were still puffy from weeping. Anguish lined my face.

"Miriam, I am so glad to see you!"

"Jeremiah, I need to talk to you."

"It is such a beautiful day! There are so many of God's blessings to see!"

"Some other time. The blessings will still be there later. I need to talk to you."

"But I have looked forward to us exploring God's beautiful creation. It is the fulness of spring! There will still be blessings later, as you say—summer blessings, but different ones, not the beauties of springtime. We have to see those now."

"Jeremiah!" I shook him by the shoulders. One tear leapt from my nose.

"What?"

"Are you blind? Can't you see I am in no mood to go on a nature walk right now?"

Jeremiah looked into my face. "Yes," he said. "I suppose I am blind. The light of the Lord of Hosts has blinded me."

"Jeremiah, my father wants me to marry an older man."

"Who?"

"Saad of Bashan."

"Well, I must congratulate you. I hear he is a good man."

"Jeremiah!"

"I don't say that about everybody, you know."

"Jeremiah, you know what this means, don't you?"

"Aside from congratulations, I *don't* know."

"It means that I will suddenly become the wife of a man whose friends are older, and whose friends' wives are older, and to whom in my immaturity I cannot possibly compare."

"You will be just fine, Miriam."

"It means you and I are finished."

The transformation of Jeremiah's face was rapid. "No," he intoned. "No."

I then quickly told him about Saad's offer to allow us to continue a friendship.

"Well, in that case," said Jeremiah. "You had me worried for a moment. And you are right, it is very unusual for a man to make such an offer. Then, how can you say we are finished?"

"It means, my friend, that we cannot ever go running around in the hills again. We can never again talk freely and alone. All we can do is to sit at the table and eat figs and dates and grapes and elah nuts and talk only about things he would understand."

"I hear he is a hunter," said Jeremiah. "That sounds interesting."

"And a businessman," I said. "As he gets older, and while I am still young, he will talk more about business and less about hunting. I do not find that very interesting."

"I'm not so sure," said Jeremiah. "Even the most ordinary trade can be interesting. One day I sat and watched a potter at his wheel, making a perfectly ordinary vase..."

I finally forced myself to say what I had been thinking for a long time. "It means that you and I could never spend our lives together. I already knew our parents would never let us marry, but I thought that I could be—in God's eyes—a prophet's wife."

"Oh, we weren't going to do that anyway," said Jeremiah, almost effortlessly.

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You never asked. But now, I will tell you. You see, my friend, my eternal friend, nearly every day I do something embarrassing. It makes no difference to me what people think, but the embarrassment would be upon you as well. One upon another, they would accumulate. You may not see it now, but how many embarrassments would it take before you finally regret being my partner? How many such embarrassments could *any* woman tolerate?"

"I would live in a cave with you," I said.

"And you would be very happy, for about a week."

"Jeremiah, I am trying very hard to not cry. You are such a good man, and I don't want you to think that I am crying..." Of course, I started to cry. "...because of anything you have done."

"There is more, my eternal friend."

"Yes?"

"The things I say and do are inconvenient enough. But I believe that Jehovah is going to ask me to do things that are more and more inconvenient as time goes on. And when the inevitable crisis comes, and the Babylonian troops are at the gates, the things that I say and do might be considered dangerous. And you know what happens to dangerous men."

"I haven't thought that far ahead," I admitted.

"Dangerous men get killed, and their wives become widows. And if the wife has already turned her back on her family, which you would have to do, as I will have to do with mine, then you will be a destitute widow. I cannot permit this to happen."

"It can't be that bad," I said. "It's not going to happen that way."

When he did not answer, I knew what he was going to say next.

"Miriam, you are the finest woman, the finest person, I could ever hope to know. But I must tell you that God has shown me a future of suffering, not just for our people, but for me, personally. Oh, by the way, for you also."

"Whether I live in a cave with you or not?"

"Less suffering if you stay away from me," Jeremiah concluded. "You are perhaps afraid that you will be wasting your life as a young wife of a middle-aged man? Don't worry about that. God will send plenty of disruption and pain to occupy your attention."

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Chapter 7

I didn't talk with Jeremiah very much for the next few weeks. I saw him a few times in the city, though. He was always practicing his lute. His voice had stabilized and was now beautiful. He trained himself on the lute, although once in a while he consulted the lutist, who showed him some less clumsy fingerings than the ones he had figured out for himself.

My family and Jeremiah's continued to have dinner together every couple of weeks. Our parents always made sure Jeremiah and I did not sit together. After dinner, when I was helping Mother, I overheard our fathers talking.

"I see," my father said, "that your son is becoming something of a musician."

"Oh, he is indeed," answered Hilkiah. "He might have a useful role to play in the synagogue after all. Am I thinking what you are thinking?"

"Cantor?" My father must have smiled. His words always slurred slightly when he smiled. "At least he will not be among the prophets."

It was at that moment that I decided I would talk to my father about being Jeremiah's wife instead of Saad's—the wife of a man who was apparently ready to settle down into some kind of normal role in society.

I never got the chance to bring the subject up with Father.

*

When Musicians' Day came to Anathoth, at the beginning of summer, I was not surprised that Jeremiah would be among the performers. He was youngest, and therefore last on the lineup. Most of the people of the town came to hear the performers. There were harpists and pipers and singers. Love songs, funny songs, and one song in which the singer tried to fit as many words as possible into a complex strain that was, no two ways about it, hilarious. And, of course, as always there was a song about little David and big Goliath. The refrain, "Five smooth stones," was easy to learn and pretty soon we were all singing along.

Jeremiah didn't have much hope to win against such competition, but that was not the point, the way most of us saw it. It was his entry into the musical world. Maybe he will win in ten years. Five, said others. All this, before even hearing him.

He mounted to the stage. His face shone. He lifted his lute and played one simple chord. "Let me sing a song for my beloved," he began.

My heart raced. I knew he was talking about me. Both of our families knew he was talking about me. My engagement to Saad had not yet, after all, been formally decided. Everyone in town must have known he was talking about me. Saad would have known he was talking about me, but Saad was on a journey. I looked around for

something to grab hold of to keep from falling. I found my father's shoulder. I smiled and looked down, blushing. I imagined that all eyes were upon me.

"I bought a vineyard, and prepared it as a pleasant planting for my beloved," he began to sing. The melody was a little awkward, but I did not care.

I wanted it to be the finest vineyard in the land—
Nothing less than the best for my beloved.
It was on a high hill,
And the soil was very fertile.
All summer and fall, I tilled its soil
And cleared away the stones.
With each stone,
Each heavy stone,
I was thinking only of serving my beloved.
I planted the choicest vines!
I went to the finest vintners,
And they gave me from their finest rootstocks.
Then, in the spring, the vines burst forth
With tender green leaves.
And I built a watch tower in its midst.
I myself kept watch as the vines grew.
As their fragrant flowers opened,
And as the green grapes formed,
I dug a wine vat, in delectable anticipation
Of the day when the grapes would ripen.

I thought that, perhaps, Jeremiah had some hidden meaning in his verses, but I could not guess what it might be. I simply enjoyed his music as it covered me like many waters.

His voice continued beautiful.

But on harvest day
I found that the vines had produced…

At this point, the tone of his song changed.

…wild grapes!

He sounded almost disgusted. Everyone looked around, hoping that the pleasure of the early verses would return.

Wild, shriveled grapes,
Barely a flaking skin over the seed.
No sweetness, no flavor.
How could I give this vineyard
To my beloved? How?
How could I so insult her?

By this point, all semblance of melody was lost. The chords from the lute were unrelated to the tuneless melody. Jeremiah's song was falling apart.

And now, O inhabitants of Judah,
Judge between me and my vineyard.
What did I fail to do? What defect
Was there in my preparations? Was there anything more
I could have done
That I did not do?

The people stood in silence, waiting for something good to happen in the plot. But it only got worse. There was no more tune. It was now poetry.

Now, what will I do to my vineyard?
The vineyard so offensive to my beloved?

His voice became hoarse.

I will tear out its hedge!
I will break down its wall!
I will let the weeds and vines and briers
And the thorns of the field
Consume the vineyard!

I stood in shock, as the murmurs began to grow loud.

Jeremiah now began to explain his words. "The vineyard," he said quietly, "the vineyard is the Kingdom of Judah, and the man who tilled it is the Lord of Hosts. The men of Judah are his pleasant planting. He looked for people whose hearts had love like sweet wine, but he found instead only greed! He looked for the green leaves of justice, and behold, bloodshed!" He started yelling and swinging his lute around. People began to flee, thinking that he might throw it at them.

My father's arm turned me away. I hid my face and cried as I stumbled home. The noisy crowd dispersed also, after someone went up to the stage and convinced Jeremiah to shut up. I cried because I knew he was right. About the vineyard, about Judah, about God. About the kings and the priests. They were, I well knew, we all knew, corrupt, like wild grapes.

But why did Jeremiah have to choose this time, of all times, to say this? Why did he have to do it in the middle of my song? *My song, Jeremiah! You are clueless, Jeremiah. You have no idea about the place and time to say things. But, you would say to me, you asked me to write a song for you, so I did. Jeremiah, you cannot possibly be so stupid! Or maybe you can. You are drunk with God and you stumble in his light. You push your friends, your beloved, to the side of the trail as you stagger in the dazzling light. I pray for you, Jeremiah. I love you. But you are most easily loved from a distance. I ask you to stay away from me, just as I ask the burning sun and the painful pinpoints of the stars to stay away from me, so I can admire all of you from a distance.*

And it was from that day that Jeremiah was among the prophets.

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Part Two

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Chapter 8

All that summer, I had to occupy myself with something, to get my mind off of Jeremiah. The servant's little girl Dinah, God bless her, was so helpful. We sat one day, and she asked me what I enjoyed doing. I said, *I enjoy reading and writing. Well,* she said, *do it.* And that was all it took. I talked with my father, and he talked with Hilkiah, who had become an even closer friend since the disappearance of Jeremiah. Hilkiah let me study all of the scrolls that he had, but that was mainly the Torah and Psalms and some historical writings. I wanted more.

My reputation as a scholar, even though I was a young woman, began to spread among the priests. Soon came the invitation for me to visit the Temple library in Jerusalem. My father took me in his carriage during a delivery of goods. I stayed for over a week with one of my father's friends in Jerusalem. In the library, I read manuscripts of scriptures and scholarly commentaries. I began to be excited by the mental work and creativity involved in interpreting the scriptures. I began to wish I could be a priest. But perhaps I could just be an obscure woman scholar, which was just like being a priest but without any responsibilities.

I found some manuscripts in a dusty corner. These were parchments destined to be used for palimpsests. Since parchment was expensive, copyists would frequently efface the previous writings and write new things on the old parchment. Most of the old parchments were scriptures that had been copied incorrectly, with errors that priests or other copyists had found.

But there were other documents that were more amazing than I could have dreamed. Most astonishing among them were the writings that identified themselves as the works of King Solomon. Were these writings to be read in the synagogue, they would be considered scandalous.

The first of the writings were simply called Song of Songs. I could not believe some of the things I read. They were shocking and delicious. *His fruit was sweet to my taste. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense. The scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits. I eat my honeycomb with my honey. Your breasts are like clusters of dates; I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its clusters. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Do not stir up or waken love until it pleases. Many waters cannot quench love. Drink deeply, O lovers! You have ravished my heart with a glance from your eyes. For I am sick with love.* I tried to fit different vowels in with the consonants, but could not; the meaning of each word was perfectly clear. As I read them, I felt I was watching a bedchamber.

And, in this scroll, there was a part about me. One passage read, *We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What will we do for our little sister, on the day when she is*

spoken for? I thought uncomfortably about Saad, who would call for me soon. I thought disturbingly about Jeremiah, who would never call for me. *We will build upon her a battlement of silver. We will enclose her with boards of cedar.* If this was supposed to make me feel better, it did not. While I feared the first steps into the garden of fleshly love, I certainly did not want to be walled up inside a battlement!

The second of the writings, were they known, would also be scandalous, but for a different reason. They openly questioned whether life has any meaning. The winds go round and round; rivers go to the sea, but it is not full. The sun goes round and round the Earth. All is vanity and a weariness of the flesh. People die, animals die, and they decompose into the same soil. *For who knows if the* ruach *of man goes up into heaven and the* ruach *of the beast goes down into the earth? As dies one, so dies the other.*

But this scroll also had some moments of hope. Not the kind of hope that the priests proclaimed about the promises of God. No, something much less definite than this. The writer—Qoheleth, the orator, he called himself—simply said that as long as there is life, hope remains; *for a living dog is better than a dead lion.* And he (or she) wrote,

> *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:*
> *A time to be born, and a time to die;*
> *A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;*
> *A time to kill, and a time to heal;*
> *A time to break down, and a time to build up;*
> *A time to weep, and a time to laugh;*
> *A time to mourn, and a time to dance;*
> *A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;*
> *A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*
> *A time to seek, and a time to lose;*
> *A time to keep, and a time to cast away;*
> *A time to rend, and a time to sew;*
> *A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*
> *A time to love, and a time to hate;*
> *A time for war, and a time for peace.*

Then Qoheleth wrote something that bothered me, though I did not quite understand why at the time. Qoheleth wrote, *For God has made everything beautiful in its season.* I promised myself I would think about this and perhaps understand it someday.

Qoheleth also brought up the question of why innocent people suffer. He or she brought it up several times, actually. This was something I had discussed briefly with Jeremiah, but not enough to reach any conclusion. I supposed that now I would never get

a chance to discuss this question with him. One passage in this scroll caught my attention. *There was a little city with few men in it.* Anathoth? *And a great king came against it and besieged it.* The king of the north, as Jeremiah kept saying? *But there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city.* In any reasonable world, this man would be a hero. *Yet no one remembered that poor man.* The exploits of kings and generals are recited in synagogues, but whatever that poor man did to save his city has been forgotten. History is written by the winners, and by those who are good at writing about themselves.

This scroll (of which I could find only one copy) said, in effect, that what happens in one's life has nothing to do with whether one is good or evil. *Time and chance happen to them all.* This was in clear contradiction to what the priests say, that if you serve God, God will reward you, with happiness, wealth, children. I had had suspicions in my mind for many years that God was not a Great Rewarder, but that whatever happened just *happened*—and here was a piece of scripture, or at least of writing filed away in the Temple, that said what I had long suspected, and said it so beautifully.

During the week that I studied at the Temple, I made copies of these documents. I tried to not be too obvious about it. I hid the copies among the other scrolls that I read or pretended to read. I had gone to Jerusalem a budding girl; I returned to Anathoth a woman just beginning to be wise.

Chapter 9

Then everything began to go wrong. Not so much for me and my family. Or, presumably, for Jeremiah, regarding whom I still heard nothing. But for the nation. Our great king, Josiah, was killed in battle. This was how it happened.

Pharaoh Neco was bringing his army through Judah on his way to fight the Babylonians. Neco assumed that it would be an easy matter to get permission from King Josiah to pass through. But Josiah refused to let Neco pass. Neco protested, telling Josiah that they had no argument with one another, and that Judah would be safer once Neco had broken the power of the Babylonians. But Josiah engaged Neco in battle, and died.

There was a big funeral, with much wailing. All the leaders of society gave elegant encomiums about the greatness of Josiah, who was restoring Israel to its holy traditions. I did not see the actual funeral in Jerusalem. But speeches were given in Anathoth, and I heard those. I had never heard Jeremiah say anything bad about Josiah, though he had criticized and condemned nearly everyone else in the government and the priesthood. But the speeches I heard, and the others I heard about, sounded excessive in their praise. It started to make me suspicious. I later heard that Jeremiah had written a song of lamentation for Josiah and for the upcoming fate of our kingdom. This was the first time that I had heard anything about Jeremiah being well, or that he was apparently gathering followers and had at least a small measure of fame. But I was still suspicious of the excessive convolutions of lugubriousness that the government officials were exhibiting.

You see, the government did not really explain *why* Josiah had opposed Neco. That made no sense; Josiah was mainly interested in the holiness of Judah, not in military campaigns. Furthermore, we couldn't even be sure that the battle was Josiah's idea. Some men, including my father, speculated that it was Josiah's political enemies who had him killed.

"Why?" asked Hilkiah as I listened through the curtains. "Why would they want him killed?"

"Well," said Father, "they were offended by Josiah's restoration of the ancient custom of Passover. If the king required Judah to observe Passover, what would come next? The Sabbath of the Fields? The Jubilee?"

For reasons I will explain later, the observance of these customs, though they were straight from the Law of Moses, would have spelled severe economic losses for some of the leading men of the kingdom. The loss of agricultural production, the loss of land, the loss of slaves and indentured servants. Josiah, to whom holiness was more important than power, was a threat to their wealth.

Everyone knew that Josiah's twenty-three-year-old son Jehoahaz would become king. But only naïve people, such as myself, were surprised that he reigned only three

months. The official story was that Pharaoh deposed him and carried him off to Egypt. I'm not quite sure how this could have happened. I had heard nothing of any battle between Judah and Egypt. The little band of Egyptians who kidnapped Jehoahaz clearly had some inside help from the king's court in Jerusalem. Next thing we knew, Jehoahaz' twenty-five-year-old brother Jehoiakim was king.

I say that everything started to go wrong. But not all at once. Those of us outside the walls of Jerusalem knew only that a good king had been replaced by an evil king who was not above using Egyptian help to get his way. The first evidence that further misfortune was coming was that land values began to decline. People with money, including my father, preferred to hold onto their money rather than to invest in new buildings or in the expansion of their enterprises. Jehoiakim was an ally of Egypt, and Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, far to the north but not as far as we would like, was not pleased. Would the investment made in a new business simply be seized by a corrupt king? And just how safe were those trade routes to the north?

What I did know was that my father began to want to get things done and settled. He wanted things in place for the future. He buried coins. He got property deeds notarized in front of witnesses, and buried them inside of sealed vases inside of sealed vases. He made sure we had a food supply stocked up in new urns from which mice could not pilfer. He canceled the Damascus contract Saad had worked out for him. But Saad found some other contracts for him, closer to home. Merchants in Lachish and Gath wanted our fabrics. They were Philistines, my father said, but their money was as good as anybody's.

And he wanted me settled.

Before Saad's next visit, my mother talked with me again. I was shocked to discover that sexual love was not always quite as much fun as the Solomonic document I found in the Temple made it sound. (A document I had not told her about.) She told me about male organs. (So *that's* what the pillar is, in the Song of Songs.) She told me about the humorously ungainly positions that may be necessary to get the pillar into—*into what? You can't be serious, Mother! And then he does what? Back and forth. It sounds so painful.* (Yes, dear, it is, the first time.) *And then, blood? Blood? Did you say blood?* I ran from the room, and we continued our discussion later. *Well, if that is how it is done, if that is how God made us, for whatever inscrutable reason, then I will get used to it, and even enjoy it when he reaches for my little clusters of dates…Sorry, Mother, it was just a poetic image I happened to think of.*

"No hurry," Saad told me once we got started talking, He handed me halvah and almond paste. "There are many maidens, many fair maidens in many cities, but you are the one worth waiting for." Then he added, "By the way, we won't be living in Damascus. That is, if you accept me as your partner."

Partner. I liked that. The husband is supposed to be the master, my mother said, my father said, and the priests said. But partner sounds more like the kind of equality that

Saad established with the other hunters, when they brought fresh meat to Anathoth, and with the merchants for whom he served as my father's intermediary. I did not get the feeling that I was simply an investment to Saad. He kept looking at me. He took my hand when I reached for some bread, and admired its gracile strength.

"What's that?" Saad asked, indicating a little smudge on my hand

"That's ink. I have been copying manuscripts in Jerusalem."

"Yes, I heard about that. I am proud to have a scholar as a wife."

I knew he was telling the truth, because it is not the sort of thing a man would say otherwise.

Then Saad added, "You probably know about the contract. Your father added a clause that guarantees your right to continue being a scholar."

Although I had not actually heard this, I said, "Yes. And, Saad, I realize how unusual it is for a husband to make such a concession."

"Your writing skills will be important," he said. "I am sure you will be much better than I am at keeping my business records. I know this sounds boring in comparison with your work as a scribe of holy scriptures, but it will make a big difference to our household affairs."

Everyone still told me that there was no hurry to sign the nuptial agreement. But my father, as much as he tried not to, started to become impatient. It was only later that I discovered that he had lost a lot of money when Josiah was killed and Jehoahaz taken away; and that Saad had asked for an interest in the business in place of a dowry that my father probably could not afford.

One important thing that was not in the contract: Jeremiah. A clause specified that I could continue to visit with people, male and female, whom I had befriended before the wedding. But the words specified people within accepted society. This, therefore, excluded Jeremiah.

Chapter 10

Then one day, in late summer, Saad took me hunting with him. Up in the hills, walking over some of the same trails that Jeremiah and I had taken so many times. The animals that Jeremiah had seen, Saad could shoot. I sat on the blanket on his horse, and he sat behind me. I believed that he relished the feeling of my hair blowing in his face.

"Saad, I have some questions."

"Yes?"

"Since I have already consented to marry you, you know I cannot mean them in any accusatory manner."

"Of course not. I have no secrets from you."

"And I imagine my father already knows the answers to these questions. Tell me about your family."

"If there was much to tell," Saad said sadly, "I would have told you. I had many opportunities, having dinner at your house."

"Well, tell me what little there is to know." I leaned my head back and looked into his eyes, very close.

"My parents are long gone," he said. "I have a brother. I do not know where he is. He was always an angry man. He divorced his wife, for reasons none of us considered good, and married another, without the consent of the priests. Then he left her alone as well. When my father died, little money was left. Father considered it his responsibility to help the two wives, and I cannot blame him for that."

"And you?" I asked.

"My wealth is not in property or gold," he said, "but is primarily in the form of good relationships in many cities."

"So I have heard."

