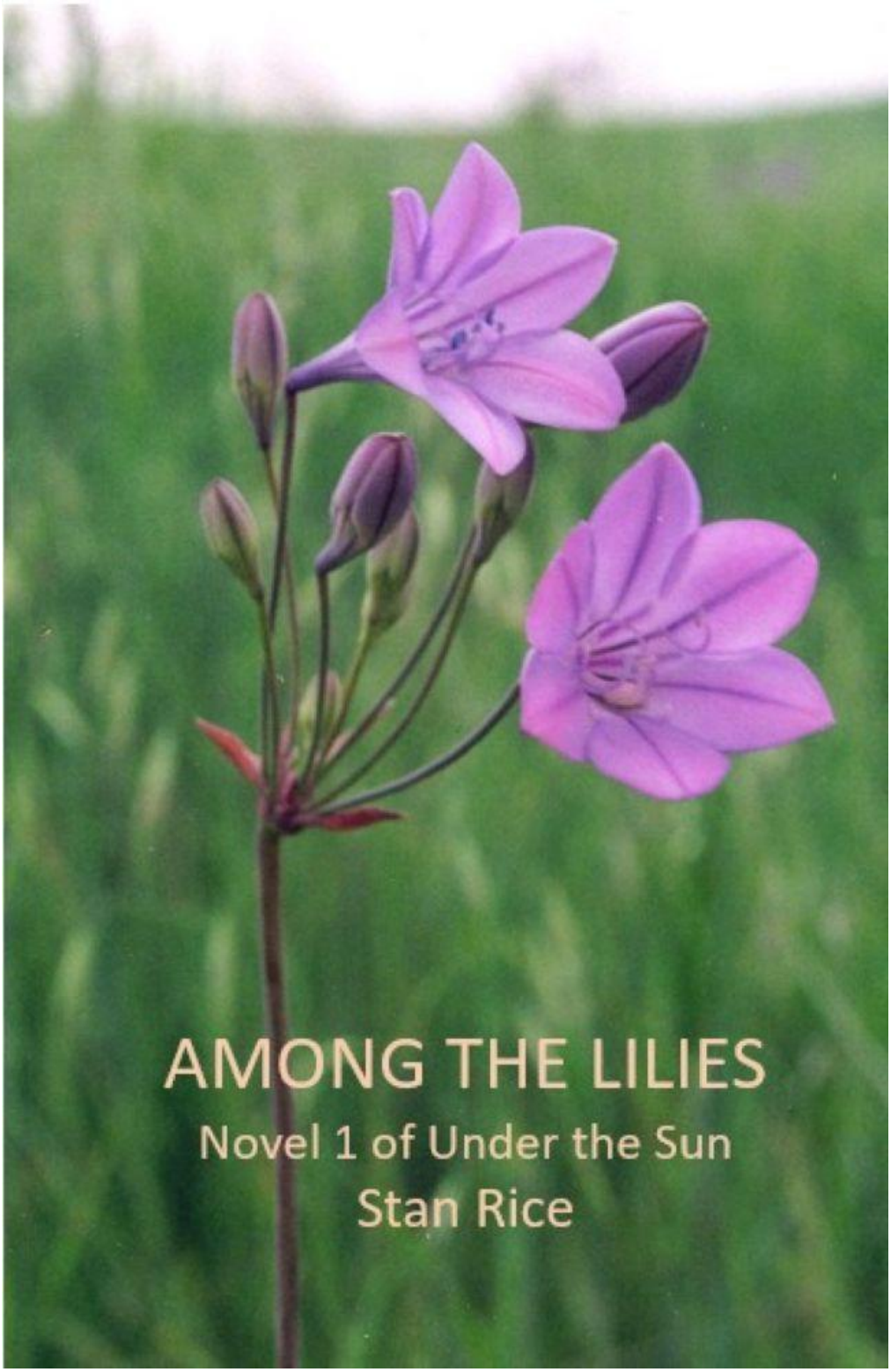

AMONG THE LILIES
Novel 1 of Under the Sun
Stan Rice

AMONG THE LILIES

Novel 1 in the series *Under the Sun*

Stan Rice

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Table of Contents

Summary of Among the Lilies
PROLOGUE
PART ONE
PART TWO
PART THREE
PART FOUR
POSTSCRIPT
Author's Notes on *Among the Lilies*
Author's notes on the *Under the Sun* novels
About the Author

To go to the place in the book, simply click on the title.