"My beautiful Miriam," he whispered in my ear, "I do not refer to the women I knew before asking you to be my wife. It is true that I have helped them in their lives, sometimes with money. But I refer now to my customers. They are my friends. To have friends, to whom one can turn in a time of crisis, is worth more than a lot of money."

"But, Saad, what if something happens? One cannot be too certain, these days, what might happen to one's wealth."

"You are wise, Miriam. That is precisely why my wealth is primarily in my network of friendships. It is actually *safer* than money."

"I think I have chosen a wise man to marry, Saad."

"Coming from you, Miriam, scholar that you are, this is quite a compliment."

When we arrived in the forest, Saad let me try his bow. He kept his hands near me, which turned out to be a good idea, because I pulled the string back too far and the arrow bent crookedly and snapped, nearly injuring me. He held my shoulders as I panted.

I rode with him on his horse, pressing against him, around the marsh. Before I realized it, we had come upon the old house with the stork's nest. He positioned the horse carefully so that he could see the nest and the stork in it. He reached for his quiver.

"Did you know," he asked, "that this pair of storks—the female is off feeding somewhere—comes back to this nest every year?"

"That is very interesting," I said, as sincerely as possible. I could not say, *Yes, Jeremiah told me that they…*

"They fly south every autumn. South of Nubia somewhere. I have heard that great flocks of them fly over Egypt and Nubia. And then they come back every spring."

"But," I said, "how do you know that it is the same pair each year?"

"I don't, actually," he said, drawing out a small thin arrow. "But they know right where to come, as if they remembered the exact location."

"Old friends of yours," I said.

"You could say that," he smiled back at me. He pulled out his bow.

"You're going to shoot it," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"It's so beautiful," I said. "And it's an old friend. How can you do this?"

"I shoot nothing unless there is a good reason," Saad told me. "This year, the customers in Ashkelon want stork feathers. In previous years, none had requested them. I could have shot the stork, and tried to find a buyer. But, as you say, they are beautiful and they are my friends. So, I waited until I knew, in advance, that I have a buyer."

"Wait, Saad. I wish you wouldn't kill it."

"It is beautiful, I admit. But so are little lambs. And they're cute, in addition."

"Saad…"

"You eat lamb?"

"Saad, don't mock me."

"I'm not mocking you. It's just that you have made the decision to take the life of a lamb, or to eat a lamb whose life someone else has taken. Just as I am making a decision, now, to shoot this stork."

"This is so sad!"

"I didn't say I would enjoy killing the stork. It is a solemn moment. You know this. I told you the stories of my hunting many times. Have I ever exulted in the bloody death of an animal, or even a bird?"

"No, but, please, can't you spare this one?"

"Adults have to make difficult decisions sometimes…"

"What did you say? Are you implying that I am even yet a child?"

"Wait, that's not what I meant. I meant, as adults, we have to make…"

I turned his face around toward me and held it in my hand as his arms, holding the bow and an arrow, drooped. "Saad, either I am a child, or I will be your wife, but not both."

Saad relaxed and smiled. “I will lose a little money. But for you, I will spare the stork. And, I promise, it won’t be the last time your opinion will influence my decisions.”

“I should say not,” I said as unchildlike as possible.

Then he kissed me. His mouth tasted like game. Like ripe wild bird from the grill. I was a little shocked at this adult taste. But my own body had begun to produce scents that shocked me. I was entering the smelly and shocking world of adulthood.

Saad put away his bow and arrow. He took out his slingshot. “I did promise that I would bring home at least some doves for us to eat,” he said. I could hardly make objection.

The doves perched in full view on the tree branches. Saad carefully looked among the stones on the ground to find the perfect one. His craftsmanship in hunting was as fine as mine would ever be in sewing. Or writing. I marveled at him. The arc of the moving stone was as smooth and precise as the flight of any arrow would have been. The dove lay dead, or stunned, upon the ground.

As Saad walked toward the dove, something burst forth from some bushes. I thought it was a dangerous wild animal, and I feared for Saad’s safety. I was still on the horse and probably in no danger. Then I saw that it was not an animal. It was Jeremiah. He wore only a loincloth. His body was streaked with mud, and his hair, now long, tangled with sticks and dead leaves. Saad came back and stood beside the horse, next to my thigh, which he touched lightly.

Jeremiah ignored Saad and went straight to the dove. He cupped it in his hands and began to cry. “You innocent, little dove,” he said. “Your cry was all for peace. And yet, here you are, crushed in a single blow. One moment alive, the next dead.” I expected him to look at Saad and say something bad about him. But Jeremiah still did not look up at us. Instead he continued to speak through his sobs, “The high and mighty of Jerusalem will fall before Nebuchadnezzar. But so also will be lowly and gentle people of Jerusalem be crushed.

“I do not cry for the eagles of Jerusalem who will be brought low,” Jeremiah continued. “It is for the doves and sparrows that I weep.” He kissed the dove’s body and crouched down to embrace it to his chest. He still seemed to ignore us, but I suspected that he intended for us to hear these words.

As the dove nestled against Jeremiah’s chest, a chest weak but with a few dark hairs, it began to move. It whimpered and raised its head. It struggled to free itself from Jeremiah’s hands.

“It’s Jeremiah,” I whispered in Saad’s ear as I crouched to him. “He brought the dove back to life. I have never seen him do anything like this.”

“The dove was just stunned, not dead,” whispered Saad.

Jeremiah stood and walked over to the marsh. His breechcloth did not quite cover him. He threw the dove into the air, and it flew. He kept watching the bird, long after it could no longer be seen.

Saad quietly remounted behind me. When I began to quietly weep, he put his arm around my stomach and hugged me. We quietly rode just a few cubits away. Then he reached for the bag that contained the food we were going to have for lunch. He laid it on the top of a rock. He then whispered into my ear, “I think God has a better use for our lunch.” He left the food on the rock as we rode away.

Chapter 11

All around town, rumors started spreading about the huntress and her affianced "wild man" who was finally settling down. Wild man? They did not know what a quiet man he really was. Soon, in the rumors, I was the huntress who had *subdued* the wild man! If they only knew what a meek woman I was, they would never have said such things. But I enjoyed the rumors.

My father came to me to discuss the *erasin* feast of betrothal.

"I know you were probably expecting a lavish feast like those of your sisters," he told me.

"Yes," I said. "I was. But I don't really care."

Father seemed surprised. "Well, this is fortunate. Because, due to recent turns of events, I must save back my money, because if you experience any difficulty..."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this. As you know, Saad has a moderate degree of wealth, but it is spread out in several different cities. He cannot afford a large *mohar* gift, nor can he pay for a large wedding. He plans to buy a small house for you, but in case this does not work out, you and he may need a place to which to return—you and your children. My house will be that place. Saad has probably told you that he does not have property."

"He told me. I believe he has not held anything back from me that I should know."

"Oh, it will be a nice feast. Just not very many guests. And Saad has already gotten your wedding ring. For this, he spared no expense."

We continued to hear rumors of more political unrest in Jerusalem. For this reason, we decided to have the *erasin* feast of betrothal soon. Also, there would be no guests coming from a great distance; all would be from Anathoth. There would be food and music, and the climax would be signing the contract. At that point, Saad and I would be considered married. However, by tradition, I would continue to live with my family for another year before the *nissuin* wedding procession, at which time I would officially move into the house that he would set up for me. Of course, I would have lived in a tent with him if necessary.

*

When the great day arrived, autumn was far progressed. The guests arrived, including my sisters and their families, and Hilkiah and his wife. I made my own wedding garments, and I made them comfortable. Since the robes were so complex, layer upon layer, I am glad that the *erasin* was in autumn, not summer. I sewed the decorations that Saad had admired so much on the outer garment. Since, to me, a good life is not just one that looks good on the outside, but down deep inside, I sewed beautiful decorations

on the inner garments as well. Saad would see these someday. My preparations went right down to my skin, which I bathed with soft soap and on which I rubbed fragrant oils. Someday, Saad would do this for me, I imagined. Saad arrived, freshly bathed, and with new clothes. We sat in the place of honor, a place only he had sat before.

There were two guests from Jerusalem, who happened to be passing through Anathoth. One of them was a dark-skinned man, I assumed one of the Ethiopians. He was tall and wore fine and very colorful clothes. His hair was close-cropped. The only thing unusual about his appearance, other than the bright colors, was his ears, which jutted out as if he were listening to the voice of God from the distant mountains, or perhaps the voice of Jeremiah. The other was a white man with a big grin.

My father introduced us to the men.

"Saad and Miriam, please meet Oba-melech of Jerusalem." He motioned toward the man in colorful garb. "He is the king's procurator. In this capacity, he has been a very good customer. If you ever see the king's palace, you may recognize some of the drapes."

The Ethiopian smiled. "Ah, this is Miriam! How often I have heard about you," he said, giving a little bow. "You may call me Oba."

And the other man smiled even bigger as father introduced O-biden-elech. "You may call me Obi," he said. Then he pulled out what appeared to be a gourd on the end of a stick, but the features of a face were painted on it, and held it up.

"Obi," explained Father, "is the king's jester. Oba and Obi have been friends for many years."

Obi held up the gourd-face and spoke in a falsetto voice. "And I am the king. I don't know what I am doing, I haven't a clue, so I am going to need a lot of advice from O-biden-elech."

"Imagine," said Oba, "a king needing advice from a jester. Back in Josiah's day, it wasn't necessary. But these days, it seems that the only good ideas the king has is when the little wooden man whispers something in his ear."

"I am pleased to meet both of you," I said.

"And I also," Saad agreed. "Now that I know who the *real* head of state is, I'm not as worried about the future of our kingdom."

"Thank you," said the little puppet. Then, in his own voice, Obi said, "I think I will put this little guy away. This is no place for work."

My mother and the servants prepared enough food that we kept eating all day. Of course, there was leavened bread to dip into tahini and onto which to spread butter; olives, dried and then soaked in olive oil; grapes, which were in season, and dried figs and raisins; dates; the ruby fruits of pomegranates; walnuts and almonds; and, my personal favorites, *elah* pistachio nuts, wild ones with the most piquant flavor. If it had been spring, we could have eaten delightful, sweet mulberries. Saad provided a deer, and had himself made the venison stew.

And there was music. The lutist had, in fact, made a new lute, and he performed beautifully. Of course, he played *Dove in Far-Off Terebinths,* which everyone loved but of which I was getting a little tired. When he started to play, I suddenly remembered Jeremiah. It may seem impossible that I had forgotten him, but putting him out of my mind was the only way I could deal with his absence. While the musician sang and played, I kept remembering the words I had read, and copied, from the Song of Songs, words that would have shocked everyone present, except perhaps Saad. The musician said nothing about my navel being a bowl for wine or my breasts being clusters of dates—or about any pillars. I drank more wine—and even a little sekhar, a drink made from barley that sat for days and started to become bubbly and sweet—than ever before.

So, when it happened, I was not even sure what I was seeing.

I first realized something was happening when I heard a commotion among the guests. I was looking at Saad's face as he fed me elah nuts. I saw him look toward the commotion. When I turned my head, I saw the two men I had hoped I would not see again: the gray Pen-sanazzar and the bright-haired Trom-panazzar. They stalked right in to the banquet hall.

My father stood up. "Who invited you?" he demanded.

"We will not be long," said Pen-sanazzar.

"That's not the point," said Father.

"We need no invitation," said Trom-panazzar.

"That is not true," said Father.

"Oh, but it is," said Pen-sanazzar. "My brother is specially chosen by God. He has the permission of the gods of heaven to enter wherever he pleases."

"That is not true," said Hilkiah.

Saad stood. He spoke clearly. "Leave. Now. I am a gentle and forbearing man," he said. "But this is my wedding feast, and if you do not leave right now you might find that a hunter is a formidable foe. I have prevailed against many animals more noble than you. Moreover, you have insulted my lovely and wise bride as well."

"Lovely, I assume, but can any woman be wise?" said Trom-panazzar. He looked at me. His eyes widened. I think it is the first time he ever looked at me. Though my face was partly hidden by a veil, I think he saw me well enough. He smiled, but it was not a smile of goodwill, something of which I already knew he was incapable. "Yes, you are correct about her being lovely." I blushed invisibly and turned away. I kept glancing at what was happening, however.

The bright-haired man suddenly took notice of the Ethiopian. "What is *he* doing here?" he snarled.

Saad spoke firmly. "He is Oba-melech, son of Oba-melech. He is the king's procurator, and our honored guest."

"Go back where you came from," muttered Trom-panazzar.

"You mean, Jerusalem? I shall indeed," said Oba-melech.

"I mean, go back to where your kind came from."

"My father, of blessed memory, was born far to the south of Ethiopia, grew up in Ethiopia, and came to Jerusalem. I cannot go *back* to Ethiopia. I am not from there."

"Please excuse the disturbance," said the gray Pen-sanazzar. "What Trom-panazzar means is that men who are of foreign blood are a threat to our society. And while we bear him no personal animosity..."

"Oh, you don't bear him any animosity, do you?" said Obi's puppet, which he drew back out of his bag, in a high voice. "Pardon me for misunderstanding you. Your face has turned red with anger. It looks like a monkey's butt." Everyone laughed.

"You will be sorry you said that," shouted Trom-panazzar at Obi.

"And as for men of foreign extraction?" continued the puppet. "A little mouse told me that there was a Jebusite around here somewhere."

"I'll have your tongue torn from your mouth," shouted the red man.

Obi spoke in his own voice. "Go ahead, sir. He's just a gourd. I can make another one if I have to." Obi grinned even bigger. More laughter.

Saad began to walk, slowly but firmly, toward the intruders. "Perhaps you thought that my command for you to leave was a request. It is not." The guests, both men and women, began to cower back away from the space between Saad and the intruders. The puppet yelped in fear and buried itself in the blankets.

"You, Saad of Bashan, might be very interested in what my brother has to say," said Pen-sahazzar.

"Some other time," said Saad.

"You might want to hear this now," said the gray man.

Saad hesitated for just a moment.

Trom-panazzar spoke. "I happen to know, Saad of Bashan, that you owe money to many, many, many people."

Saad stopped. "Not very many, and not very much. They are my friends—and I have many other friends to whom I do not owe money—and they know I will *continue* to repay them, in return for my *reliable* services."

"Friends?" said Trom-panazzar. "You think those men owe you any loyalty?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do, as I do to them." Saad continued walking.

"Well, listen to this. I have talked to them..."

"All of them?"

"Enough of them. And I bought up your debt from them. Now you owe me the money that you owed them."

Saad froze.

"And my terms of repayment," continued the rude, red-haired man, "are considerably less generous than theirs. I want the money as soon as possible, and more."

"More? You mean, as in usury?" asked my father.

"I like to think of it as a fee for the work I am doing."

"You will answer to the Council for this," said Hilkiah.

"I answer to no one," said Trom-panazzar.

Pen-sahazzar said, "My brother is specially chosen by God. He has the permission of the gods of heaven to..."

"You said that before," said Hilkiah. "It was wrong the first time, and still is."

Saad then smiled. "I think you are lying," he said to the angry man. "Could you name one of the men from whom you claim to have bought my debt?"

"Nathan, for one," said Trom-panazzar.

Saad stepped back, tense. Then he relaxed. "You must have the wrong Nathan. There are lots of men named Nathan."

"Nathan of Jericho."

Saad again became briefly uncomfortable. Then he relaxed again. "The Nathan of Jericho whom I know would not do such a thing. You must have the wrong Nathan of Jericho."

"The Nathan of Jericho to whom you owed 50 *maneh*. You now owe me 75 *maneh* on that debt."

"A fee that is half of the debt?" exclaimed Saad.

"Well, I had to pay Nathan a little bit. My profit is not the entire 25 *maneh*. And that is just the beginning," said Trom-panazzar.

"You greedy swine," mumbled Saad.

"You are mistaken about several things," said the gray Pen-sanazzar. "One of them is, apparently, that you believe my brother to be greedy. He has more money than he knows what to do with. He buys debts not because he needs the money but because he enjoys doing it."

Saad rushed toward the two men. I believe he could have strangled both of them. But my father stopped him. Saad then breathed deeply and tried to become calm. "Thank you, Ahaz. Now that I have a moment to think, I realize what I must do. Tomorrow I will begin a journey, on which I will visit all of the men who are my partners in commerce. I still suspect that these two swine are lying to us. I think I can work this out. After all, the bonds of friendship are stronger than any amount of money."

Bonds of friendship. I thought of Jeremiah again. Saad was absolutely right about friendship. At that moment, I began to appreciate Saad even more as a friend than I had previously.

"I would advise against going back to your friends, as you call them, to get them to change their minds," said Pen-sanazzar. "We have the written contracts. They cannot change them now any more than you can."

Hilkiah said, "You will never be able to enforce this arrangement."

"What is the total amount that you seek?" my father asked.

"I was wondering when you would ask. How does fifty talents sound?"

This was a really large amount of money.

"Now I know he is lying," yelled Saad. "That is several times the amount that I owe, in total, to anybody."

"Or would you prefer that I raise the price?"

The red man whispered something to his gray brother, who nodded. The gray man said, "My brother wishes to offer another option, upon implementation of which all debts can be forgotten."

Without waiting to be asked what this option was, Trom-panazzar pointed at me and said loudly, "Her."

Chapter 12

The happiest day of my life had been ruined by an arrogant man who, needless to say, left the feast without me and without any money, but with many glares of hatred. Previously, I had been a little resentful that there had to be a year between betrothal and consummation, but had that been my actual wedding night, I could not have stopped crying long enough to be intimate with Saad. I did, however, keep my composure as we signed the contract—Saad's hand trembled almost as much as mine did—and he gave me the wedding ring. It was the finest gold. In the center was the four sides of a tabernacle roof, each with a Hebrew letter on it. He told me what each letter represented, but I could not hear him over my own sobs. I would have to ask him later. Soon the guests left.

Saad remained. "Don't cry, my beloved," he told me. "I will take care of this. No hunter on a chase, and no leader in battle, was ever more motivated than I am in this matter. As my soul lives, I will not rest until I prevail against this man."

*

Saad left on his journey the next morning. I felt desolate and alone, no matter how much my parents tried to cheer me. The only thing that could take my mind away from my worries was to go to Jerusalem and transcribe some more manuscripts. Most of them had been written, or re-written, recently, but a few of them used phrases that seemed centuries old. The only truly enjoyable part was that my father gave me a scroll, which was just long enough for me to copy the Song of Songs and Qoheleth, a copy that I could keep.

*

When Saad returned, he seemed to be very happy. I was relieved and surprised at this. Father and I shared a meal with him.

"I did not have a moment to lose," Saad told us. "Trom-panazzar had indeed offered to buy up my debts, and offered them a little monetary enticement. Yes, the contracts were written and signed. But Trom-panazzar had not yet actually paid them anything."

"I knew he was a liar," Father said.

"Liar, indeed. Trom-panazzar told them that I had agreed to the arrangement. As soon as I told them that this was untrue, they agreed that, when Trom-panazzar brings the money, they will simply refuse to accept it."

"But, the contract?" I asked. The two men looked at me and smiled.

"Good point, Miriam," said my future husband. "The wording said *Upon acceptance* of the money from Trom-panazzar. *Acceptance,* not *delivery*. They will simply not accept it, thus voiding the contract."

"A nicety of wording," said Father.

"A contract consists of words," Saad responded.

"And they all went along with you?" I asked.

"Most of them," answered Saad. "A couple did not, until I suggested to them that the contract would not be enforced by the officials. Technically, what Trom-panazzar did was usury, and illegal, but I was not actually sure the law would be enforced against him. I took something of a chance by telling them the contract was illegal. But, you see, nobody likes Trom-panazzar."

"So, my dear Saad, you were right. Friendship is worth more than money." I could not—yet—tell him that this was exactly what Qoheleth said.

"Yes," he said. "Of course, friendship runs both ways. My friends were tired of meat from sheep and goats and were happy to receive some venison from me.

"And," continued Saad, "I have some more good news."

"What is it?" I asked, excitedly.

Saad looked into my eyes. "I have decided to centralize my business dealings. I will have a place in which customers will come to meet me, rather than me always going to them."

"What made you decide to do this?" asked Father.

"I discovered that I have been losing some business because I am always someplace else when new customers are looking for me. I have to be someplace where they can find me." He looked fully at me. "I will need you to keep my records."

"I am ready, my husband," I said, smiling.

He smiled back at me. "I have already signed a contract for the room. It is on a busy street. We can put the merchandise on tables in front, during the day, and lock the door at night. We can keep the records in back. There is even room for your parchments, Miriam."

"Where is it? I assume it is in Anathoth," said Father.

"No," Saad corrected him. "It is in Jerusalem."

Father and I were silent. Jerusalem is not far away, but it takes the better part of a day to travel that distance and back.

"That means," continued Saad, "that we are moving to Jerusalem."

I could tell that Father was not ready for me to leave, but that such good news deserved a celebration. "We will bring out the good wine for you, my son," he said.

"I will be living with you on a busy street?" I asked. "I will do so, of course."

"I have also secured some small rooms for us," Saad answered. "Not big, but they face a shaded courtyard with very little traffic."

I jumped up and kissed his hands. "How good my life has become," I said.

Father then said, “The period of betrothal is not finished.”

“This opportunity was not to be missed,” Saad told him.

“You are right, of course,” Father said. “This means that the *nissuin* procession needs to take place soon.”

“You mean, I need to load my belongings in a wagon and take them to Jerusalem,” I said.

“With Miriam not living here anymore,” said Father, “we can spare two of the servants to help you move. Tiglath and his wife.” My heart leapt for joy. They have taken care of me as long as I can remember. He spoke to Saad, “We cannot leave Miriam alone in Jerusalem while you are at work.”

“Tiglath and his wife can use one of the rooms,” I said.

“Which will have to double as a kitchen,” Saad pointed out.

“I assume you will still travel occasionally,” said Father.

“Yes,” answered my husband. “I must inspect merchandise before I buy it. And I will continue to hunt. The servants, and Miriam, can keep the operation going when I am gone.”

“I had been hoping,” added Father, “for a celebration of some sort.”

“I am sorry, Father,” Saad addressed him. “I do not have money for this. As a matter of fact, I had to borrow some money to get the room for us to live in.”

“From whom?” asked Father.

“From Hilkiah.”

“Hilkiah is one of my closest friends,” said Father. “I was unaware that you knew him so well.”

“I have talked with him a few times,” responded Saad. “He did not say it directly, but I think that he sees me as something of a substitute son, now that Jeremiah has disappeared.”

Jeremiah! My heart leapt, just briefly.

“How nice,” said Father. “Is there anything you will be doing for Hilkiah in return?”

“He asked me to keep an eye out for Jeremiah when I am hunting. And help him, if he gets in any trouble.”

“Which he probably will,” said Father.

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Chapter 13

I had been fully married to Saad for a week. He spent all day every day with me that week. He was as gentle as he could be. He was careful to not press his weight down upon me. I think he even entered only partway the first time, unable to bear my grimaces of pain. And when, partway through that week, I entered the way of women, he seemed happy enough just to caress me and to bring me food. And, of course, to bathe me. I had never bathed myself so carefully as he bathed me. He first bathed himself to remove, he said, the animal smell, but let me re-bathe him. He had brought soap from his last trip to Egypt that had the scent of what he said were lotuses.

About the fourth day, he brought me a present. Also from Egypt, he said. It was some kind of animal that one of his customers no longer wanted. As he carried it in, holding it by the middle of its body, it stuck its legs straight down, and claws emerged from them. It was entirely black and had short hair. He handed it to me, and I held it the same way. It started thrashing, and leapt from my grip. It landed on its feet, and emitted a vowel sound that our language does not have. Saad scooped it back up with his right hand and gently slipped it into the cradle of his left forearm, its back down. Even though the animal's hind legs still stuck straight out, claws extended, it calmed down and put its front paws on his shoulder, with the claws hidden. Then, holding it by its middle, he handed the animal to me again. I took hold of it incorrectly, again, but held it against me. It clung to my shoulder with its front paws—and its front claws, which penetrated my admittedly insubstantial gown.

"It is a miniature type of lion," he said.

I managed to keep myself from convulsing with surprise when he said this. I held it quietly, but heard a kind of rumbling coming from its breast and almost tickling my shoulder. "What is that sound?" I asked.

"That is the miniature version of the lion's roar," he said. "I think. Oh, and they catch mice. That's why the Egyptians keep them around their storehouses. I hope you like it."

"It seems lovely, so far. So soft," I said.

"It will keep you company in bed while I am away," he said.

"In bed?"

"It will sleep at your feet, or will come up and help you to sleep by lying beside you, with that gentle roar." Saad smiled. "And it generates warmth." Just in time for late autumn.

I had just taken a bath. While Saad was in another part of the house, I decided to give the little lion a bath. I had not gotten any further than carrying it into the room with the bath when it exploded with that annoying vowel sound. And it hissed. I hate hissing sounds. I am not afraid of snakes; I just hate the hissing sound popularly associated with them. Jeremiah would always, when describing the future desolation of Judah, talk about

how anyone who would see the ruins of our once great country would “hiss” at us. He kept saying this until I told him how much I hated the sound of that word. Well, this little animal erupted in a storm of the most annoying vowel and the most annoying consonant in any language. And its claws were out. It propelled itself across the room and left a bleeding scratch on my face.

When I screamed, Saad came running, halfway into his clothes. When I told him what happened, he started laughing. Louder and louder.

“I forgot to tell you,” he said. “You don’t bathe them. They bathe themselves.”

“They decide for themselves when to enter the water?” I asked.

“No,” he said, laughing harder. “Come, see.” He led me into the room where the animal had hidden in a corner. It was licking its own fur. “It licks itself clean,” he said.

“How disgusting!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, really?” He grabbed my arm and began licking it.

“Saad! Stop it!” I was screaming in anger and laughing at the same time.

“Is this disgusting?” he said, working his way up inside the gown to my shoulder. He couldn’t go any further because he bent over laughing. My silence eventually made him stop. Tears ran down his beard.

“The animal scratched my face,” I said. “Now I am no longer beautiful.”

Saad became serious. “Well,” he said, “perhaps this is a good thing. Now I am the only man in the world who thinks you are beautiful. That means I get to keep you all to myself.”

Then he drew his face to mine and rubbed our cheeks together. He ground his salty tears into the blood of my scratch.

*

It was after Saad left that I began to fall deeply in love with him. I knew that I should fall in love with the man whom I had admired as long as I could remember, the man who brought me sweet soap from Egypt, the man who did not shoot the stork. But now I began to think about him all the time. Of course, he brought me that animal too. But over the next couple of days I began to like the animal as well. It was very soft, and once it stopped scratching me it was very pleasant to feel that rumbling sound against my chest.

I took care of business while Saad was gone. Tiglath helped me set up the tables, brought me lunch, and helped me put everything away in the evening. My father’s fabrics sold well, as did the soap from Egypt. The silver coins piled up, with images of lions, oxen, date palms, owls. I found them interesting, since in my sheltered life I had never actually touched money.

As much as I enjoyed the coins, I enjoyed the customers even more. I didn’t always like them, but I always found them interesting. Several of the men assumed a

woman couldn't know the difference between a *shekel* and a *maneh*. But Saad had trained me well. Everyone wanted to purchase items, whether scarves or small bottles of ink, for as little money as possible, and they assumed a woman could not know what a fair price would be. I surprised them with my shrewdness when they offered me a ridiculously low price. The only time I had my doubts was when a customer said that he was an old friend of my husband and had always gotten a discount. Since he knew Saad's name and that he was from Bashan, I let him have the discount. I was quickly becoming the kind of wife that Solomon (if he was really the author) praised at the end of his proverbs, which I had read in the Jerusalem library. I, myself, was worth a price above rubies.

When I ran the store, I was tired at the end of the day. But I was too excited to rest. I found myself walking around the room, always thinking of things I could say to Saad when he returned. I even fantasized about reading that love poem to him I had found in Jerusalem. Or, maybe I could write my own. I even stayed up late copying the Song of Songs and Qoheleth by lamplight. When I could not sleep, they were the subjects of my lucubrations.

I was up late one night. The autumn weather had turned hot. Since it was an upper room, I dared to leave the shutter just a little bit open even though I was almost naked.

The animal jumped on me at earliest dawn. I turned over and hugged it to my bosom. *Ouch,* I said, as it pressed its claws (playfully, I am sure) into me. I brushed it away, sitting up.

It was then that I saw him. Right beside my bed.

"Jeremiah!" I whispered hoarsely, grabbing a sheet and failing to cover myself. I hugged a pillow instead. "Jeremiah! Get out of here!"

"I mean you no harm, Miriam," he said, averting his eyes too late. "Please do not fear me." Somebody had given him new clothes.

"Fear you? Of course not. That is why I am whispering, not screaming. I'm afraid for you. If anybody finds you here…How did you get in here?"

He motioned to the open shutter with his head.

"But this is an upper floor," I said.

"There are grapevines all over the wall."

"What are you doing here?"

"I have a message for you," he said, finally looking up into my face.

"Jeremiah, if anyone finds you in the bedchamber of a married woman, especially one who once roamed the woods with you, they will assume either that we have happily coupled, or that you have raped me. You could deny it, I could deny it, and it would make no difference. What is there about this situation that you cannot understand?"

"I have a message for you," he repeated.

"This had better be quick," I said, letting the pillow slide just a little. "A message from whom?"

"From God," he said.

"Oh, of course," I said.

"I'm serious," he said.

"You always are," I said, suddenly very calm.

"Come with me," he said.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who delivered the laws to Moses, who wrote them with his own finger on the tablets, who condemned adultery, has told you to tell me to run off with you."

"I am not asking you to commit adultery, just to come with me," he said.

"And you must have known that Saad is gone right now."

"Everybody knows it."

"Everybody?"

"Well, my followers do. Yes, Miriam, I have followers. It is their business to know things. I want you not to run away with *me* but to come and join *us*."

"You've finally gone too far, Jeremiah. No, wait, you already went too far some time ago. Now tell me. What—were I *insane* enough to join you—could I possibly do for you?"

"Not for us. For you. It is the only way you can be saved."

"Saved? From what?"

"The king of the north will come and lay waste to this land and put its inhabitants to the sword. Even those who are consecrated to God. But you will die pure."

"Jeremiah, I know you spend a lot of time out in the country. The way we always used to. That is one of the things I like most about Saad—he takes me with him out into the forest. Sometimes. Not so much, now that he has a shop. Now, if during your journeys you have seen Babylonian troops approaching, then it is not me whom you should tell about it. You need to tell the king."

"I already did."

"And he ignored you? When you brought him information about…"

"It wasn't actually information," Jeremiah said, looking up at the ceiling. "It was a vision. The troops aren't, to my knowledge, actually here yet. If they were, it would be too late. As it is, there is still time for the Kingdom of Judah to repent."

"I think," I said, "that God wants me to stay here, with my husband." A tear drained from my eye. "Jeremiah, at least you could have stayed in touch. I would have invited you to the betrothal feast. Everyone would have raised their eyebrows, but I would have insisted upon it."

"I would not have come," he said simply.

I cried some more. "Jeremiah, we had a special friendship. It was a kind of love. How could you say this to me?"

"That's not it, Miriam. God has told me not only to remain unmarried, but to not attend weddings. Or funerals."

"Why?"

"Because the time is coming, very soon, when there will be so many dead that there will be no weddings, nor any time for funerals, nor even time to dig holes to bury the dead in. You know the Potsherd Gate here in Jerusalem? Well, it will be covered with stinking corpses."

"Jeremiah," I said, not looking up. "There was a time when you were as close as my shoulder, as close as my heart. Now, for all the difference it makes, you could be in a different land. I don't know you anymore." I looked up quickly. Another tear leapt away from my nose. "Listen. There isn't much time. Saad and I don't have much money, but we have a little. Whatever you need, let me know. Somehow. Leave me a note in the window or something. I'll do what I can."

"Thank you, but God is already providing whatever we need. Saad has already been bringing us things. I would like for him to come with us also."

"You have told him this?"

"We do not actually speak to one another directly. I want you to tell him."

"Jeremiah," I said. "I love you. Because I love you, I charge you to not come back here."

We both heard the movement in the other room. Jeremiah leapt to the window and began to scamper out. I jumped from my bed. The pillow dropped, and I was nearly naked again. Jeremiah did not look as he quietly slipped down a vine. I had to think quickly of an excuse for the noise. *That animal. Where is it? There it is! Don't run away from me, you little demon. Make yourself useful for once.*

Tiglath's wife entered my room and said, "I heard a noise in here."

I held up the animal as it made the sounds of that horrible vowel and that irritating consonant.

Chapter 14

One evening, as a fire blazed in the small brazier (we had no hearth), I read the Song of Songs to Saad. The next evening, I read Qoheleth to him. The third night, we lay in bed together and talked.

"I see what you mean about these scrolls," he said.

"They are some of the greatest literature I have ever seen," I said.

"That, but I also meant that I can see why the priests in the library considered them inconvenient. They could not bring themselves to destroy them, but they left them in the dust pile, so that they could be accidentally destroyed. At least," he said, "the priests didn't burn them."

"What if, as Jeremiah has always prophesied..." I had told Saad about Jeremiah's visit, without details, and that Jeremiah was now one of the leaders of the prophets. Jeremiah had transmogrified from inconvenience to embarrassment to voice of the wild. "What if fire should destroy Jerusalem? God help us then. God save his own scripture then."

"You consider those writings to be scripture? A sexually-charged love poem, and the cynical musings of someone who did not quite believe in God?"

"Yes, I do," I said. "I cannot prove that they are, of course."

"But if they are scripture," my husband said, "perhaps it was for just such a time as this that God has raised you up."

At first, I could not speak. "God using me as an important part of his plan of history? Is that what you are saying?"

Saad smiled. "Remember the first Miriam."

*

I had no hope of ever seeing the inside of the royal palace, though I walked past it many times. I had read in the scrolls about the magnificence of the palace that Solomon had built. The scriptures gave every detail of every gleaming pillar. Right outside the gates, beggars sat in their own squalor. Who could help them? Their needs were so great that I could certainly not make any difference to them, so I ran past them like everyone else. The king's household, supposedly, gave them alms, though I never saw it.

Saad and I went to the Temple each sabbath. I had, of course, been to the Temple three times every year as I grew up in Anathoth, for the Feasts. But now Saad and I could go every week. Saad would have preferred to remain at home with me, but his customers needed to see us at the temple. I still believed in God, not yet being convinced by Qoheleth that life is only time and chance. I could not enter any further than the Court of the Women. This magnificent Temple was actually chaotic and disgusting. People bought animals for sacrifice, pigeons and goats and sheep, and the priests wrung the necks of the

pigeons and slit the throats of the goats and gouged out the hearts of the sheep, and blood ran through little troughs down into the gutter. People argued with the priests about the prices of the animals.

As we left the Temple one Sabbath, we saw Jeremiah. He was standing at the main gate and yelling in a louder voice than I had ever heard. His small chest had grown into a manly bellows, and his words were clear to everyone who came out of the Temple.

"God will raise up his servant, Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and he will destroy this city," shouted Jeremiah.

"His servant Nebuchadnezzar?" someone yelled. "The king of Babylon does not do the will of the Almighty."

"Oh, but he does," said Jeremiah. "He may not realize it, but he is moving Jehovah's will to fulfilment.

I will bring evil from the north, and a great destruction.
The lion has come up out of his thicket,
The great Gentile destroyer is on his way.
He is on his way to make this land desolate.
The cities will be laid waste, without an inhabitant.
Wear sackcloth, put ashes on your head, lament, and howl all you want to,
But the anger of Jehovah will not be turned back.
The hearts of the king and princes will perish,
The priests and prophets will be astonished.
Behold, the Babylonian king will come up as clouds of dust
And his chariots as a whirlwind;
His horses are swifter than eagles
Woe be unto us! We haven't got a chance.
I bear the pain of the people of Judah
As I proclaim this message.
The pain reaches into my very heart, which throbs within me,
Unto my very bowels...

"Oh, now we understand," another man yelled, laughing. "It must be something you ate."

"I hear the trumpet, the alarm of war," said Jeremiah.

"That's just the sound of gas," said the man. Many in the crowd joined him.

Jeremiah continued without stopping for a second.

I beheld the Earth, and, lo, it was formless and empty,

The heavens gave no light,
Just as it was before the very Creation.
The mountains trembled. There was no man,
Even the birds of the air had fled.
The fruitful place had become a wilderness,
The fierce anger of Jehovah broke down the city walls.
The Earth will mourn, the heavens will be black.
Thus the Lord has proclaimed, and He will not change his mind.
When you hear the noise of horsemen and archers,
Flee unto the thickets, climb unto the rocks!

Jeremiah had been yelling, and swinging his arms as if he held a sword or a hammer. But then he relaxed and spoke in a normal voice. He said, “King Jehoiakim has made an alliance with Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar does not like this. And it is Nebuchadnezzar whom God has chosen as his hero for this time. Open your arms to Nebuchadnezzar. This is the will of God and it is the only way this city and this people are going to survive.”

“This man is treasonous!” shouted one priest. “He says we should surrender to the Babylonians! But God has chosen our king, not Nebuchadnezzar, as his own.”

“It would be nice if that were true,” said Jeremiah, whirling to face the priest. “But King Jehoiakim is somewhat irrelevant to the matter. Jehoiakim has sold out to the Pharaoh of Egypt. So, our only choice is, Egypt or Babylon? And God has chosen Babylon.”

It was then that the High Priest Pashhur made his appearance. The other priests had hastened him to the scene. Pashhur had that haughty look on his face that he must have spent years cultivating. It made me sick. I wanted my miniature lion to scratch his eyes out.

“So, it is the prophet Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, from the hills of Anathoth,” said the high priest.

“I am simply the messenger. The message comes from the Most High who, even according to Solomon who built this Temple, is too large to dwell in any structure made by human hands.”

“This same Solomon proclaimed that God dwelt in this Temple. This Temple is holy, and it is also invulnerable to any of the perils that humans might create. Solomon himself said you could, in fact, swear by the Temple.” Pashhur crossed his arms and stuck out his chin.

“Well, the Lord God of Hosts,” said Jeremiah, “has a different opinion. For as I stand before you today, know that the armies of Nebuchadnezzar will raid this city and take away all of the artifacts of the Temple of which you are so proud.”

Pashhur nodded at the Temple guards, who began striding in Jeremiah's direction. The guards arrived to grab him, but he shrugged them away. "I have not finished," he said. "There is another sin for which God will punish this city. And it is this. It is the way you have treated the poor and downtrodden."

Some of the richer businessmen in the crowd began to laugh. "The poor?" asked one. "Of what possible consequence can they be?"

"On the hem of your garments," Jeremiah proclaimed, "is the lifeblood of the innocent poor." Then he looked at me. *At me.* As if I were somehow guilty of the blood of the poor. As if he had seen me walk past them without even looking in their direction.

Then he turned his eyes back to the rest of the crowd. "Oh, yes, you are proud, are you not! You have grown great and rich, fat and sleek, but your wickedness knows no bounds! You do not do justice to the cause of the fatherless or defend the rights of the needy."

"Now hold on, there," said one of the businessmen. "We give them jobs. I'd say that's pretty helpful to them."

Jeremiah ignored them. "'Shall I not punish them for these things?' says the Lord. 'Shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?'" Then he shouted, just a little less loudly, "All of you, from priests on down. You don't have a clue about how to please God. The priests have invented complex rules for how to please God. But it's actually very simple. This is what God requires: 'Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.' That's what he told me. And he told me this also: 'To judge the cause of the poor and the needy: Is this not to know me?' saith the Lord."

Jeremiah sighed. "I tried to get God to change his mind," he said.

The crowd roared with laughter. The priests did not. Pashhur shouted, "Having a conversation with God? On His level, like a couple of friends chatting? This is blasphemy!"

"Blasphemy it may be," called out one man, "but it is a lot of fun to listen to."

"And, so, God said to me, *Run to and fro in the streets of Jerusalem. Look everywhere. See if you can find even one person who desires what is good, that I may pardon such a one*."

And then he looked straight at me. "Miriam." My hand went to my throat. I was suddenly sick. Saad put his arm around my shoulders but did not shield me. "Miriam, my friend. I know you are a godly woman, and one in whose heart there is goodwill for everyone." *Jeremiah, thanks a lot, but you are turning the attention of the people on me, and I know that you are about to say something really critical, something that perhaps you should have told me a long time ago in private. But back when we were still friends, you were not yet among the prophets.* "Have you ever visited your father's looms, or the places where the workers dye the fabrics?" I nodded my head, *No.* "Have you ever seen

the loom workers sweating, the bones of their malnourishment protruding from their bodies?" *No.* "Have you ever seen the pestilence that erupts on the hands of the workers who dye the fabrics with poisonous fluids?" *No.* "Well then. I suggest that you do *not* go and see them. That is, unless you are willing to renounce the riches of your household."

A guard came to me. "This man is insulting you. What should we do?"

"Please, do not harm him," I said. "He is an honest man. Too honest. Too honest for me, for you, for this city, for this kingdom."

"Oh, we won't harm him," said Pashhur. "We just want to see how much he is willing to *pay* for the right to insult the chief priest, and the chief citizens, and, were he here, the king, I would bet."

"Most certainly," said Jeremiah.

"Well, have you any money?" Pashhur asked Jeremiah.

"No," he answered simply.

"But your followers do, I'll bet."

Jeremiah said nothing.

"He has followers, doesn't he?" Pashhur looked at me. "You seem to know a thing or two about him. Well, does he?"

Jeremiah had told me that he did, and that all his physical needs were met. I knew him incapable of lying to me. But I had no direct evidence for it. So, I said, "I do not know."

"Well, since he cannot pay a fine, there is only one thing we can do." Pashhur nodded to his servants. Everyone started talking, wondering what was going to happen. The servants returned shortly with large wooden stocks, with three holes, into which Jeremiah's head and two arms could be placed. They sunk the stocks into a hole in the ground, led Jeremiah to it, and locked him in. His head faced the cheering crowd, his rear faced the Temple. Jeremiah was silent. As one moment followed another, the crowd began to disperse. Saad touched my shoulder and led me home.

"I was almost ready to listen to that man," Saad told me. "But when he turned his criticism upon you, such a godly woman..."

"Saad..."

"...as he himself admitted..."

"Saad," I said directly into his face. "He is right. Not one of us is really good in the eyes of the Lord."

"What has he done to you?" asked Saad. "He has reached into your very mind and twisted it, so that you, even you, feel shame."

I turned from him and lay upon the bed. When Saad saw that I did not want to talk to him, he decided to go hunting. *I'll bet he shoots the stork this time,* I thought. *And I don't care.*

When evening fell, and Saad returned, I took some bread and wine in a basket and started to leave.

"Where are you going?" asked Saad.

"I am taking this to Jeremiah," I answered. I was crying and I was angry.

"Either we both take it to him, or neither," said my husband. "It will be your decision, but first you listen to me. That man flung out your name into the cauldron of the guilty, even though you are innocent of wrongdoing."

"I don't know. Maybe I could do more to help the poor." I approached Saad. "Please, Saad, let me go. I must help him. He is my childhood friend."

"He *was*. Remember, I have tried to help him also. Starting with that time I left our food for him? Out at the marsh? I have done this, many times, since that day. But I will not have him drag your name through the filth."

"You must know," I said, "that Jeremiah is totally clueless about what he says. He can offend more people in one minute than you could in a lifetime."

"Look," my husband said, relaxing into compassion. "For what it's worth, I feel sorry for him. He might even be right. But we cannot be seen giving him aid. He speaks what the king considers to be treason."