Summary of Among the Lilies

Elah, the narrator, is a servant in one of King Solomon's harems. While this sounds like the best job in the world, Elah's work is way below his mind. He spends all the time he can thinking and writing about what, if anything, God is doing under the sun. But then he meets and loves Henna, the only black woman in Jerusalem. She is confined to her stepfather's walled garden. Elah risks his life to meet Henna in the garden.

While in a cavalcade to the cedar forests of Lebanon, which he intends to cut down to make his palace, The King (who resembles Elvis) elevates Elah to the position of chief scribe. When The King sees Henna, he decides to add her to his stable of wives. Meanwhile Gomer, who becomes the woman in charge of the royal kitchens and is an expert in poisonous wild plants, is not at all pleased. She wants Elah for herself, and doesn't she try to do something about it. But she cannot keep Elah from meeting Henna again. His quest fails.

Elah becomes a leader of revolutionary forces against The King. Elah finally finds Henna in the muddy eroded landscape that used to be the forests of Lebanon. The King captures Elah and offers him the choice between death and not quite being dead.

PROLOGUE

I looked into Henna's glistening eyes. I saw my entire life there. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her deep black skin radiated warmth. But it was not just her physical beauty. Her mind and spirit were like a breath of Heaven, like mountain breezes. She stood beside me as a goddess beside a slave. Yet she loved me, despite the sorry pallor of my Jewish skin.

I could have been the most blessed of mortals if I could have spent my life with her. But Henna was one of the hundreds of wives that belonged to King Solomon. At that moment, The King's guards watched with their swords drawn, and The King himself waited bemusedly for my decision. I knew that life without Henna was unthinkable. I could die defiantly, and the guards were ready to dispatch me if I chose this option. But there was another choice I could make, one in which I could spend every day with Henna for as long as either of us should live. The King had just told me that I could either be a dead lion or a living dog. It was I who wrote those words, and he threw them back at me now.

I looked more deeply into Henna's eyes, hoping that I would find there the answer to my dilemma. But I saw only love.

It was then that I made my choice.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

"I know what your problem is, little buddy," Eli said to me.

"What makes you think I have a problem?" I responded.

"Well, for one thing," said Eli as he sat on his cot in our room. His voice was deep as a cave and as gravelly as a wadi. "You spend all your spare time writing on those little scraps of parchment. What are you writing about?"

"God has spoken to me," I said to him.

"What did God say?"

"God told me that there is much that I do not know."

"Well," Eli said, "I guess you can say that again. I always said you didn't know much."

"I think God meant that none of us know very much about him."

"What else did God say to you?"

"Well, I'm not sure he actually said anything to me, in words that I could hear. I just felt them."

"That sounds pretty confusing to me."

"It is through confusion that we come to understand God," I said.

"Well, in that case," Eli said, "I guess you're pretty qualified to study God."

It wasn't just the fact that I was always writing that concerned Eli. It was what I was writing about. "You write all those poems about the weariness of life," he continued. "The sun rises, the sun sets, then it rises again. The rivers keep flowing to the sea, but the sea is never full. There is nothing new under the sun. That sort of stuff. Am I right?"

"That's pretty much it," I admitted. My voice was much milder than his.

"And about the Will of God," continued Eli. "As if anybody can ever know what *that* is. And that's just the poems you told me about. Sometimes you stay up writing half the night." Eli had told me that neither the candlelight nor the sound of my stylus kept him awake, so I believe he was genuinely concerned about me, rather than annoyed. "No, little buddy," he said. "I know what your problem is. You need a woman."

"But I'm surrounded by women already," I said. Eli and I were both servants in one of King Solomon's harems, in Jerusalem, the capital city of the twelve tribes of Israel. We worked in Regiment 25. Eat your hearts out, any of you men who may happen to read this someday. You must think that I had the best job in the world. I was inundated with women, most of them beautiful and none of them veiled. But they all belonged to the King. I could look at them all I wanted to, and they wanted me to look at them a lot. The only men who could touch them were the eunuchs who bathed them. At first it was frustrating for me to look without touching, especially when they teased me. But after a while it just became boring. And that's why my poetry was about the weariness of the world rather than about the raptures of love.