"Well, the king is wrong," I said. "It is not treason."

"The king *defines* treason," Saad told me. "Jeremiah is going to be all right. He won't starve. They're going to let him go tomorrow, I heard. And as far as suffering the indignity and discomfort? I get the distinct impression that Jeremiah enjoys it."

Chapter 15

That was the last that I saw Jeremiah for the better part of a year.

It was a good year. Saad's business had been successful, and he brought me nice clothes, a few at a time. A sash, a scarf, only once a whole robe. Because the streets were filled with filth, I stopped wearing nice leather shoes when I was out, and wore sandals instead, except in the coldest part of the winter. I would leave the sandals at the door of our rooms, and sit at the desk that Saad got for me. When he came home, he left his sandals at the door also, and came into our room. He took a basin of water and a cloth, and washed my feet with the sweet soap, of which he had accumulated a fair supply. He kissed my feet. I would then do the same for him. Sometimes we started enjoying one another a little bit further up than the feet. Tiglath and his wife waited until we gave them a signal, such as I wonder what is for dinner tonight, then they would open the door and invite us to the little table in their room. While we ate, they washed our sandals and the floor of our room. In this way, we kept our feet clean, and we could forget about the filth of the world.

One day in late spring, I walked down the street in my new clothes, stepping around foul puddles in my leather shoes. I wore a fine veil, mainly to keep out the dust. I had done this many times before. I was obviously in the upper class, but the poor women did not take any particular notice of me. But now I noticed that the women looked directly into my eyes with a kind of resentment. What had caused this change?

I was soon to discover that it was Jeremiah. It was he who had turned the hearts of the poor against those of us who were even a little bit rich.

When I saw Jeremiah, he was on the street corner with his lute. His clothes hung in rags, and his hair had grown in long, wavy locks. It was clear that he had been living out with the other prophets, in a cave perhaps. But he appeared clean. I assumed that he washed himself with wild soapberries.

That afternoon, Jeremiah was singing. It was not like the song with which he had shamed me years before, the song about the vineyard, sweet and then ferocious. This song was bouncy, almost funny. The poor people who gathered admiringly around him were clapping.

This land is your land, this land is my land,
From the Negev Desert to the Plains of Megiddo.
From the Great Sea waters to the Sea of Arabah
God gave this land to you and me.

I could not help but smile as I watched from afar.

God did not give this land to the kings

Or to the priests or to the rich men
He gave it to all of us, to all us poor men,
And women, and children, you and me.

He kept playing his lute, as the poor women rushed their children up to him. He stopped strumming just long enough to rub the heads of the kids. I had never seen him smile so grandly.

They have the armies, they have the Temple guards,
They have the money hidden in flour pots
But the power is with the people
The people of God, you and me.

Money in flour pots. That was my father. The listeners raised a loud cheer. But the cheer did not last long.

And when the rains come the land turns green
And yields its fruit and grain and oil
But soon the rains will no longer come
And it's famine and drought for you and me.

And then he looked at me. *Why do you keep doing that, Jeremiah! Why can I never hide from your eyes?* I wanted to flee but was frozen to the spot. My veil hung open. Jeremiah sang quietly, occasionally strumming a chord.

And when the rains stop the trees will wither
No more will water flow through the Kidron
And where we once went to see God's presence
There'll be no rainbow for you and me.

Jeremiah put down his lute, and pointed at me. "Even you, Miriam, even you!"

I rushed back home as people were watching me and murmuring.

When Saad found me crying, he asked me what had happened, and would not let me get away with vague references about seeing Jeremiah in the city streets. What was he doing, what did he say, where is he, and so on. Saad quickly kissed my cheek, licking away one tear, his tongue lingering on the barely-visible scar from the animal, then headed out the door. I followed him at a distance. As I knew he would, he found Jeremiah right away.

"Jeremiah," he called out.

"Saad," the prophet answered.

"I've been very kind to you," yelled Saad.

"Oh, that's an understatement," said Jeremiah. "I probably owe my life to you. Although, if you had not kept me alive, perhaps God would have sent ravens to deliver food to me, as he did with Elijah. Who can know?"

"This time, Jeremiah, you have gone too far even for my immense patience."

"My friend, my good man..." began Jeremiah.

"We have to work this particular conflict out before we can act like friends," yelled Saad. People were watching. Jeremiah listened. "You called me a good man just now."

"I did."

"And my wife, your childhood friend, is a good woman."

"The best."

"And yet, not even an hour ago, you made her feel iniquitous, just like everybody else in Jerusalem."

"She is complicit, not iniquitous. That's not the same thing."

I wondered how many people knew what either of those words meant.

"That means I am complicit, also."

"Yes, it does."

"Jeremiah, if this is how you treat those of us who are receptive to your message, you will never convince those who oppose it."

"I never expected that I could."

"Say what you wish about me," Saad pointed at Jeremiah as he spoke. "But Miriam! Quit dragging her down into your quagmire of doom and decay." I was surprised that Saad, though quite literate, knew the word *quagmire*. I wanted him to stop yelling at Jeremiah. I felt embarrassed for this public display of hostility.

"Judge me," said Jeremiah, looking around at the small crowd. "Those of you who heard me speaking the name of Miriam. Judge me. Could you not see that I was speaking in sadness and not anger?" No one in the crowd said anything.

"That makes no difference to me," shouted Saad. Then he came closer to Jeremiah, and spoke as man to man, with a space between them to buffer the friendship. "Perhaps you do not realize how much she still cares about you. Your words can lift her up, or they can shatter her soul. You have chosen to do the latter. You have made tears streak her beautiful face..."

"That is what I intended."

"...her beautiful face, which has its natural beauty. She does not paint her face like the whores you love to denounce. But you have made her feel like one."

"That was not what I intended," said Jeremiah, looking around at people then back at Saad. "I intended to make her cry. She will fall into the hands of the Babylonians, like everyone else in this city. Her purity will be violated..."

"Enough!"

I nearly fainted as I imagined a Babylonian soldier—I didn't even know what they looked like—raping me.

"...and her nakedness will be exposed..."

"Jeremiah, I charge you to never speak to her again. Or about her. Her pure feelings of friendship for you were, and are, holy and very intense. I can feel it when I talk to her about you. You have violated that holy friendship."

Saad turned his back on Jeremiah and strode back toward our room. I scrambled to get there before he did, but he saw me entering the door to our stairwell ahead of him. When he entered our room, just behind me, I expected him to be angry with me. But he was not. He cupped me in his arms, lay me down on our bed, pulled away my robes, and baptized my chest with his tears.

It was later that evening, over dinner, that he told me he would not permit me to speak to Jeremiah again. I was ready to hear it. Were the last words Jeremiah would have for me be, "and her nakedness will be exposed"? I knew I would hear his words again—we all would—but I gradually accepted the fact that there would be no more words for me.

Another winter passed. It was early springtime. My father and mother and Saad and I were visiting Hilkiah and his wife in Anathoth. Nobody mentioned Jeremiah. I tried not to think about him, and I was doing a pretty good job of it. Until I wandered from the kitchen to the north porch, and suddenly remembered that time, years before, when Jeremiah was sitting by the pot and the north wind blew. I almost fainted as I relived those moments.

Years before, it was a nice spring day. The north wind was blowing clouds away. But this time, the north wind was bringing cold weather. The almond branch was beginning to bloom, just a few small flowers poked pinkly from behind their breastplates. Soon there were snowflakes swirling. They looked like stars, the way stars would probably appear if we could see them move during the course of the night or the course of the ages since creation or the ages into the future, as the wind blows round and round and as the waters flow to the sea. I knew that snowflakes were water, but I did not know where they came from, or why they were white, just as I did not know what the stars were. I did not even know if these were questions that men or women were allowed to ask. By nightfall, the largest drifts of snow that we had seen all winter had clogged the streets.

Chapter 16

One day the next autumn, the messengers came from the army of the Babylonians. We had watched helplessly from the city walls as one large regiment of soldiers approached from the north and camped just outside the city walls.

Word spread quickly through the city. Saad and I closed up shop and bolted the door quickly, like everyone else. There was nothing else we could do. Fortunately, we had a small stockpile of bread in our rooms, since no more could be had now. We even had a barrel of water in the kitchen. This would barely be enough for an extended siege, especially as my parents, and Hilkiah and his wife, were visiting us.

"Why weren't we warned?" I asked. "Surely King Jehoiakim must have known the Babylonians were coming."

"Oh, I'll bet he knew, all right," Saad answered. "But he was expecting his friends the Egyptians to come and save us at the last moment. But to the Egyptians, we are just a little rural country. They made a tactical decision to let the Babylonians have us. And here they are." King Jehoiakim had proclaimed himself both a man of war and of peace, both a man of the rich and of the poor, a diplomat and a patriot. And to him it had seemed most cost-effective to outsource the defense of our nation to Egypt.

Everyone hid in their houses when the Babylonian soldiers broke down the city gate and entered. They soon rounded up the Israelite soldiers who were in the city and took them out to their camp. Most of the soldiers fled to the countryside, where small platoons of Babylonians roamed and pillaged, but which they did not control. Yet. My father worried about his business, and Hilkiah fully expected to find the synagogue at Anathoth looted if and when he returned.

And then most of the Babylonian soldiers marched right back out of Jerusalem, with King Jehoiakim in shackles, and carrying a few wagonloads of gold, silver, and bronze from the Temple. They did not even take everything out of the Temple. They did not pillage the city. They did not rape, with one exception. They forced King Jehoiakim to watch as their general, Assur-Hamazi, stripped and raped Jehoiakim's favorite concubine, then beheaded her. I did not see this; I heard the distant screams, but could see only the quiet shade of the courtyard from my window.

Assur-Hamazi then called a meeting in the central square for everyone in the city. I went with my parents and with Hilkiah and his wife. Saad stood behind me, holding my shoulders tightly. The Babylonians had quickly built a wooden platform from which the commander could speak. On the stage with him was Jehoiakim's younger brother Mattaniah, whom Assur-Hamazi introduced under his new name, Zedekiah. And, astonishingly enough, the grim and gray Pen-sanazzar, whom I had hoped to never see again, was with them. He acted as interpreter.

"Hear, O people of Jerusalem," Pen-sanazzar interpreted the commander's words. "Today is your day of rejoicing. Now I know..." Assur-Hamazi chuckled in an avuncular

fashion. Pen-sanazzar did not try to chuckle. He continued, “it may seem hard for you to believe. But the troops of Babylon have, today, liberated you from the oppression of the Egyptian Pharaoh.”

“I didn’t notice much oppression from Egypt,” my father said quietly to us. “From King Jehoiakim, yes. I’m almost glad he’s gone. But Egypt was pretty irrelevant to my business and, as far as I can see, to everyone’s lives in the whole Kingdom of Judah.”

“Today is the beginning of your prosperity,” said the commander.

“He has conquered us, and all of our wealth is his,” whispered Saad. “He knows it, and he knows we know it. What is the point of this ridiculous speech?”

Assur-Hamazi continued. “It is a new world, and Babylon is at the forefront of it. What I am talking about is efficiency.” This was a word the translator had a little trouble with, but we got the idea as the commander continued to explain himself. “Gone are the days when every little place makes every little thing. In the future—starting now—each place will specialize in something. Damascus already specializes in metals. There is no need for you to have craftsmen who work with metals. Sidon already specializes in woodworking. There is no need for you to have craftsmen who work with wood. And Nippur specializes in fabrics. There is no need…”

“I already knew my business was at an end,” said my father. “I don’t need to hear this man make it sound like it is in my best interests.”

“It sounds as if he is going to take all of our skilled craftsmen to Babylon,” said Hilkiah.

“And,” continued the commander, “you have a really top-heavy religious administration.”

“I knew this was coming,” said Hilkiah.

Assur-Hamazi continued, “Your Temple was just, shall we say, too cluttered. We have cleaned it out a bit. You had too many priests. And you have too many little rural synagogues. In the new government, you will have a chance, if you choose, to engage in your own religious practices. The official policy of our great king Nebuchadnezzar is to not interfere with the reasonable practice of religion within our…” The translator struggled with this a little. “…within our co-prosperity sphere. Under our new administration, you will not be needing all of the little synagogues.”

“Such as the one at Anathoth,” whispered Hilkiah. “I wonder to what use they will put our little synagogue.”

“They might make it into a whorehouse,” said Ahaz. We all knew that, even though no women were raped just now, every nubile unmarried woman in Judah would be expected to service one of the soldiers. The soldiers would have had their way with the married women, also, but they did not want the inconvenience of dealing with vengeful husbands. I could easily imagine what Saad would do if any of the soldiers touched me. Saad would lose his life, but not before taking several Babylonian men with him into Sheol.

"You will still be permitted to have your three annual festivals at the Great Temple." Assur-Hamazi stopped, expecting to hear the crowd cheer. Hearing nothing, he continued.

"Moreover, from our viewpoint," said Assur-Hamazi, "peace is, no two ways about it, more profitable than war. Why should we want to destroy you? You will work for us, and share in our prosperity."

"Yes," muttered Hilkiah. "Slaves share in the prosperity of the masters. When we were slaves in Egypt, we had plenty to eat. We had prosperity back then, all right."

"And there's more," continued the commander. "You Israelites are our brothers and sisters. Your language is a dialect of ours. Why, many of your legends even come from ours. Your story of Noah came from our legend of Gilgamesh. Even your creation stories came from our *Enuma Elish*. Much of your scripture is derived from ours. Your founder, Abraham, came from Ur of the Chaldees, which we have absorbed into our Co-Prosperity Sphere. Many of his descendants were taken—against their will, but to their benefit—to Assyria, which we have also absorbed. Now Abraham's remaining descendants—you—have been brought into our circle of peace.

"Yes, peace! Peace! Even your word for it is almost the same as ours. Your word is *shalom*; ours is *salaamu*. Our unity was predestined by the gods of heaven!

"Therefore, this day, I bid you to recognize the benefits, to you as individual persons, of our unity. Some may call it conquest; but we should eradicate this term as quickly and completely as possible.

"And, with this in mind, I would like to introduce your new king, Zedekiah."

Mattaniah, I mean Zedekiah, stepped to the front. He spoke so quietly that only the people in the front understood him. Whispers came back to us that he was ready to introduce the new manager of the kingdom. Manager? A manager is someone who *gets things done*, said the whispers. One who answers to the king, who answers to Babylon, but who has skills and powers that Zedekiah does not have. A manager, we assumed, who ran the economy, for a fee.

The king stepped back. Onto the stage stepped the bright-haired Trom-panazzar, resplendent in a red robe that shone with gold thread. Trom-panazzar waved to the crowd, which murmured rather than cheered. Most of them did not know him.

"He wanted to take my business," whispered Saad. "Well, now, he will be so busy taking everybody's business that he will have no time to pay any attention to me. For that, at least, we can be thankful."

Trom-panazzar's voice was even louder than that of Assur-Hamazi. "Welcome to the first day of our new prosperity." His gray brother translated his words back to the commander, who nodded in approval. "That's what it's going to be, you can take my word for it. Prosperity. I have heard that one of your prophets said..." He waited for murmurs of disapproval. Hearing nothing, he continued. "your fields would be destroyed and sown with salt."

"Jeremiah said that," I whispered.

"That," said Trom-panazzar, "sounds like a lot of work, if you ask me. Who would want to do that? And who would profit from it? Not me, let me tell you.

He continued. "I believe I am correctly representing the opinion of King Zedekiah when I say that the administration of his brother, our recently departed king, was nearly insufferable. It was like living in Sheol. To see him cling to Egypt was frankly embarrassing. Shameful." He was trying to make us laugh. "Egypt? Was he kidding? What has Egypt got going for it, anyway? Pyramids. Columns. Tombs. Mummies. Lots of mummies. More mummies than you could shake a papyrus reed at! Right. Mummies of pharaohs, and their wives, and their pets, and even ibises and crocodiles. What were they thinking? What kind of an economy, my fellow citizens of the Babylonian co-prosperity sphere, could be based on mummies? They even made mummies of those little miniature lions. Egypt has only its history to ride upon. The future is with Babylon.

"And our role, here in Judah," continued Trom-panazzar, "is agriculture. Ah, this may surprise you. The Land Between the Rivers, you say, is the best agricultural land in the world."

"Except for Egypt," said Hilkiah.

"But Mesopotamia, some time ago, started to experience a few problems with their grain crops. In recent centuries, their wheat productivity has fallen. Nobody knows why. It seems to be connected with the layers of salt that are beginning to accumulate on their irrigated land. Some of you don't even know what irrigation is. Well, that's how far ahead of us the Babylonians are in agriculture. But their wheat production has declined even in the places where no salt can be seen. And we do not know where the salt came from. Did the Assyrians put it there before they retreated? We can only guess. The Babylonians can still raise plenty of barley. Now, I have nothing against barley. Makes good stew. And good *sekhar*. But they need bread. And that means wheat. Friends, we can grow wheat right here in Judah. Our fields are on gently sloping hills, nourished by rain. We do not need irrigation. Can we produce wheat? We can produce so much wheat…"

"For the Babylonians," said Hilkiah.

"…that there is plenty for both us and the Babylonians. What Damascus is to metal, and Sidon is to wood, we will be for grain. We will be the new Damascus of wheat. Say it with me! The Damascus of wheat! The Damascus of wheat! Right." A couple of people had mumbled with him. "And, our hills our second to none in the production of fine grapes for wine. The vines that are already there, and new ones to be planted, will produce famous wines, famous all over the place. It will have a ready market in the cities between the rivers. The people there will line up for it. It will make us rich."

"It will make the Babylonians rich," said my father.

"It will make Trom-panazzar rich," added Saad.

Trom-panazzar was preparing to launch into the next phase of his speech when Assur-Hamazi thanked him and asked him to sit down.

Pen-sanazzar then announced, “And we have a word from somebody you all know. I give you now the Prophet Jeremiah.”

I gasped loudly enough that everyone around me heard it. But in the recent social chaos, few people knew who I was and nobody knew my connection, now years ago, with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah leapt onto the platform from the crowd at its base. The people at the back of the crowd, mostly poor, began to murmur. Jeremiah turned and began to speak. “O inhabitants of Jerusalem, hear the word of the Lord this day. Remember that it was out of Egypt that the Lord God led us from captivity.” When the translator had told Assur-Hamazi these words, the commander began to clap, and the crowd followed him. Even King Zedekiah smiled grandly. Trom-panazzar scowled but said nothing. “And then the Lord spoke unto Moses and gave him commandments and instructions…”

Pen-sanazzar touched Jeremiah on the shoulder. “The commander asks that you stick to the subject.” The translator remained at Jeremiah’s side.

“Very well. The Lord has given this city into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and he has conquered us...”

“I think the prophet meant that you have joined the co-prosperity sphere…” interjected Pen-sanazzar.

“...and there is no point in resisting it. So, go unto Babylon…”

All the people now began to murmur. Only now did they begin to realize that most of the men and their families, except for farm workers, would go into exile. Assur-Hamazi stood up and, through Pen-sanazzar, said, “The prophet has raised an important point. There will be plenty to do for those of you who want to stay here and raise wheat and grapes. But there will not be enough work for all of you. There will be many of you who will choose, for your own prosperity, to relocate to Babylon.”

What! This is outrageous! Leave our home? Leave the Lord’s land? The people shouted all of these things at once.

Jeremiah continued, and the people began to listen to him. “Go unto Babylon. Build homes there. Plant fields there. Establish cities there. Work for your own prosperity…” He looked around into the eyes of all his listeners. “And also work for the prosperity of the Babylonians.”

The people became very angry at Jeremiah, not the least his followers.

One man near the front of the crowd turned and yelled to those behind him, “Jeremiah predicted that the Babylonians would come and conquer us. But what I want to know is this. How did he know? Maybe...” he spoke into the hisses of the crowd. “Maybe he was somehow involved in the arrival of the Babylonians. I’ll bet he had something to do with it. Now Jeremiah can stand before us and say, *I told you so.* This is supposed to make us respect him?”

But Assur-Hamazi stood up and gestured his arms in the air to silence the people. Pen-sanazzar announced, “Thank you, Jeremiah, for confirming the commander’s explanation of the co-prosperity sphere. In upcoming days, the army will be visiting each of your families to register you, either to stay in Jerusalem and be farmers or to go to Babylon. These proceedings are closed.”

Saad led me back toward our Hilkiah’s house. After we shared dinner, we had an important meeting to discuss our futures. For we had, as a group, no future.

“We must go,” said Hilkiah. His wife nodded. “Perhaps there will be some value of us priests in keeping the scriptures alive in the hearts of the exiles.” This was the first time anyone within my hearing had used the word *exiles.* I realized that it made a lot more sense than *co-prosperity sphere.* “Imagine, Saad. Imagine, Ahaz. Imagine, Miriam. Jeremiah appears to have been right after all. That’s what I get for being embarrassed of him.”

“I am too old to make the journey,” said my father.

“You are too old to be a farm laborer,” said Saad.

“We will take care of you and your wife on the journey,” said Hilkiah. “You really have no choice but to come.”

“Perhaps,” said my father, “they will not take *all* skilled craftsmen, or force *all* who remain here to be farm slaves. They sent only a small army. There is only so much that they can do.”

I was glad to hear this. I really, really did not want to go to Babylon, especially as we had just begun to build a business, a life, in Jerusalem. But I could not imagine Saad—or myself—as farm laborers. We would raise wheat and vegetables that we would not be allowed to eat, and raise cows that would be herded up to the land between the rivers.

“They could always send more soldiers,” said Hilkiah.

“Now you are sounding like your son,” said Ahaz. Then he said, “I should not have said that. I mourn for your son even yet. And I think we all know that the invasion is not at an end. I didn’t need to say it.”

Saad shifted uncomfortably and announced something he had not even told me. “I have been summoned to a meeting with the king,” he said.

“What could it possibly be?” said my father, with a mixture of elation and fear.

“I do not know,” answered my husband. “I suspect it has something to do with my knowledge of the countryside.”

“So, perhaps you will be staying here after all? Is this perhaps to be where you raise our grandchildren?” asked my father.

“I do not know,” answered my husband.

“Jeremiah says that there is no point in having children. They will either just be farm workers or will be carried away into captivity into the land of exile.” I spoke without lifting my eyes.

"And when did you hear him say this?" demanded my husband.

"He's been saying it for years," I answered.

Assur-Hamazi supervised the work of his soldiers as they rounded up the best of our craftsmen. "We are taking only a few," he said, but he always took more than a few, and then more. And the same thing happened in every little town around Jerusalem, as the small Babylonian army went from one to the next.

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Only one town—Nob, a little town up in the mountains outside Jerusalem—decided to put up a resistance. The Babylonian soldiers simply camped out and besieged the town. Soon a couple of platoons of reinforcements arrived, and they battered down the gate. We all heard about the complete slaughter and rapine that followed. It was the only one of our towns that, at this time, suffered such a fate, and none of the others dared to take a similar chance.

When the Babylonian soldiers left, they led the exiles from Jerusalem and the surrounding cities slowly northward. Only a few of the people remained behind. Most of these served as farm workers. The autumn harvest had barely begun, so the Babylonians had their choice of food. Fortunately, there was more than they could transport, and they left much of it behind. Under guard. Hilkiah and his wife packed their few belongings—he had a lot of scrolls, but not as many as I. My father and mother had even less to take. Saad and I watched the trudging exiles from the top of the north wall of the city. We were not sure which ones were my parents. We did not want to know, since I knew we would never see them again.

"And now all I have is you," I told him, and buried my face into his shoulder.

Chapter 17

"Why did you bring *her*?" the king's administrative assistant, a little man named Kwashiorkor, asked Saad. He looked harshly at me.

"Because," Saad answered him, "she is my scribe. You might have heard of her."

"I have heard of her. A woman scholar. Just imagine. Well, we already have a scribe."

"She is also my partner. Whatever it is you wish me to do, I suspect that she may play an important role in helping me."

"A woman? In the king's council meeting?" Kwashiorkor demanded.

"The king can ask me to leave if he chooses. I do not think you will be making that choice for him," I said. Only later did I realize that by this statement I had earned Kwashiorkor's eternal hatred. Not that it made any difference.

"Ooh, there's going to be a fight," said a man who was watching us. He had a big grin. I recognized O-biden-elech. Obi's robe was red and green, and he wore tattered scarves of different colors. "Maybe she's going to slap him!" said Obi. Kwashiorkor continued to look coldly at me while I watched Obi, who so far had managed to keep his job as the court jester. Obi lifted up his gourd and wood doll. "Your Majesty," he said to the doll, "what do you think?" The jester answered his own question in a falsetto voice, "Ooh, it would be so much fun to see them fight!" Then the jester bowed to his own doll and said, in his own voice, "Yes, Your Majesty!" He looked over at Saad and me. "Good to see you again, old friends."

The army and exiles had been gone only one day. Without preliminaries, after entering, the king said, "That public session with the Babylonian commander Assur-Hamazi was an unmitigated disaster."

"But Trom-panazzar's speech was really inspiring, Your Majesty," said Kwashiorkor.

"It made me proud to be a citizen of Jerusalem," said the wooden doll in Obi's falsetto voice.

"It was a bunch of shit," King Zedekiah said. "I told him to say those things just to please the Babylonians. I'm pretty good at making shit up," he yelled. "I had things all lined up. The Babylonians were going to leave, taking a few things from the Temple, and a few captives, mostly pretty women. Leaving us with the ugly ones." I imagined that he shot a glance at me. I knew I was not ugly, even though my first wrinkles had begun to show. No more oil for my skin, after all. "But I thought Assur-Hamazi was going to leave almost all of the men, with my promise to send them along later. Those men would have formed my army." He looked around at us. "Then Jeremiah had to get up and talk. Where did he come from, anyway? How did they know about him?"

"How dare Jeremiah get up before the people and agree with me!" said the doll.

The king ignored his jester. “Jeremiah convinced some of our best men to leave. Just about the only ones who stayed were the ones I was able to contact personally. Well, that’s all sewerage under the bridge. We have a few men left, maybe…”

“Eight hundred and fifty, Your Majesty,” said Benjamin, the commander of what had once been our army.

“Well, whatever we have, that is what we will use. They are our army,” said the king.

An old man spoke up. “As soon as the Babylonians learn that we have revolted, their army will turn back around and come for us, Your Majesty.”

“And we will be ready,” said the king.

“With just eight hundred and fifty warriors?” asked the old man, forgetting to say *Your Majesty.*

“Yes,” said the king. “We might yet get reinforcements from Egypt.”

“When have *they* ever let us down?” asked the doll.

The king continued. “Forget all the crap Trom-panazzar said about the Egyptian economy. Well, except for the mummy part. But still. The Nile floods every year and brings new life to their fields. They have been raising wheat for thousands of years and there is no end in sight to their prosperity.

“And even if we don’t get any reinforcements from Egypt,” continued the king, “we will still be ready. When the Babylonians turn around to face our army, they will face…nothing. Because our army will be in the hills, from whence we will raid them and strike terror into their hearts.”

“Their ordered ranks will be of no use to them then,” said the jester.

“Thank you,” said the king.

“But, Your Majesty, their warriors will simply chase ours back into the hills,” said another advisor. “That’s not going to help Jerusalem, or any other city.”

“We know the hills. They do not,” smiled the king.

“We do?” asked the advisor, who added, “Your Majesty.”

The king looked over at Saad. “He does,” said the king.

All eyes followed his. And soon they were on me when Saad told them, “And my wife knows the countryside pretty well also, though more locally than I, mostly around Anathoth.”

Benjamin looked a little bit perplexed. “What kind of leader could a woman be? Your Majesty, Deborah she is not,” referring to a war heroine from the days of the Judges.

“All I have to do is show you the way,” I said, not lifting my eyes.

“And that’s really all I need to do, also,” said my husband.

“So, are we ready?” asked the king.

“Armies must be provisioned, Your Majesty,” said the commander. “Food, uniforms…”

"As for food," my husband said, "the Babylonians took most of it, Your Majesty."

"Is there no food out in the mountains?" asked the king.

"Well," said my husband, "now is the season of elah nuts out in the woods."

"And acorns," said the king.

"Acorns!" said the doll. "My favorite! I could eat those things all day. And the hills are full of them!"

"If Your Majesty please," Saad responded, "have you ever tried eating an acorn? You can make them palatable by pouring hot water through the flour made from them, but the Babylonians would see our clouds of smoke coming from the mountains if we boil the water. At best, elah nuts can only be a supplementary food. I fear that there are not quite enough elah nuts even for such a small army…"

"An army of squirrels fed on acorns and elah nuts!" said the doll. "How can the Babylonians stand up against an army of squirrels? The squirrels can run up inside the soldier's uniforms and start gnawing away…"

"We will have to make do with what we've got," said the king. "We can always pilfer some of the grain before it gets shipped off to Babylon."

"They grind it in Babylon," Saad informed him. "You intend to feed an army on raw grains?"

"We only have eight hundred fifty soldiers," said the king. "We don't need much."

"And as for uniforms?" continued Kwashiorkor. "The Babylonians have taken all the fine bright fabrics, leaving us only with dirty, dingy materials." This confirmed my fear that my father's inventory had been ransacked.

"Which is perfect for hiding our troops up in the hills," said the king.

What I said next was not very wise. "Your Majesty, Jeremiah the prophet knows the countryside better than any of us."

The king exploded in anger. "Jeremiah! Jeremiah! He is a traitor! He would not guide our troops. He would run off and join the Babylonians!"

"Then, why didn't he?" I asked. "Your Majesty."

"Because," the king yelled, "we had him in custody. This brings us most nicely to the point. Guards, bring him in!"

The guards pushed Jeremiah into the chamber. He stood until the guards pushed him into a kneeling position. He was dirty and chained. He looked up, right at me, but made no sign of recognition. Maybe his mind had at last broken, or else he already knew I would be here, I told myself.

"Behold, the prophet of the Lord, with mud on his feet!" said the doll.

"Well, Jeremiah," said the king. "Prophet of the Lord with mud on his feet. Still making things inconvenient for us. For the priests, the wealthy men, and any king who happens to be on the throne."

"I simply speak the words of God," said Jeremiah. "I was under the impression that, for once, the king was in agreement with them." The guard beat Jeremiah on the shoulder with the butt of a spear. "Your Majesty," Jeremiah added.

"You spoke words that were intended only for your own profit," said the king.

"How could Jeremiah possibly profit from his words?" I asked in surprise. Everyone glared at me, including my husband. "Your majesty," I added, with a hasty little bow from my sitting position. "Profit? He is destitute."

"And as for you, Jeremiah," said the king, turning his attention from me, "the facts do not look so good for you. Your father is already on his way to Babylon. Exile? Yes, technically, but not slavery. No. Nebuchadnezzar is much too wise for that. He will give the exiles land, seeds, tools, livestock, and tell them to raise food for themselves. These exiles, once they arrive, will divide up the best land.

"Which means," continued the king, "that if, as you predict, the remaining Children of Israel get driven to Babylon, they will have to go into debt to purchase their land, their seeds, their livestock, their tools from people such as Jeremiah's father who will already be there. At whatever price he might require of them."

"Welcome to Babylon! My father has such a deal for you!" said the jester.

The king continued. "The exiles—oh, doesn't that word make them sound so pitiable—will have done as you say, Jeremiah. They will have prospered, and when their relatives, such as yourself, arrive in due time, *you* will be the new upper class of 'exilic' society. The rest of us, not at all. Your message was motivated not by God but by gold."

The jester suddenly became serious and spoke in his own voice. "Your Majesty, that was a good one." The doll bowed to the king.

"On the other hand," continued the king, "maybe it is for the better. The ones who are on their way to Babylon are the ones who would have been most likely to be traitors to me now. Eight hundred and fifty *trustworthy* men remain."

"Your Majesty," began Jeremiah. "The rebellion you propose is utter foolishness. The Babylonians will smite every one of you. You, your family, your commanders and soldiers. All who help you in this venture." He looked at me, then continued. "You cannot imagine the evil that is to befall you." I felt that Jeremiah had just foretold my husband's death and perhaps my own.

"So, I take it, Jeremiah, that when you go back to preaching among the people, you will not ask them to support me?" The king crossed his arms and stared.

"You are a fool," said Jeremiah.

"Enough!" the king exploded. "I am going to deal with this man once, for all."

"Ooh! Ooh! Off with his head! Off with his head!" said the jester.

"Would somebody tell our court jester that his services have been quite enough for today?" demanded the king.

"I'll tell him," said the doll, which turned toward Obi. "Okay, you shit-head, get out of here." Obi then said in his own voice, "Yes, Your Majesty." He bowed to the doll

and slipped out of the room. And as he left, I saw an obscure figure from the back of the room leave with him. It was Oba. The shadows had hidden his bright clothes.

"You can kill me," said Jeremiah with perfect equanimity, "but you would be shedding innocent blood, with no appreciable difference in the outcome. God will avenge my death, but will also avenge your idolatry. Not that it matters. You can only be destroyed once."

"I can make you wish you were dead," said the king.

"I already bemoan the day I was born," said Jeremiah. "But I must tell you. The Babylonians will come against you and lay siege to this city. No matter what you do or do not do. At the same time, the Lord himself will be fighting on their side. A great drought will fall upon this land during the siege."

Jeremiah raised his arms as far as his shackles would allow, and began another one of his oratorical poems.

Judah mourns, and her gates languish;
Her people lament on the ground,
And the cry of Jerusalem goes up.
Her nobles send their servants for water;
They come to the cisterns; they find no water.
They return with their vessels empty;
They are ashamed and confounded and cover their heads.
Because of the ground which is dismayed,
Because there is no rain on the land,
The farmers are ashamed; they cover their heads.
Even the hind in the field forsakes her newborn calf
Because there is no grass.
The wild donkeys stand on the bare heights;
They pant for air like jackals
Their eyes fail, because there is no herbage.

This was some of Jeremiah's best poetry. I later wrote it down as best I remembered it.

The king was growing impatient. He was about to stop Jeremiah, when Jeremiah came to his brief point.

"The Lord will send a drought, and a great heat wave, upon the Kingdom of Judah, in addition to the Babylonian troops who will besiege us," Jeremiah finished. "The heat wave will be so strong that our people will hardly be able to breathe. And as you are starving, you will eat your own dead."

"You are wrong, Jeremiah," exclaimed the king. "We will rout the Babylonians before they can form a siege." The king forgot for the moment that he was king and had no obligation to explain things to Jeremiah.

"If your majesty will remember," I spoke up, still without raising my eyes, "when Hananiah the prophet told your brother the king exactly what he wanted to hear, and claimed that Jeremiah spoke lies, it turned out that Jeremiah was the one who was right." My father had told me all about it. "Your Majesty needs an honest prophet, so that you have reliable information upon which to base your plans."

"And his advice," said the king, "is simply to surrender."

"You already have, once," I said. My husband poked me. "Your Majesty."

"So, Hananiah spoke his words for personal gain. And Jeremiah seems to be doing the same, though with different words. Hananiah? Jeremiah? Both spoke or speak for personal gain. Well, so much for prophets," said the king. "Why have any of us bothered listening to any of them?

"With that, I am going to draw this meeting to a close. I am eager to hear advice from the wisest man I know, a man who gets things done. My manager."

Trom-panazzar entered and stood beside the king without bowing and waited for the rest of us to leave.

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Saad did not tell me what he was going to do. But I knew that the king had planned something, against Saad's best advice, against the advice of the wood-and-gourd puppet, against everyone's advice who dared to have their own opinion. And I knew Saad was sworn to secrecy.

Usually, when Saad got up in the morning, he would quietly slip out of bed and allow me to slumber sweetly. But today he lifted me out of bed and was holding me up in the air before I knew what was going on. I helped him pull off my only garment. Whenever and wherever he grasped me, I pressed myself against him. Whatever we had ever done together in bed was concatenated into a few minutes. He held me up in the air above our bed, brought me down upon him. He grasped my tiny clusters of dates, and I fell over on him as we reached the pinnacle of excitement. And then he got out the bottle of expensive perfumed oil that we had kept for a special occasion, and worshipfully anointed every part of me, first with his fingers, then with his lips. He then left, glancing over his shoulder at me sadly. I had not yet become pregnant. I was relieved, because I would not be able to face a future of suffering if I also was pregnant or had an infant, especially if this was, as I feared, the last time I would ever see Saad.

Throughout the day, I was told, Saad helped the soldiers prepare and plan. They did so in small groups, in places out of sight of the Babylonian soldiers. He spent that night in an old overgrown garden, behind a latticed window in the gate, inside of a five-

sided wall, with some of the soldiers. I went to see him, but the soldiers would not admit me to the enclosure. They did, however, carry my message, a piece of parchment that said simply, *I await your return with eagerness. Signed, your wild doe upon the mountains.*

Saad did not come home because that night he led the small group of soldiers from the garden to an old gate in the city wall. The gate could barely open. No Babylonian guards saw the small groups of soldiers amass there from other secret locations within the city. The king awaited them.

"We have such a clever plan," he said quietly to the few who could hear him, as it was reported to me later. "They will never find us here, where we will escape into the mountains. And from there we can lead terrorist raids on the Babylonians. Though few in number, we will create fear in their hearts, as Gideon did with his small army. We will have the advantage, and can keep attacking them until we have overcome them."

"Who will lead us on these dark trails, Your Majesty?" asked one commander of a small unit.

"None other than Saad of Bashan, the great hunter," said the king.

"Won't the Babylonians just follow us back into the mountains, Your Majesty?" asked another commander.

"Saad will show us where to hide," said the king.

"Whose idea was this operation, Your Majesty?" asked a third.

"My manager, Trom-panazzar," answered the king.

"But, Your Majesty," said the first commander. "Trom-panazzar has no military experience. Why are you taking his advice?"

"At least," said the king, "he was willing to step up and propose something we could do. And he has provided us with material support."

"He gave it to us, Your Majesty?" asked the second commander.

"He very generously advanced credit to us," said the king. "We can amply repay him when our prosperity returns."

"But, Your Majesty, wasn't he the one who told us we should join the—what did he call it?—co-prosperity sphere?" asked the third. This is the man who would later tell me what happened.

"This discussion is at an end," said the king. "Dawn approaches. The die is cast. We move."

The gate was so rusty, and opened so little, that each soldier had to painfully scrape through it. On the trail through the woods, Saad knew every boulder and pitfall in the almost complete darkness before the first glimmer of dawn. He would tell the commanders, and they would pass the word on to the soldiers, whenever there was an obstacle. By dawn, Saad was leading the soldiers of Judah through little vales parallel to the Babylon Road. By midday, they could look down upon the walls of Jerusalem and see the Babylonian army, terrifying but not large, camped outside the city.

"See this small group of enemy soldiers? Now that we get a good look at them, they are not a very formidable force." The king waved his arms in excitement.

"Your Majesty, it would be best for you to keep low. Even at this distance, the Babylonians might see you." Saad spoke gently.

"Very well," said the king, sitting down next to Saad.

"Furthermore, Your Majesty, you must realize that most of the Babylonian soldiers are actually inside of the city, sleeping in what was once our houses."

"Yours also, I take it?"

"No, Your Majesty. They think I am still there, and they know to leave my wife alone."

"Well, Saad, just how many Babylonian soldiers do you think are inside of Jerusalem?"

"At least twice as many as are outside, and twice as many as we have, Your Majesty." He looked at the king, who sat rigidly, with a terrified look on his face. "You must have known this, of course. Didn't Trom-panazzar tell you?"

The king could barely speak. "Yes, of course," he whispered.

"Now is the time, Your Majesty, to tell me what you plan to do. Exactly where do you plan to attack?"

"The Keyhole, of course," the king said.

"The Keyhole, Your Majesty?"

"Why, yes, Saad. Don't you know it?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. That's it right over there." He pointed to two cliffs facing one another across a path. The path was only wide enough for one person to pass at a time, and the cliffs barely six cubits high. "How do you plan to engage the enemy there?"

"Well," said the king, "we will actually cause a skirmish on the edge of their encampment, and then they will follow us down the trail. When they pass through The Keyhole, our soldiers will be waiting to attack them."

"Your Majesty, please help me to understand this. You think the Babylonians will pass through the Keyhole one at a time, and we can kill them that way."

"That's the way it's supposed to work, isn't it, Saad?"

"Who gave you advice for this strategy, Your Majesty?"

"Trom-panazzar, of course."

"And you think that hundreds of Babylonian soldiers will just keep going through that narrow pass, one at a time, while we keep killing them?"

"Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty, the Babylonians will quickly figure it out, and simply go over the hill to either side, and chase—or slaughter—us."

"I have it on good authority..."

"Trom-panazzar's, I take it."

"Yes. The Keyhole is a famous spot for ambush."

"Of individual travelers by robbers, Your Majesty, not of an army."

"Has it ever been tried, Saad?"

"No, it has not, Your Majesty."

"Well, then, there it is," said the king, rising to find a place to take a nap. "We do not know that it will not work."

By late afternoon, the king's soldiers had passed through The Keyhole and amassed at the edge of the forest. The Babylonian troops were in sight, but not very many of them.

"We attack at sunset," said the king, "when the soldiers start drinking their wine."

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"And that is exactly what they did, my lady," the third commander told me the next evening. "Our commanders knew that the operation would not work, but even they were surprised when the Babylonians looked up at them without surprise and did not move. A few Babylonian guards shot a few of the king's leading soldiers. But then we all stopped, hearing a massive howling behind us. At least a thousand Babylonian soldiers were waiting for us, hiding amidst the myrrh trees and frankincense bushes outside of the margin of the forest, and came up behind us. The slaughter was unbelievable, my lady. The king's best soldiers were in front, and the Babylonians easily dispatched the rear soldiers.

"King Zedekiah," the commander, now a mere messenger, continued, "our king, brave man that he was, turned his ugly butt and ran as fast as he could along the trails back toward Jerusalem, leaving his army behind. About a hundred soldiers ran with him. The king tripped over every boulder and root as he ran, before climbing through the old gate. He could barely fit his fat body through it.

"I am sure the Babylonian soldiers could have killed him, but instead they decided to let him enter the city, followed by seventy-four soldiers. They knew that Zedekiah would have to surrender or die.

"Like the rest of us," concluded the commander.

I was in shock. I felt that it was not my voice that spoke. "Then Saad is also among the dead."

"Oh, no, my lady," he told me. "The Babylonian general—you remember Assur-Hamazi? He came back—knew that your husband knew the landscape. He offered to employ your husband as his own guide. Saad simply looked at the ground and would not answer. He bowed his neck as if he expected it to be struck by Assur-Hamazi's sword at any time. But then Assur-Hamazi said that there was plenty of time for Saad to make his decision. The last I saw your husband, my lady, he was in chains in among the prisoners of war."

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Chapter 18

Just as Jeremiah had predicted, another force of Babylonian troops marched down from the north toward Jerusalem. We watched them from the walls. It was like watching the tide rise. They engulfed everything around them, like a plague of locusts. There was no hope for us. And also as Jeremiah had predicted, a brutal drought set in. It was not obvious at first, but when the winter rains did not come, we knew what was going to happen. In addition to the lack of rain, a strong hot wind from the south dried up all the soil and withered the leaves on the trees, except for the oaks, whose thick leaves die without withering.

Zedekiah was still king. Nobody obeyed him, because we were all starving and thirsty. He was delusional. He called a public meeting one day, which I attended out of curiosity. He told his few remaining able-bodied servants to construct a tower of rickety boards, on the top of which was a cauldron. He had the servants light a big fire in the cauldron. He claimed that the fire would cause rain to form. The fire burned for a day and a night, during which time the hot south wind only became stronger and hotter.

The next morning, I heard the sound of a bell from that part of the city. A bell? I ran to see that the cauldron had fallen from its tower and cracked into metallic fragments. The buildings in that part of town caught fire. I knew it would spread, so I ran back to the chamber where I would never again embrace Saad. I grabbed only the most precious parchments, the Song and the Qoheleth, and stuffed them in a bag. I found my notes about Jeremiah, and took those as well. Then I took blank parchments, pens, and my little bottle of very fine ink, made from round galls that grow on oak trees. I took a few other items, then others. Soon the bag was so stuffed I could barely drag it. By the time I got outside the house, all of the nearby houses were burning. There was no food in my bag because there was no food in my house for me to take.

As I surveyed the smoking, tottering walls, I realized there was no place else for me to go but to join the prophets. Actually, they came for me. Four men hailed me and identified themselves as followers of Jeremiah. I was too tired to even answer them. Two men carried my bag, and two others supported me under the arms and helped me walk. They brought me to Jeremiah. The prophets were all staying in an abandoned building in the city, which could not burn because it already had. Jeremiah seemed unsurprised to see me.

“Just in time,” he said.

“Is that all you can say?” I croaked.

“I need a scribe. Baruch was my scribe, but he is one of the exiles heading toward Babylon. What do you have to write with?”

I just stared at him. Would he just pretend that we could re-start our friendship as if nothing had happened?

"Miriam," he said, "I know that the last thing you would part with is pen, ink, and paper. So, what do you have?"

I cleared my throat. I realized I had not spoken to anyone for a while. "I have some scriptures from the priestly library..."

"They won't do us much good right now. Don't worry, the scriptures won't be lost. Hilkiah took them with him. And?"

"Blank parchments."

"Good! They must be the last ones in Jerusalem."

"A quill."

"Just one?"

"Just one good one," I said. It was a hawk feather with its shaft trimmed very sharp. "But I have a half dozen reed pens."

"And ink, I suppose."

"Yes, Jeremiah."

"Well, let us begin," he said. "I have had this poem in my mind for a while, but could not write it down. Are you ready?"

He began to dictate, *How lonely sits the city that was once so full of people…* It was a long, very long, poem of laments. He did not dictate it to me all at once.

We were starving. The Brook Kidron was thick and muddy. We could drink the water only because we filtered it through linen loincloths. I assumed the cloths had never been worn, but I did not ask. I wondered if they had been made on my father's looms. Jeremiah and I sat together, but we were too tired to talk. What was there to talk about? When he did have things to say, I wished for him to shut up.

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Then one evening a guard came from the king's palace. He, at least, looked well fed. He looked around, and saw only me. "Well, nobody told me there were women among the prophets," he said. "I'm looking for Jeremiah. The king talks about almost nothing except how much he hates Jeremiah. I believe that if I kill that man, the king will reward me. I've been looking for him everywhere. Now tell me where I can find him."

"I will not," I said hoarsely.

"Oh, but I think you will," he said, holding out a piece of bread on the tip of his sword. "What will you not do for a piece of dry bread!" He cast the bread just out of my reach, and approached me, putting his sword in its scabbard. "I will let you scramble in the dust for that bread, in just a moment." He then grabbed me by the front of my robe and pushed me against the wall with his right hand, his left hand cupping my throat. Then with his right hand he liberated his stinking pillar. He rammed it inside my robe and between my legs, where it met only with dry scratchiness. "Withered hag," he said, withdrawing. "I can't even find your furrow. You are half dead already." It had been a

long time since I looked at myself in a mirror, but I suppose that, wrinkling with starvation, I might very well have lost the beauty I recently had.

Then the soldier was animated by an idea, and drew his pillar back out. “The dry bread is over there. But would you like something moist?” He pushed me down on the floor. He drew out his sword again and placed its sharp edge against my throat, then presented his pillar to my mouth.

I wish I could say that I was a great heroine and I bit him so hard that he howled in pain, allowing me to grab his sword and behead him. But it didn’t happen that way. I wish I could say I gave him such pleasure that he forgot himself and that I was able to push him over and grab his sword. But it didn’t happen that way either. It was more stupid than that. Before he even had a chance to ram his member into my tightly closed jaws, he just lost his balance—wine might have had something to do with this—and I pushed him over the rest of the way. I saw Jeremiah and ran to him, holding the soldier’s sword. Of course, the soldier had a dagger, and approached us. I slumped, barely able to hold the sword. It was heavy, and I was so weak I could barely stand. But as the soldier approached, I felt a sudden power, and I lifted the sword into the air and brought it down upon him. I do not remember where I struck him. I just remember going crazy, entering a state of altered mind, and I began hacking and hacking and hacking. The other prophets restrained me, and I looked down on what I had done. I felt no horror. The soldier’s blood was on my lips. It tasted good.

Jeremiah approached me. “This day,” he said, “the Lord has created a new thing. Such a thing has never been seen before, and it is a marvel to the eyes. A woman defends a man.” He lifted a trembling hand. “Miriam, you saved my life. It appears that, after all, you are like the warrior Miriam, or like Deborah—you actually took the sword in your own hand and used it to fell an enemy and to defend a man, or what is left of one.” Then he fell on his knees before me. So did all the other prophets.

My next surprise was even greater. Jeremiah announced a feast in my honor. *You are crazy,* my mind told him. But two of the prophets laid the soldier’s body in the dust, and, using his sword and dagger, began carving him up into pieces. Two others found half-burned pieces of wood and lots of kindling. We had kept torches lit, and this was the source of the fire for cooking. I sat, stunned, not even thinking about what was happening.

“You are a lioness,” said Jeremiah, handing me the roasted heart. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? Nobody except the Lord himself. Convert the meat of this deceitful heart into the strength of your own body, my lioness.” He placed one morsel of it to my lips. I licked his fingers as I accepted it. It did not taste all that different from the flesh of the intestines, purified by fire. I could not tolerate the greasy, crackling skin. The dust had absorbed the blood and was easily brushed away, as were the ashes and charred wood. Jeremiah’s followers scattered the bones and armor amidst many abandoned houses. By the next morning, not

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a trace remained of the feast that inaugurated a new world. It was a new world: God’s people were either on their way to exile or sentenced to a frightful death; the laws of clean and unclean meat had changed; and a woman had defended a man.

Chapter 19

The king would not leave Jeremiah alone. Soldiers came around asking about their missing comrade. Jeremiah suggested that he might have fled through the old rusted gate. The king, said one of the soldiers, had promised Jeremiah a punishment worse than death, whether he was guilty of the previous soldier's disappearance or not; whether he had spoken any new treason or not; whether or not he even still had the heart of a man.

The soldiers grabbed Jeremiah and tied him up. They led him out of the wrecked walls of the building. I followed them. They forced Jeremiah at sword-point to a place a couple of streets away. I waited outside the palace where they took him. Although the building looked as ruined as any of the others, I realized that this must be what is left of the palace. I saw the king and his court. In the back of the little group were Oba and Obi, looking tattered and tired.

And that was how Jeremiah came to be in the pit. The king ordered his personal body guard to throw Jeremiah into a pit full of excrement, though not enough for Jeremiah to drown in. Not quite enough. The drought would dry down the excrement a little, making it easier for Jeremiah to keep his nose in the air. But for now, he would not even be able to sit down without drowning in shit. I hated king Zedekiah from the bottom of my heart. I swore to kill him if ever I had the opportunity.

The king then began the festivities. It was in a little courtyard, right next to the pit, and in full view of the people of Jerusalem. The king's servants set up tables with food—not a lavish feast, but more food than anyone in Jerusalem had seen since the siege began—and bottles of wine. The king strutted around and sang tuneless songs about his victory over Jeremiah. The courtiers imitated him. I was puzzled that the king mentioned only his victory over Jeremiah, not over the Babylonians, a delusion probably even he had surrendered. I hated king Zedekiah from the bottom of my heart. I swore to kill him if ever I had the opportunity.

Then the king whooped loudly. *I feel it,* he said. *It's time*. He stomped drunkenly over to the pit into which Jeremiah had been thrown. He lifted his robe, exposing his loins. All I could do was to wonder who had eaten the loins of the soldier that we had cooked. Was it I? I honestly did not remember. Maybe nobody did. There are some things too disgusting even for prophets to do. Then the king hoisted his butt over the edge of the pit and took a big dump into its dark depths. *Take that, Jeremiah! Manna raining from heaven from your God!* I hated king Zedekiah from the bottom of my heart. I swore to kill him if ever I had the opportunity.

A couple of other courtiers did the same, although most of them only pissed. One of them vomited.

And so it came to pass that I spent my time sitting in the gutter watching the pit into which Jeremiah had been thrown. I was the one to guard him. I worried only for my

bag of parchments, hoping that the other prophets guarded it back in the burned building. I drank little and ate nothing except a few dry crusts brought to me by prophets who had even less than this. Boils grew on my loose skin. Leprosy? I didn't care. My teeth started to get loose. What little I ate made me feel bloated then came out as a stinking liquid. Even on hot days, of which there were many as the drought was prolonged, I felt cold. My hair started to fall out.

At first Jeremiah's voice trumpeted out of the pit, to the amusement of most the few passers-by. There were a few people who stayed off to the side, but came and listened to Jeremiah when the scoffers had gone. But then they, too, left, and I alone remained. Soon Jeremiah's voice became so weak that no one could hear it unless they listened carefully. I would call into him, *Jeremiah, I have not forgotten you.* He would answer, *The Lord has not forgotten me.* One time, he said, *If you have not forgotten me, then the Lord has not forgotten me.* This was, perhaps, the most beautiful thing he had ever said to me. But then I heard no more voice. I knew he might be dead, but I stayed in the street, watching the pit, just in case. At first, courtiers would come by and pour their chamber-pots into the pit. But soon many of the people who remained in the city dumped their wastes into the pit because they were simply unaware that it was anything but a cesspit.

One day I knew he was alive. As usual, I lowered part of my portion of bread that the other prophets had somehow found, down into the pit, using the sash of my robe. And I felt a tug. The bread was gone when I pulled the sash back up. I had a small flask of water. It was actually not leaky, though I had rescued it from a garbage pile. I lowered it into the pit, and Jeremiah took it.

*

When one of the prophets, a young man named Nathan, brought me some bread, he asked me how Jeremiah was, and I told him what I knew. He told me that the other prophets had dispersed. He was the only one who remained. "If there was any hope that we could save Jeremiah," he said, "that hope has vanished."

"The palace is right over there," I said, too weak to point. "If they saw us rescuing Jeremiah, they would probably come and stop us."

"You are assuming that they even remember he is here," Nathan said.

"I have a question for you, Nathan," I said. "Why are the Babylonians just sitting outside the city walls, besieging us, waiting for us to die? They could very easily break down the gate. We do not have enough soldiers to stop them, and they know it. Don't they have anything better to do?"

"I hear things once in a while," said Nathan. "Rumors, maybe unreliable, but better than nothing. Actually, the Babylonian soldiers aren't just sitting around. They

have harvested our fields and baked bread and had feasts with our cattle and sheep. I have seen the fires of their feasts from the top of the wall. Have you?"

"I am too weak to climb the steps," I said.

"They are in no hurry," Nathan continued. "They are busily eating the fat of the land. Of course, with this drought, they won't be able to plant any new crops for the spring, so this situation cannot continue forever."

"Where do they get water?" I asked.

"They have a man who knows where to find it," answered Nathan. "He is a man far too valuable to them to send into exile just yet. It is Saad."

"Then he lives?" I gasped.

"Rumors," said Nathan.

*

One day a little girl wandered up to me. She wore a threadbare robe, and on her feet were worn leather shoes. I felt a sudden anger; the shoes were of green leather, the kind that only the richest families could afford. Here was someone from one of the families richer than mine who really did deserve the suffering that they now experienced. But, this little girl? How could she deserve the suffering? What had she, personally, done? Why should God punish her for what her family had done? There were starving people all over the courtyard. I wondered what Jeremiah would have to say about this, but I did not want to know the answer.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"I am Janiletha."

"That is an unusual name. Not from the scriptures."

"I think it's weird. I wish I had a different name. My mother gave it to me. She is dead now."

"I am sorry to hear this, Janiletha. My mother is in exile. Do you know what that means?"

"No. My father fell asleep in the street yesterday, and I could not awaken him. I looked for help, but couldn't find any. When I returned, he was gone. I do not know where he is. Can I stay with you until I find him?"

I knew where he had gone. Whether dead or almost dead, he had been eaten.

"Can I stay with you until I find him?" she repeated.

"Why certainly, Janiletha. I am Miriam."

"Like the warrior woman?"

"Yes. You could say I am a warrior woman like her."

"I like your name better than mine."

Janiletha looked up at me with her big clueless eyes. All girls her age—even younger than the age I was when Jeremiah first told me about God watching the almond

branch—have that same clueless look on their faces. Her nose looked more like a mole's burrow with two openings than it did a nose.

"Do you have a daughter?"

"No, Janiletha, I do not. But if I did, I think I would name her Janiletha."

"Thanks. That is one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me. I'm tired now. I want to rest. And I'm thirsty and hungry."

"Go ahead and rest, my dear. And if I find any food or water, I will let you have some."

When she did not move for about an hour, I touched her. Even in the heat and drought, I knew that she was dead.

I picked up her body in my arms, and held it out, her arms and legs dangling, using strength I did not know I had. I carried her to the pit, and spoke to Jeremiah inside.

"Jeremiah. This little girl is Janiletha. She is the little girl we will never have."

And that Saad and I would never have.

Then I carried Janiletha through the streets. People looked at us, both the people who had someplace to go and to be and those who did not. Some hid their faces, unable to bear this reminder of death. Some, both men and women, came up to us.

I am so sorry for your loss, good woman. God rest your daughter.

I never told anyone that she was not my daughter. Not even the procession of women that began to follow me.

The words of the scroll that I had rescued from the Temple library kept going through my head. Not many of them, as I could not remember many.

A time to be born, and a time to die.

The procession got longer and longer. I glanced back and saw what must have been a dozen, then two dozen, women. Then I no longer looked back, but the noise was that of a multitude, or so I imagined it.

All is vanity and a weariness of the flesh.

I arrived at the Potsherd Gate. The guards, emaciated and sleepy, blocked my way.

"Where are you going?"

I did not answer. I just held up Janiletha.

"Just throw her over the wall," said one guard. "There is one portion of the wall where people throw out their dead, and the Babylonians do not shoot at them there."

"Just open the gate," I murmured.

"Are you crazy? The Babylonians will rush in."

The guard suffered from his own kind of delusion. He did not understand that the Babylonians would already have entered if they wanted to. I continued holding up Janiletha. I do not know where the strength came from. The crowd behind me was silent and motionless.

The guard, who was obviously in charge of the others, spoke to them quietly. The others stood at strategic points, with their swords drawn and spears at the ready.

"You go to your own death," the guard said to me as he raised the latch and opened the gate just enough for me to pass sideways, still holding the child up like an offering unto Jehovah.

A time to be born, and a time to die.

I strode boldly out on the road. Out of the corner of my vision, I saw Babylonian soldiers jumping to their feet and grabbing their spears and bows. They must have thought that what was left of our army was now coming against them. When they saw the army was all women, they just stopped and watched. The gate was open wide, but was blocked by the female crowd that had followed me.

All is vanity and a weariness of the flesh.

Corpses were strewn at the base of the wall, as Jeremiah had prophesied. But Janiletha's little corpse would not be thrown to the ground. The ground was too hard, and we had no tools, so I could not bury her. Some of the women gathered around me as I stood in silence.

One of the Babylonian soldiers said something. The woman translated for me. "He said it must be the princess. Look at those green leather shoes." And for a moment I realized that, for aught I knew, Janiletha *was* a princess, from one of the houses of the king's relatives that had fallen out of favor with him.

The women were waiting for me to say something.

A time to be born, and a time to die.

God has made everything beautiful in its season.

"No! No, he hasn't!" I screamed. I am sure nobody had any idea what I was talking about. "No! There can be no beauty in this! There can be no God in this!"

A Babylonian in shining armor, who must have been the commander of this local unit, slowly approached me. He held out his arms. I let him take Janiletha. I turned my back, almost wishing that the soldiers would kill me. The women watched me as I walked back in the gate, and they followed me as the gate closed behind us.

"There is no God in any of this!" I yelled again. And again. What was sadness on the part of Qoheleth was anger on my part. I did not pity, but was angry at, everyone who sheepishly accepted what the priests and scriptures said about God. *That includes you, Jeremiah. You are a fool. You are totally deluded.*

And yet, on the last day that I had written down the words of Jeremiah on the parchment I could only hope had not been lost, I wrote his foolish words:

Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
Why is it that we are not totally destroyed? It can only be

Because of God's compassion.
God's great faithfulness is renewed every morning.
When someone strikes my cheek, I turn the other,
And bury my face in the dust, because there may yet be hope.
No one is abandoned by the Lord forever;
Though he brings grief, he shows compassion.
He does not willingly afflict anyone.

These things cannot be true! I wanted to tell Jeremiah. *The corpses at the base of the city walls, the corpse of gentle Janiletha, shows that God, who could so easily have prevented this suffering, does* not *have compassion. Or else, there is no God. Why did Janiletha die, while our vile king continues to live in more comfort than any of the rest of us?*

The women fell away, each to their private griefs, as I returned to Jeremiah's pit. I was going to scream down into it, until I remembered that my voice was too weak to do anything but murmur. *Qoheleth was right. But we all have to learn for ourselves that there is no God,* I told myself.

I looked down into the pit. Instead of speaking words of scorn, I began to cry. I wonder if the drops of salt landed on Jeremiah. I began to whisper, "Yet this I will call to mind..."

Chapter 20

I tried to stop him, but it was too late. By the time I saw him, he was already urinating into the pit where Jeremiah was trapped. By the time I could have gotten there, he would have finished anyway. I was also afraid to approach him, because he was dressed in fine clothes. Who might he be? He had to be part of the king's retinue, but I had not seen him during that disgusting feast in the street, which was the last time the king had been seen in public.

When he turned his head in my direction, I gasped. I recognized Oba. I hid under my robe, because I did not want him to see my face, still young but so wrinkled by care, by exposure to the sun, and now by hunger. A face that he might have remembered as beautiful. He had all of his teeth, the way I did until recently. I knew this because he looked up into the sun and smiled. I saw Obi standing beside him.

Oba looked around at the starving people in the courtyard. There was a flash of empathy in his eyes. "These poor people," he said. "Their wrinkled skin barely clings to their bones." His eyes passed over what little of me he could see as he said this.

Obi smiled. "They are from the king's vintage. But they are no longer grapes. They are raisins, for the last dry crusts of the king's bread. Ah, the king!" He raised the wooden doll into the air and bowed to it.

"Give it a rest, Obi," said Oba. "Save it for when we get back to the palace. When you see the king, then you can do all the kissing-of-the-nether-realms that you like. For now, these people are suffering. I only wish there was something I could do for them."

"You could steal all the bread from the king's pantry," said Obi, "and hand it out around Jerusalem. You could feed all of these people for a day. And then there would be no food left, and we would begin to starve along with them. And," he said, raising up the puppet and speaking falsetto, "Don't let me catch you stealing my food, or I'll throw you in the pit along with Jeremiah!" The jester again bowed to the wooden doll.

Oba raised his voice. "If only I could hear the voice of God, and hear his will for us."

Jeremiah spoke from the pit. His voice was now weak, but he shouted as strongly as he could. "God says that we should surrender."

Oba turned around. "Did you hear that?" he asked Obi.

Obi bent over the pit and looked in. "Must be some kind of shit-eating animal that the Babylonians brought with them," he said.

Jeremiah continued, "God says, hearken to my voice, for I have spoken my will to the corners of the Earth. For by my own hand have I raised up my servant…"

"I am not accustomed," said Oba, "to hearing the voice of God emanate from a cesspit. But there is definitely somebody down in that pit."

I quietly approached them.

"For by my own hand have I raised up my servant…" Jeremiah continued.

"There's somebody trapped down in there," said Oba.

"Of course, there is," said Obi. "It must be Jeremiah."

"You mean," said Oba, "down in *this* pit? I didn't realize it was *this* pit. And I pissed on him! God help me. You mean, Jeremiah, the prophet who came into the king's court that day? Man, he was brave. He showed no fear. I wish I was that brave. Maybe I should try to get him out. No, bad idea. The king had him thrown in, and may not take kindly to my pulling him out."

"Did the king say," said Obi, "that you could not pull him out? What the king does not see is not in his little wooden mind." Obi turned the face of the doll away from the pit and said, in falsetto, "Just don't let me see you do it."

Both men turned to me as I approached. My veil fell away. I scrambled to put it back. Oba said, "Miriam? Is that you?"

"Yes. What's left of me." I said *yes* several more times as I fell to my knees and began to cry. Oba took my two hands and raised me back to my feet. I stopped crying, mostly because there was no fluid left in my eyes. I just wheezed. *Yes, yes.*

"Please, take courage," Oba said to me.

"Oh please, Oba, can you save him? Can you? Can…"

I could say nothing more. The muscles in my dry throat cramped, and I began to convulse. My tongue was sticking to the top of my mouth.

"I think I should save you first," said Oba.

"No," I whispered hoarsely when I got my tongue free. "Save him first. Don't worry about me. If I die, I die. But Jeremiah is God's true prophet. In saving him, you will save yourself."

"I have an idea," said Oba.

"That's your problem. You always have ideas," said Obi, in falsetto, dangling his wooden doll in the air.

"Obi, could you stop being a mule's-furrow for just one minute and help me get this woman back to the palace? No, not the main palace; the scullery entrance. At least we can get her some water from the cisterns." I tried to say, "Jeremiah! Save Jeremiah!" but I could not even whisper. "And then," said the Ethiopian, "maybe I can find some rope and get Jeremiah out of the pit."

*

The next thing I knew I awoke in the palace garden. I recognized this place from not very long ago, when I had accompanied my husband to the meeting. My heart felt strong, and my mouth felt fresh and moist. A servant woman was washing my face with the cleanest water I had tasted in weeks. I looked at my robe. It was no longer my robe, but a different one, no longer new but definitely not rags. And no longer spattered with blood from our cannibalistic feast. I sat up suddenly and looked around.

"Well, you are awake again," said the woman. "You had quite an appetite. You almost starved."

"Jeremiah!" I said. "Where is Jeremiah?"

Then I saw him. That is, I saw his bare shoulders and his head. He was sitting in the garden on the other side of a wall. I heard the splashing of water. He was washing himself. His hair showed little patches of scalp. I laid back down and let the woman continue cleaning my face. I knew that, when Jeremiah was finished, it would be my turn to wash in the garden.

Jeremiah was sitting in the servant's room, with Oba, when they brought me to him after my bath. I ran and fell at his feet. His feet were so clean that I could have kissed them, only he immediately told me, "Get up, Miriam! It is an offense to God if you bow to me."

"I am so glad they saved you," I said through my tears—tears! Actual tears!—as I rose and went to the seat to which the servant woman guided me.

"Well," said Oba, "I'm glad I saved both of you. Incidentally, I was not at that wretched party when they threw Jeremiah in to the pit. I knew what was going to happen, and I pretended to be ill."

"I wasn't there either," said Obi. "The king was so drunk he didn't notice. Besides, I had permission to not be there." He held up the doll. "Yes. I gave him permission to stay home," said the falsetto voice.

"How did you get Jeremiah out of the pit?" I asked. The servant woman handed me a bowl of fresh figs, which I ate as slowly as I could, though the raw desire for food must have been evident on my face.

"Go easy on the figs, my dear," said Obi. "They cause great torrents to come from the nether regions if they are eaten too fast."

"Give it a rest, Obi," said Oba.

I nailed the jester with the kind of stare I used to give Jeremiah, and which I thought I would never have a chance to use again. "I am so famished, there is nothing to come out in torrents," I said.

Oba answered my question. "Well, first I had to find out how deep the pit was. So I brought a torch and…"

Obi began laughing and rolling on the floor. "The miasma," he said. "The sewer miasma caught fire!"

"It didn't last long," Oba said. "It went out as soon as I pulled the torch away. But it did last long enough for me to see how deep the pit was."

"And that fire," said Jeremiah, "is what happened to my hair."

"I looked for a rope," Oba continued, "but I could not find one long enough. So, I got this brilliant idea, see. I decided to tear up some rags into long strips, and tie them into a long band to let down into the pit."

"Ask him where he got the rags," squeaked Obi's doll.

"Where did you get the rags?" I asked, accidentally squeaking in the jester's falsetto. I covered my mouth and hid my laughter. Everyone was laughing. More servants came in to listen.

"Well," said Oba, "shall we say, don't ask for your old robe back. You see, there are plenty of ropes around here long enough to reach *down into* that pit. But here was the problem," continued Oba. "Jeremiah was too weak to climb out on a rope."

"Or even to hold on to one," said Jeremiah.

"So, I had to tie together a band that was long enough so that I could let it down into the pit while holding both ends, and he could put it under his arms. Then I pulled him out."

"And so," said Obi, "the robe that had pressed itself against a woman's loins now curved its way underneath a man's arms!"

"Obi," said Oba, "the number of useless observations you have made could fill a book. But it won't."

"I never saw a man with so much shit on his feet," said Obi. "A thick layer of it, encrusted…"

"Quite," said Oba. "I think we get the point, my friend."

"I feel so refreshed," I said.

"You slept all afternoon," said Oba. "Both of you."

That was when I began to remember even the smallest shattered fragments of my dreams. I was in Eden, surrounded by trees heavy with fruit. I tried to remember if I had been naked in my dreams.

"They looked so sweet," said Obi. "Lying in one another's arms."

Both Jeremiah and I gasped.

Oba looked down at the ground. "Now I remember. You were married to the man at that meeting where I last saw you, the man whom the king chose as his guide. His name was..."

"Saad," I said, starting to cry.

"You slept the sleep of the innocent," Obi told me and Jeremiah. "I stood guard over you. I was hoping you would do something interesting, you know, but..." His puppet now spoke. "But you didn't."

Oba turned to Jeremiah, with a look of empathy on his face. "Hey, sorry I peed on you, my man. I didn't know…"

"I hardly noticed," said Jeremiah. "All I knew is that it wasn't rain. The Lord has closed the windows of heaven against us. And this is all because…" He began to raise his voice for an oration, but stopped when a servant woman appeared at the door.

The woman almost cried. "I'm sorry, but there is no more flour for us."

"Do not worry," I said. "There is hope for all who are living. Better a living dog than a dead lion."

"What? What did you say?" asked Oba.

"I was just quoting a piece of ancient writing from the Temple library," I said.

"Do not worry," said Jeremiah. "Tell the woman to go back and strike the sides of the barrel. You will find some flour that way." With a confused look on her face, she turned and left. "Well," continued Jeremiah, "it worked with Elijah and the widow. Can't hurt to try it here." The prophet Elijah, long ago in the northern kingdom that had been conquered and vanished into the dust of history, had told a starving widow to beat the sides of her flour barrel. She thought that this induced God to miraculously create flour for her. It probably just dislodged flour that had stuck to the staves inside the barrel.

"And you are the prophet, the here-and-now Elijah," said Oba.

"Yes, he is," I said, smiling.

"Just don't tell anyone in the king's court that I said so," said Oba. He continued. "I saw you preaching one day, out in the street. You said some pretty nasty things about the queen. You said, as I recall, that the king from the north would lift the queen's skirts over her head, and so on and so forth."

"Yes, that is what I said." Jeremiah was smiling.

"You son of a mangey cur," Obi's doll screeched. "I'll never forgive you for what you said about my wife the queen!"

"And then, my man, you said that the queen was as unlikely to change her ways as the leopard was to change his spots." Oba smiled quietly. "And then you continued. You looked at me and said, or as *that Ethiopian there* was to change his skin."

"I said that?" asked Jeremiah. "I don't remember. I must have been in a trance of rage. Sorry, I meant no offense. I must have seen your rich clothes and assumed, correctly, that you lived in the palace; and I thought, incorrectly, you were evil just like the rest of them."

"No offense taken," said Oba. "How could you have known I was not evil? But perhaps there is some hope, because you did, in fact, have an impact on at least one person in the king's retinue, namely myself. I can't change my skin—nor do I desire to—but at that moment, I began to change my ways. Or at least my mind."

Jeremiah was stunned. "I had no idea that my words, like seeds, landed on any fertile soil that day."

Oba said, "Had they not, you would still be in the pit, with Ethiopian piss drying on your scalp." He smiled. "You know," he continued, "there was one other time, not too long ago, when the king dragged you into his court and was ready to kill you."

"I didn't know about this one," I said.

"Oh yeah," said Oba. "The king was hopping mad…"

Obi started bopping his little doll around, until we silenced him with our stares.

"But the priests advised caution," Oba continued. "They said that we should consider legal precedents. One of the priests pointed out that the prophet Micah had denounced a king, but the king did not kill him. Then another priest pointed out that the prophet Uriah had denounced a king, who then had him killed. Not only that, but Uriah's

body was torn up by dogs and thrown on the garbage heap. Then the king stood up and said that the king who had killed Uriah had suffered no evil consequences from his action, whether from the people or from God. His conclusion was to kill you, Jeremiah; why not? *Give me one good reason why I should not!*

"And then, Jeremiah," said Oba, standing and looking into his face, "you had to go and practically ask to be killed. You had to say that whether the king had you killed or not, the outcome would be the same: conquest and exile. You must be crazy, man. You don't know how the political system works."

"He doesn't care," I said.

"He doesn't care," said Obi's doll.

"I don't care," said Jeremiah. "It was the word of the Lord."

Oba continued looking into Jeremiah's face. "God told you what to say. But do you have to just blurt everything out rather than using a little caution?"

"Yes, he does," I said. "He's been that way since he was a boy."

"You've known him that long?" asked Oba.

"Yes," I said, looking down.

Oba sighed and turned to the rest of us. "You see, I want to help Jeremiah. I have little influence, but I do have some. But he is making it very, very, very, very difficult for me to do so."

"There is nothing you can do," said Jeremiah. "Any day now—the king cannot hold out much longer—the end will come. And what then?"

"Well," said Oba, "it's off to Babylon, just as you said. I wish I could think of a message of hope, but you've pretty much closed the door on that possibility."

Then Jeremiah said, "Have I? Have I indeed?" He thought for a little bit. I could feel the power rising in his mind. Over the years I have learned to recognize it. "God is telling me something, right now." He closed his eyes and we waited breathlessly. Then he said, "God has told me,

I made a covenant with your fathers.
How could I forget this covenant?
It is the Lord who gives to us the sun for light by day,
Who superintends the fixed order of the moon,
Who sets the stars in the heavens by night,
Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar…"

I had no idea what was coming next, but I smiled. Here, here was the old Jeremiah, pouring forth in billowing waves of poetry, the way I had heard him so many and so few years ago.

Jeremiah continued.

The Lord of hosts is his name.
Hosts of stars, hosts of waves.
If this fixed order of the world,
Of the sun, moon, and stars,
Departs from before me,
Then and only then can it be said
That the descendants of Israel should cease
Being a nation before me forever.

Jeremiah stood and my heart lifted.

And thus says the Lord:
If the heavens can be measured,
And if men can explore the foundations of the Earth below,
Then and only then will I cast off the descendants of Israel.

Oba stood in awe. “Beautiful. But you just said that God was going to inevitably lead us into captivity in Babylon, and that we might as well just accept it, and start settling down and beginning our lives anew there. Sounds to me as if we will no longer be a nation. I do not understand.”

“Nor do I,” said Jeremiah. “I just repeated what the Lord told me.”

Oba became quiet. “I think I just figured out what it means. Maybe the Lord speaks to me also. Yes, we will go into captivity in Babylon. But then, after we have been there for a number of years, God will release us and we will return to this land. That is the only way that both of your prophecies can be true. This land that he promised to your descendants, and to the descendants of sojourners such as myself, forever. God will keep his promise, eventually.”

“Yes,” said Jeremiah thoughtfully. “That must be it. After a number of years, God will allow us to return. But why? What event will make this possible?”

Obi’s doll had the answer. “I am great and powerful. But Nebuchadnezzar will kick my butt. And Nebuchadnezzar thinks he is so powerful. But what if somebody kicks *his* butt?”

“Yes, of course,” said Oba, trying to contain his drama. “Some other people will arise, and send their armies to conquer Babylon. Why, now that I think of it…”

“Obi thought of it,” the doll said.

“Yes, well. Come to think of it, how could it be otherwise? When has any king of the Earth, or his descendants, remained supreme forever? All kingdoms fall, eventually. Now, who might it be? The Egyptians? The Persians?”

“Probably one of them,” Obi said in his own voice.

"The Phoenicians?" asked Oba.

"No," the jester continued seriously. "They got their butts kicked worse than we did or will. They had this big maritime trading network, worth a lot to Nebuchadnezzar. He conquered them and he's going to keep good hold of them. But us? We're just hill country. We can raise a little grain, and we have some really whoop-ass grapes, but other than that, we have little to offer. In contrast, Tyre and Sidon will continue to be intensively-managed vassal states for Babylon."

Oba was obviously impressed with his friend's long-hidden wisdom. "Very well. After a number of years, someone will conquer Babylon, and allow us to return to our land. The one remaining question is, how many years?"

"Seventy," I said.

All eyes were upon me.

"Miriam!" exclaimed Oba. "Has God spoken to you also?"

Obi said in his normal voice. "God spoke to the original Miriam, I seem to recall, and this was something that Moses and Aaron had a little trouble accepting."

"And why should God not speak to a woman?" I shot back at him. Then I smiled and spoke calmly. "No, actually, it had nothing to do with God. God never tells me anything. It is simply numbers."

"Please, explain," urged Oba.

"Quite simple, actually," I said, savoring my moment of wisdom. "Jeremiah, do you remember my favorite parts of scripture?"

"Yes," Jeremiah said thoughtfully. "The part about the Jubilee."

"That was one of them," I said. "The Law of Moses says that every fifty years, all slaves shall be freed of their indentured debt, and all debts forgiven, and all land returned to its original owners. That was the Year of Jubilee."

"I haven't read that part," said Oba. "That is astonishing. I would never have guessed that the scripture would have contained such a thing."

"The priests seldom mention it," I continued. "You can imagine why. The Year of Jubilee was never observed. In year forty-nine, social chaos would have resulted. Slaves would have stopped working, saying, I'm going to be free next year and there is nothing you can do about it. The bottom would have fallen out of land prices as well. How can anyone sell land the title to which would have been lost in a year? The Year of Jubilee would have resulted in a total collapse of the market. The priests insisted on the observation of every jot and tittle of the law, when it came to what to eat, and what to wear, but this whole big chunk of the law, about Jubilee, they conveniently ignored. I would have loved to see it. Everybody in the land, from least to greatest, would have had to say, Wealth is not as important to me as the goodwill of neighbors."

"Astonishing," Oba kept saying.

"Jeremiah," I said. "As I recall, you didn't pay too much attention yourself to that part of scripture."

"Of course not," said Jeremiah, recovering a little of his fire for just a moment. "What does it matter? If the whole people, from least to greatest, were playing the harlot before other gods, burning incense to those gods that are not even gods, every day of every year, then by comparison ignoring the Jubilee law was a minor infraction."

"It gets better," I assured Oba. "Something that was supposed to happen every fifty years can be ignored for at least forty of those years. But…Jeremiah? What was my other favorite part of scripture?"

"I just remember the Jubilee part," he said to me.

"I'll give you a hint," I said. "Do you remember what I liked the best of anything in the world? You know, when we would go to the Brook Kidron and see the colors of the rainbow in the mists…"

"You were always talking about how beautiful the trees were," Jeremiah said. "So your other favorite part of scripture must have had something to do with trees. Fields. Yes, that's it! The Sabbath of the Fields."

"Prepare to be even more astonished, Oba," I said. "The Law of Moses specified that, every seventh year, all agricultural fields were to be left fallow, so that the weeds of the field could grow in them. Just as we were to take a Sabbath rest every seventh day, a rule to which the priests attached hundreds of rules of their own, so our crop lands were to take a Sabbath rest every seventh year. This law was, like the Jubilee law, unpopular. For farmers to forego a whole year of productivity! They would either have to store up grain, or else depend upon their neighbors. But their neighbors wanted money for it. In the end, this law was ignored throughout the land.

"What this means," I continued, "is that the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah had an unpaid debt to God. I have been told that Saul's kingdom was established four hundred and ninety years ago. All during that time, there has been no Sabbath of the Fields. This means that we owe God, we owe the land, one-seventh of that time."

"Seventy years," said Oba, in quiet amazement.

"You see," I explained, "one way or the other, the land is going to get its rest. One way or the other, the fields will keep their Sabbaths. They are not like men, who can decide to be disobedient. In perfect innocence, the lilies of the field serve God.

"So, our choice is very simple. Not letting the land rest is not an option. We either incorporate the Sabbath of the Fields into our normal cycle of life, build it into our calendar, letting the fields rest one year at a time, or else we wait until our society collapses, at which time the fields will get one large chunk of years in which to rest. The latter choice is what we have made."

"And so," said Oba, "you were right, Jeremiah, but only partly. We will be conquered. We will be taken to Babylon. But then, after seventy years, God will bring us back to this land."

"Yes," said Jeremiah. "Yes, that makes sense. This must be what God is trying to tell us. Miriam, that was brilliant. So, we have a message of hope after all to proclaim to the people. That is, the people in exile, when I eventually reach them."

"The people of the exile are not going to believe their ears," said Obi. "A message of hope from the lips of Jeremiah? They will wonder whether you were crazy before, or whether you are crazy now, for you must have been crazy one of those times."

"Don't you remember, Jeremiah?" I said. "When we were young, and you told me that God had called you and given you a mission."

"Of course, I remember," he said. "And to think, Miriam, you were my friend that day and have been my friend all the years since that time."

"Your mission," I continued, "was to pluck up and to destroy, but also to plant and to build. Remember that? You must. Well, the plucking up and destroying is almost accomplished. Soon it will be time to plant and to build."

"Yes," said Jeremiah. "That is what I must do in the land of exile."

"And I will be very privileged to be by your side as you do so," I said triumphantly.

Jeremiah looked at me in utter seriousness. "No, Miriam," he said. "Your mission is to stay here and preach the prophecy of hope."

What? Even now, as we have come together again, I must be separated from Jeremiah? I sat stunned, and hardly listened to the rest of the conversation.

"This message of hope," said Oba, "is not an easy one. It will require, first, that you continue to proclaim that this city go into captivity. And while doing so, you will still be considered a traitor to the king. This message is not a soft and comforting one to this generation. It requires audacity to proclaim this message of hope." And he smiled his big white smile.

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Part Three

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Chapter 21

I had a little cot in the corner of the palace kitchen, while Jeremiah slept under a canvas tent in the garden. I suppose the king never found out that we were there.

The day we all expected finally came. We found out why the Babylonians had waited and waited and waited. We heard the cheers of the Babylonian soldiers. Having regained part of my strength, I climbed the stairs to the top of the city wall. There were even more soldiers than before. And there was a procession with fine gold and bright banners that could only have meant one thing: the arrival of Nebuchadnezzar himself.

The Babylonians easily broke down our main gate. Our few remaining soldiers were too weak to pull back their bowstrings. The Babylonian soldiers cheered and began running through the city. They wanted to rape the women, but they found only hags like me. They wanted to raid the riches, but found none. But they did find the Temple library, and set it ablaze. Now, the word of the Lord could be saved only by Hilkiah and myself.

The soldiers gathered back at the gate. Assur-Hamazi lined them up in two files. The soldiers parted to allow the king's entourage to enter. King Zedekiah, with his small group of relatives and courtiers, met Nebuchadnezzar. Oba and Obi stayed back with Jeremiah and me, watching from the shadows.

"I am Zedekiah King of Judah," said the king.

Nebuchadnezzar ignored him. "By the gods, this place smells awful." I could not understand his words. Someone told me later what Nebuchadnezzar said. He turned to Assur-Hamazi. "You told me to come all the way down from Babylon to see *this*?" Assur-Hamazi did not answer. "Well, I know what we have to do now. We will destroy and burn everything and leave it empty for the wind and the rain to cleanse. Only after this is complete can any decent human being come back here. The land needs to rest a little."

"How long will this be?" asked Assur-Hamazi.

"Seventy years," said a voice from somewhere.

"Who said that?" asked Nebuchadnezzar.

"One of the Hebrews, sire," said Assur-Hamazi, who translated it for Nebuchadnezzar.

"Seventy years sounds about right," said the Babylonian king. "I'll be dead by then, but by the looks of this place, I don't care, myself, to come back.

"And so, inhabitants of Jerusalem, the few of you who are left," continued Nebuchadnezzar, still ignoring Zedekiah. "We have burned your precious scrolls. The memory of your—what was his name?" Assur-Hamazi whispered something to him. "Jehovazzar. All memory of Jehovazzar, of whom you were such sorry representatives, will now be lost. Now, if you had done as we do—written your records on clay tablets—than no fire could destroy them. They could be destroyed only if an army comes through and tramples on each tablet individually."

"Which they will do," said Jeremiah, but Nebuchadnezzar did not hear him.

"You may wonder," said Nebuchadnezzar. "You may wonder—both you few pitiful remnants of whatever this place was called, and my brave soldiers of Babylon—why I ordered this long siege, instead of a quick conquest. I heard, from one of your priests, I forget his name..." Assur-Hamazi whispered to him again. "Hilki-azzar? Not that it matters. But I heard that you people believed that your Jehovazzar had chosen you from all the peoples of the earth and would bless you with eternal prosperity. Well, Hilki-azzar now knows that he was wrong, but he still clings to his belief in Jehovazzar, who will someday save his people.

"This sounded ridiculous to me," continued Nebuchadnezzar, "but I thought, why not give this Jehovazzar a chance? So, we waited and waited and waited for Jehovazzar to save you. Well, time's up.

"I hear," said Nebuchadnezzar, "that there are a few important people of this city that I should meet." Zedekiah, who had been kneeling, now stood. But Assur-Hamazi pointed off in another direction. Nebuchadnezzar looked in the direction by which Trom-panazzar entered, still in gleaming, though now shoddy, clothes. Pen-sanazzar walked up slightly behind his brother.

"Who are these people?" Nebuchadnezzar bellowed.

"I am Pen-sanazzar, O great king." He spoke in the Babylonian tongue. "I am the official interpreter for King Zedekiah."

"And this is King Zedekiah?" asked Nebuchadnezzar, pointing at Trom-panazzar.

"No, O great king. This is my brother Trom-panazzar, who has played a very important role in delivering this city to you." Nobody from Jerusalem reacted to this, since they did not understand it.

"Oh, did he? Did he indeed?" asked Nebuchadnezzar. "What, pray tell, did he do?"

"My brother is a man of business," said Pen-sanazzar, "and quite a successful one." He turned to Trom-panazzar and smiled by narrowing his eyes. Trom-panazzar gave his brightest arch smile. "During the siege, there were thousands of lonely soldiers camped around the city. For a modest fee, my brother brought out beautiful women of Jerusalem to comfort them."

Nebuchadnezzar consulted his general again, then said, "That's not what I heard. I heard that the women were scrawny and wrinkled and sometimes their hair was even falling out. Disgusting!"

"Well, sire, they were starving," said Pen-sanazzar, now a little alarmed.

"That doesn't alter the facts of the case," resumed Nebuchadnezzar. "Although, I suspect my fine soldiers were getting a little desperate. But," he turned to Assur-Hamazi, "you paid him for this?" After the general whispered to him again, Nebuchadnezzar said, "Very well. I suppose that we are going to get that money back now." Pen-sanazzar

blanched and did not tell his brother what was said. “Well? Anything else this buffoon did that I should be grateful for?”

Pen-sanazzar stumbled. “When Zedekiah, the now vanquished king, tried to attack your army from the hills, it was my brother who warned you that it was going to happen, so that you made short work of the attack.”

“News to me,” said Nebuchadnezzar. Assur-Hamazi whispered to Nebuchadnezzar, and he said, “Oh, I do remember hearing about that. The attack would have failed anyway.”

Nebuchadnezzar strode toward Trom-panazzar, who smiled until he realized that the Babylonian king was not happy.

“So, little man, you think you are so important? Let me tell you something. I have no respect for a man who would betray his own people, even if those people are my enemies.”

Pen-sanazzar did not translate. There would have been no time anyway, because Nebuchadnezzar drew out his sword, lifted it high over his head, and brought it down vertically upon Trom-panazzar, slicing him almost in two.

Chapter 22

Some of the exiles had returned to Jerusalem and Anathoth. They had learned enough of the Babylonian language—which was, indeed, not that different from ours—to translate for me. I asked to see Saad, but I was not allowed to. Assur-Hamazi did, however, give me a small house in which I could store my manuscripts, and where I could continue writing them after the army retreated. Someone had told him that I was a scholar, and he wanted me to stay and keep something of the Israelite culture alive in upcoming years. For the rest of my life. No such place existed in Jerusalem. The house was in Anathoth, a place slightly less devastated than Jerusalem, and where the Babylonian administrators, and the few soldiers and officers, would be stationed. The house where I was to live was Hilkiah's house, that had somehow escaped destruction.

I sat underneath the almond tree. It was now winter, no longer hot, but still dry. Babylonian soldiers who were to remain in Anathoth delivered my parchments and writing tools. They even had orders to make sure that my physical needs were met. No meat—the cows and sheep had almost all been sent north, and it would take years to build the herds back up. I had no luxuries, but they did provide soap, and oil for my skin. I had scars that would never go away. The teeth I had lost, thankfully few, would never return. My breasts were now not only tiny but wrinkled. At least none of the soldiers would want to rape me.

One afternoon, soon after I had been relocated to Anathoth, and only a couple of days before the new procession of exiles was to head north to Babylon, Jeremiah came into the garden of his childhood home. He smiled into my haggard face. Somehow, he still looked boyish, even though he had suffered as much as I.

"Welcome home," I told him. I started to hug him, but he just patted my shoulder. "They let you come here."

"Yes," he said. "They consider me to be of no great consequence. I could run away and they would not care. They might even prefer that I do not help to keep alive the memory of Jehovah among the exiles."

"I have written down your words," I said, close to his face, the way I had done when we were kids and when we were no longer kids. "Please send me anything else you may write."

"I will do so," he said. "Meanwhile, I have brought you a gift."

He handed me a cloth bag of wild elah nuts.

I gasped and almost cried. "I will cherish these," I said.

"Eat them up," he said. "They will go rancid. I have been running around in the hills gathering them. I kept some for myself. I wonder if they have oak and elah trees in Babylon. I bet they don't. It's all swampy lowlands, I hear."

"You could stay here," I said.

Jeremiah was briefly impatient. “You know my calling,” he said. “If anyone knows it besides myself, it is you. I know,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulder. “I will miss you every day. I will probably remember you as a perfect woman, almost like a goddess. I know you are not, and have never been, but that is what happens with memories.”

“I am losing Saad, too,” I said.

“Yes,” Jeremiah agreed. “If it is any comfort to you, Saad and I have become friends. We will be traveling together. Before I left, I was going to give you his message of undying love.”

“Please give him the same message from me,” I said.

Jeremiah said, “When you look at the sky, remember me. Then he looked up at the sky, and he furrowed his brow. “How long it has been since we have had rain,” he said. “But I think that is about to change.”

I looked up. He was right.

“Quick! We need to go,” he said.

“Go where?”

He sighed and smiled. “Where do you think?”

The fig tree was dead but we could still climb it. I was racked with pain as I walked, and Jeremiah had to stop for me frequently. But soon we were at the little brook Kidron, standing beside the sycamore tree.

I expected the sun to be golden bright, as it had been every day during the drought. But it was shrouded in mists and was red. And I could see massive, black storm clouds building up on the horizon. I looked in the dry creek bed. Just as Jeremiah had said, back in the days not long past when his words could offend me and get him in trouble, there was no mist and no rainbow.

“God is still gone from this land,” he said.

We sat down and listened to the distant thunder. As the storm came closer, it felt as if the earth itself was rumbling. The wind blew violently. As the prophet Elijah had discovered while he was hiding in his cave, more than a century earlier, God was not in the thunder, nor in the wind. Thick darkness filled the whole Earth below the clouds. Plumes of smoke rose from distant fires started by the lightning. A bolt of lightning hit near us. When another bolt hit nearby, I wondered if God were angry at me for doubting that he had thrown it and doubting that it was he who miraculously created each rainbow. My hair stood up and I felt a crackling sensation.

Then I heard a susurrus, and smelled a beautiful scent long forgotten. The scent of newly wet soil. Within moments, torrents of rain were pouring down. I smiled into the rain. Brown water filled the creek. Later the water would be clear, but for now it had to be brown, brown with our sins that it washed away.

I heard a slogging, slipping noise. Jeremiah was running and jumping around. His body slid in every direction and he crashed into every tree. He was smiling bigger than I had ever seen. He ran back to me.

"God has sent this rain as a sign of his covenant," Jeremiah shouted. "Right on time."

No, Jeremiah. The winds go round and round the Earth, and when they do, they bring rain. They do so because they are winds, not because God has a script for them to follow.

Jeremiah pulled out of his pocket a hunk of scented soap. "From Oba," he said. He rubbed it into his hair, lathering it up as he stood in the rain, then handed it to me. I did the same, then rubbed the soap everywhere inside my robe. He took the soap back from me. He threw his robe off, and began to rub the soap all over his naked body. My own robe was so heavy with rain, how could I keep it on? The rain rinsed our bodies as we clasped together. I was ready for him. I believed at that moment that we were meant for one another, and that God would smile upon our love as surely as upon the man and woman in the poem I had copied.

But he turned from me and started dancing around as the rain slackened. He danced naked before the Lord. *Is Saul also among the prophets?* I approached him with my arms outstretched in invitation. He picked up my robe and threw it into my face. Its slogging heaviness almost made me fall. He pulled his robe back on. I held mine against me the way I had held the pillow on the morning he sneaked into my husband's bedroom.

"You see," Jeremiah said to me, "we don't have to grow up after all. God has just washed away all of the slime of the adult world that polluted us."

As if God were taking cues from a script after all, the sun came out at that moment. I looked into the mists. There was the rainbow. It was a little brown, but because of the massive torrent below, it was a bigger rainbow than I had ever seen at that place.

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Chapter 23

The Babylonians took King Zedekiah and his sons and courtiers to Babylon. The rumor came back after a year or so that Nebuchadnezzar had ordered Zedekiah to watch as his sons were slain before his eyes. Then Nebuchadnezzar's guards gouged out Zedekiah's eyes and sliced off his thumbs. He spent the rest of his days crawling around under the king's table, grasping crumbs of food that fell from the table, as best he could with his remaining fingers. Throwing bits of food at Zedekiah was one of Nebuchadnezzar's favorite activities.

To those of us who remained behind in Jerusalem, this was a pretty funny story. We might as well find the humor in the situation, for there is nothing we can do about it. Now nobody remains in the land except a few Babylonian guards and the poorest of our people, enslaved to till the soil and dress the vineyards.

My job was now to proclaim the message of hope—a message in which I did not even believe—to those who remained behind in Anathoth and in Jerusalem. I realized that Qoheleth was right about a lot of things, and Jeremiah was wrong. About the will of God and all that. Things just happen. They are neither the will of God nor against the will of God. Just as water and light make rainbows because they are water and light, so all the things that happen in the world are just the cycling of the wind and water and the turning of the sun endlessly around the Earth.

Perhaps it was best that Jeremiah and I part. I could not agree with him about God doing this or that or the other thing. His faith had grown stronger while mine eroded. At some point, along the banks of the Euphrates, he would have felt compelled by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—three very ordinary and fallible men, hardly ones to proclaim the truth about God—to denounce my apostasy. He would have wept, but he would have denounced me. And, like the willows along the river, I would have bent into the torrents of sadness.

Case in point. That stuff he said about the exiles returning. I would have shouted in his face, his beautiful boyish face, *Jeremiah, listen to what you are saying! Eventually the exiles will return. But not the same exiles! When God, as you say, finally shows compassion, many of those who suffered—you should have seen little Janiletha, then you would not talk about the compassion of the Lord—will be DEAD.* And that stuff about God showing compassion. *God afflicts some, then shows compassion to others. How can this be fair? And, Jeremiah, YOUR OWN SONG contains the fatal flaw. God does not WILLINGLY grieve or afflict, you say. Well, if he is God, then how can there be grief or affliction that are NOT the results of His will? Who or what makes God cast down afflictions upon us NOT willingly? Answer me that!* My soul is silently screaming as I write this. Be calm, my soul.

I was the one who brought together the words of Jeremiah into a single book. I had scraps of poetry. I interspersed it with scraps of history, if I could get it, or at least

hearsay. One day a messenger arrived from Babylon with more of Jeremiah's writings. I just inserted them in the place I was then writing. I looked over my work. It is a jumble. But I did not know what I could do to bring order to such a tumultuous mind as his. There is, however, one thing I did. Near the beginning, I inserted the story of the almond branch, of *shoqed* and *shaqed*. Future generations will judge if he was insane. I kept his poems of lamentations separate. I was also the one who inserted the comment, near the end of the second book of the Chronicles, about how the seventy years of exile were a payment to the land for the sabbath of the fields.

Among the young slaves here in Anathoth I am what passes for a matriarch. They have forgotten Moses' feasts. But at harvest time, before the Babylonians take away their choicest share of grains and grapes and young calves and lambs, before we have to be confronted with how little remains for us, the people gather for a harvest feast. Moses had commanded a harvest feast, but this generation does not know it; they know only that, if you are ever going to have a feast, harvest is the time to have it.

Today the grapes were all cast into the bin, but before the young maidens crushed them with their feet, they invited me to be the first to step into the vat. The purple fluid, like the purple dye of the Phoenicians, filled the wrinkles of my feet and made them look even older. After I had slipped around in the grapes awhile, I let the maidens take over. Most of them were the daughters of Jewish women and Babylonian guards.

Each year, after the feast, the young men and women gathered before me to listen to my words. I was, after all, the one who had known Jeremiah. Jeremiah was somewhere in the land between the rivers, probably still proclaiming the upcoming year in which the captives would return. I did not even know whether Jeremiah—or my husband—was alive, although an occasional visitor would tell me he had heard something about Jeremiah still being active. Nothing about Saad.

I read for the young people the poems I had copied from the Temple library. To my knowledge, these were the only copies that remained in the world immediately after the conquest. It was not long before the young scribes—that is, young men who could barely read, since all competent scribes had been taken to Babylon—made new copies. I had to proofread them. This year as every year the assembled young people were astonished when I read to them about my nard giving forth its fragrance; about the bag of myrrh between my breasts; about the cedar beams over our green couch; about the sweet fruit of his body; about the flowers on the spring hillsides and the voice of the turtledove throughout the land; about the young stag feeding amidst the lilies; about my breasts being like the fawns of a gazelle; about wine mixed in the bowl of my navel; about the locked garden of henna; about the well of living water and the winds rushing down from the mountains of Lebanon; about my love eating his honeycomb with his honey; about stumbling naked through the streets seeking my love; about my love climbing the palm tree and grasping my breasts like bunches of dates; about how I ravished his heart with a glance of my eyes.

Due to my advanced age, in relation to theirs, they permitted me to preach a little. I imagined myself to be Qoheleth, the orator. I told the assembly about a prophet who had arisen among the captives in Babylon. Ezekiel, that is his name. And he spoke of visions he had, really bizarre visions, whirring wheels, wheels within wheels, big brass monsters with wings. They laughed when I said, what was this man smoking? Probably some of those leaves that only the Arabs knew how to find. And his vision of paradise was of a gleaming city with metal walls. Walls with jewels, square as an ephod. (Not that they had any idea what an ephod is. I barely remember myself. It was some cumbersome thing that priests wore.) Gleaming walls. Sterile. No plants. No butterflies. No singing birds. A river, yes, a big sluggish river, but no leaping fishes or rushing white waters creating rainbows in the sun, no river that could try, and fail, to quench love. How different this is, I said, from the Song of Songs. Time and again, the poet or poets who wrote the Song of Songs made reference to specific geographical features—the henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi, eyes like the pools of Heshbon by the gate of Rathrabbim, the dens of lions on the peak of Senir, and Hermon the mountain of leopards, the goats wandering shoulder to shoulder down the mountain slopes of Gilead. None of that kind of thing was in Ezekiel's visions. Forget Ezekiel, I told them; instead, rejoice in what we have, here and now, the beauty that you can see around you in the hills and streams.

Then I read to them from the book of Qoheleth. They did not understand it, and many of them dozed off. Especially when I was reading to them about how the wind goes around and around and around, and how the streams flow and flow and flow but the seas are never full. It did not bother me that they fell asleep, since the whole point seemed to be that nothing really matters; if they remember the words, or if they do not, whether they are wise or fools, they will end up in the same place, rubbing shoulders with dead animals. For who knows whether the ruach of man goes upward and the ruach of the beasts goes down into the Earth? Let them doze. The young woman over there, who reclines on the chest of the young man—do not stir up or awaken love till it please. Soon enough, that young woman will be given to a Babylonian guard; let her, while she can, listen to the breathing of her Jewish lover. I read to them that two is better than one; and I imagined I saw the couple snuggle more closely when I read this. I skipped the part about Solomon's riches; these people could not imagine such riches, and these poetic images would mean nothing to them. I also skipped the part about Qoheleth hating all the work of his hands; soon enough they would go back to their hateful labor in the dust. Only during this one brief festival would the maidens get their feet purple in the fruit of the vine.

By now the first stars were appearing in the sky. Jeremiah had once said, in the days when his cynicism was being replaced by hope, that it was no more likely that God would forget his covenant people than that the fixed order of sun and moon should depart. But what if everything we think we know about the sun and the moon and the stars, about the windows of heaven opening to pour out rain and the storehouses of the

wind, is wrong? What if the fixed order does indeed depart? Jeremiah had said that, if the heavens could ever be measured, only then would God abandon his people. But what if, someday, we *do* measure the heavens? What then? I wanted to tell this to the young people. But that is not what they need to hear. They do not need the message of Qoheleth right now. They need his—or her—poetry, but not the hopelessness.

And, so, I read to them the portion of Qoheleth's writings that are heartbreakingly beautiful. I knew this, if they remembered it from the shores of slumber, would give them a repast of beauty and purpose for another year.

> *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:*
> *A time to be born, and a time to die;*
> *A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;*
> *A time to kill, and a time to heal;*
> *A time to break down, and a time to build up;*
> *A time to weep, and a time to laugh;*
> *A time to mourn, and a time to dance;*
> *A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;*
> *A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*
> *A time to seek, and a time to lose;*
> *A time to keep, and a time to cast away;*
> *A time to rend, and a time to sew;*
> *A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*
> *A time to love, and a time to hate;*
> *A time for war, and a time for peace.*

I smiled for a moment, thinking about Jeremiah, who had plucked up and was now planting, who had wept and was now laughing, who was even now gathering stones together in the land between the rivers, if there were any stones there (I had heard there was only mud). Jeremiah, for whom there was never, never, never a time to keep silence, but only a time to speak. He is still, I bet, that same clueless boy I used to know.

Then I came to the passage in which Qoheleth said, *God has made everything beautiful in its own time.* I can never read this passage, quietly alone or in front of the harvest assembly, without being shot through with anger. *Everything beautiful in its own time? This is outrageous!* I felt like I was yelling at Jeremiah again, or raising my voice as I did that day at the Potsherd Gate when I lay Janiletha's delicate body on its altar stone. Even God, if there is one, cannot make this kind of death beautiful. Death can be beautiful, in peace at the end of a long wise life. The death of that soldier whom we ate was beautiful to us prophets. It was so satisfying to eat his arrogant heart. I hardly need mention King Zedekiah, and Trom-panazzar, for whom death was have been too merciful. But Janiletha? *God in Heaven, you just try to tell me that there was something*

good about her death! I defy you! IF THIS IS YOUR TRUTH, THEN I HATE YOU! Jeremiah had said, is anything too difficult for God to do? Well, apparently individual justice is too difficult for God. He can pour down suffering on a nation, but he could not direct suffering as punishment against those who deserved it, nor shield the innocent from it. Of course, the whole thing is ridiculous. God is not a person. He is like the wind and the waves, without a mind.

So, I just changed the passage in Qoheleth's writing. I kept the original wording in my scrolls, but I changed it every year when I read it at the assembly. In my mind I told them, *Do not try to figure everything out, why this or that or the other thing happens.* When I spoke, I told them, *Look for what is beautiful in everything, and find it where you can.* This is the nearest thing I can figure to the meaning of life. The only alternative to looking for beauty in all situations is to *not* look for beauty; avoiding the situations is not an option.

I was not sure that anyone heard me, until I saw the intense gaze of a young girl off to the side. She looked like me at her age. When I saw her, I knew that the wisdom of Qoheleth, such as it is, will not be lost.

Then I nodded to the musicians, and the drums began to beat. The young people woke up as I read from Qoheleth, "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do."

They did not notice that I sat quietly with my bread and wine—they gave me the best of both—and did not join in their merrymaking. I was thinking about life and history and all of the people I had known. I thought about the brilliant, passionate, and good Jeremiah, and about the snivelly and shifting King Zedekiah and about the noble Oba, and how they will all come to the same end, for there is one breath in man and in beast. *And I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the men and women of discernment, nor favor to the men of skill, but time and chance happen to them all.* And, so, what if the exiles return to the land, or not? What if the strong wind from the north, blowing over Jeremiah's pot on the porch, sweeps the Babylonian kings away as it swept away the kings of Judah? What if the sunshine of spring makes the almond branch bud into pleasant pink flowers? What happens will happen, what has been is what will be, and there is nothing new under the sun.

THE END

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Author's Notes on *The Almond Branch*

Nearly everything in this novel came from the book of Jeremiah, or the corresponding parts of the historical books of the Old Testament. I also included extensive portions from Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes, books that almost got lost from the Bible.

In addition, I included the following allusions:

Part one, chapter 1: Being hypnotized by a beam of light like a frog: One can hardly help but think of the words to the song *Joy to the World:* Jeremiah was a bullfrog, was a good friend of mine, I never understood a single word he said, but he always had mighty fine wine.

Part one, chapter 1: *Look upon my works:* from the poem *Ozymandias*.

Part one, chapter 3: To pluck out, to plant: this was actually the command God supposedly gave to Jeremiah.

Part one, chapter 4: I wrote words to the tune of *Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'*, which included a final verse *The creation of Earth is like music…*

Part one, chapter 7: The song Jeremiah sang was actually Isaiah's song.

Part two, chapter 15: Jeremiah's song should be set to the tune of *This Land Is My Land.*

Part two, chapter 16, co-prosperity sphere: The Imperialist Japanese, before World War Two, referred to their conquered territories as the *Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.* Also, the Babylonian precursors of the creation and flood accounts in Genesis can be found in books by Alexander Heidel.

Part two, chapter 19: Janiletha was the name of a little Hispanic girl who died out in the desert while crossing into the United States from Mexico. By the time her body was discovered, she was decomposing, but was recognizable by her green tennis shoes.

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Author's notes on the *Under the Sun* novels

The novels in this series are each independent of the other, and can be read in any order. What brings them together in a series is the theme. All four novels have emerged largely from my decades of close study of the Bible, at first as a fundamentalist, then as a reader who, emerging out of fundamentalism into an undefined faith, could appreciate the power and wisdom of the thoughts behind many of the books in the Bible. If you think you understand the Bible because you go, or went, to church, be prepared for some surprising things the preachers have not told you. These novels represent situations, across millennia, in which people have had to *think about what God's will might be, and why an all-powerful God would allow evil things to happen to good people.* In particular, all the novels contain extensive, almost verbatim quotes from Song of Solomon, which is explicit in its joyous sexual details, and Ecclesiastes, which is an almost agnostic book that says that humans are no different from animals: We just die, and that's the end of the story. Not only that, but these books have a powerful beauty that the millennia have not diminished. These are the books preachers of conservative churches and of isolated religious communities don't want young people, or old, to read. Rather than to just present these passages to the reader, I wanted to show imaginary people—Solomon's scribe, Jeremiah's female friend, Heloïse and Abélard, and an Amish woman—giving careful thought to these passages and confronting them in their own experiences.

Part of my motivation, in all four novels, was to break away from reading the Bible in a kind of religious sanctimonious trance, and to experience it as an intense work of living art. When you do this, the Bible becomes a document throbbing with life and love, on the level of any novel or movie, and not something to just be read in a church lectionary.

Another major motivation of the first two novels is to show the kings and prophets as flawed human beings. The Old Testament historical chapters present Solomon as a wise man, and incredibly rich. Archaeologists (see *The Bible Unearthed* by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman) have found no evidence of this. But even the Bible itself does not try to conceal Solomon's sins. Anyone reading Solomon's stories will see him as a shrewd politician who used wisdom as a tool rather than as a way of life. Jeremiah was just plain weird, no two ways about it, though not actually crazy and delusional like Ezekiel.

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.