"A woman," repeated Eli. "Then you'd have something interesting to write about."

"If women were going to inspire me, they would have done so already," I said.

"I don't mean the ones here," said Eli, sighing as he stood up and stretched. "I mean one you can touch."

"A prostitute?" I asked. It was officially against regulations for us servants to visit prostitutes even during our spare time, but there were ways of doing so. Forgiveness is easier than permission. If Eli had ever tried this, he had not told me; but I did not dare to go out into the gritty world where prostitutes and their men could see my naïveté at a glance.

"For the time being," said Eli. "But that brings us to another problem. Sure, we have good jobs right now, but what about the future? We've both got good prospects—you are an excellent writer, if you'd just find something happy to write about. And me? I'm good with numbers. Someday you will be one of The King's scribes, maybe even the Head Scribe, and I will be the Chief Steward. But what good is it, if we die without sons to carry on our family names? No, little buddy, what you need is a wife."

"Well," I said, "if marriage is such a wonderful thing, why haven't you gotten a wife?"

"I'm working on it," said Eli. I knew that at least once a month Eli visited his family, who arranged meetings between him and eligible women.

"Where am I supposed to find a wife?" I asked. "At least you have a family. The only family I have is a brother and sister-in-law who live very far away. Sure, I have all my needs taken care of right here at the Regiment: good food, a nice place to live. But no woman's father would be interested in a man without a family, without property, and whose entire possessions consist of a few sheets of parchment. If I do become Head Scribe, then I can look for a woman. But until then, I'll just sit here and write poems and serve dinner to the wives and concubines."

Perhaps this is why I considered life to be heavy. If I ever did meet a woman who considered me a good prospect, perhaps the straight line of progress, raising sons to carry me into immortality, would have taken precedence in my mind over the endless circling of the wind.

Eli came over and sat beside me. "Did you hear about the sunburned woman?"

"Who?" I asked.

"The black girl that Bildad the Shuhite brought with him." Bildad had come from far away, from Shuah, and was as mysterious as he was rich. "He adopted a girl from south of Nubia. She is a woman now," said Eli, looking into a distance that was not there.

"What's so significant about her?" I asked. There were a couple of Nubian concubines in our regiment and even a few Nubian families in Jerusalem.

"She's not really Nubian. As I said, south of Nubia. Rumor has it," said Eli, lowering his voice and moving closer, "that she is the only person from her distant land in the whole kingdom of Israel. And rumor further has it that her country is very powerful and rich. And, they say, the woman is very beautiful."

"You know how rumors are," I said. "Any woman who hides from public view is imagined to be beautiful."

"No, my man, I mean *really* beautiful."

"Tamar the Nubian is beautiful," I said, referring to the tall and graceful slave in our regiment. "Come to think of it, I've never seen a Nubian woman who wasn't beautiful. But I imagine that this is because the ugly ones don't make it all the way to Jerusalem. It's a long trip."

"I mean, more beautiful than she. For one thing, her skin."

"Why do you call her the sunburned woman?"

"Nubian women have brown skin. But this woman's skin is actually black."

"Black?" I asked.

"Black as night, black as the pupil of an eye, black as charcoal."

"And this is beautiful?" I asked. "I mean, any more beautiful than any other color."

"All I know is, men who have seen her say that her utter blackness gives her an irresistible allure."

"Dark brown," I said. "I think you've been hearing exaggerated rumors."

"Oh, and there's more," said Eli.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"Besides her own language—which is not like the Nubian language, I hear—she can read and write Hebrew. And not just. I mean, she can write beautifully. Poetry and such like."

Now Eli had my attention. A beautiful woman? Lots of those. But one who can write beautiful Hebrew poetry? I began to fantasize that someday this woman and I might exchange our writings, even if we never saw one another. This was almost as stimulating to me as the thought that I might see her or touch her. I wondered if it was such a good idea for us to exchange writings, considering what I mostly wrote about.

"I should have thought before telling you about the sunburned woman," said Eli. "Now you are going to be even more depressed than before. Because, of course, neither of us has even a chance to meet her." He left the room to do some errands.

I sat on my cot, looking at the parchment scraps around me. I had some good blank parchments, made from skins of The King's own sheep, but I was saving them for the final draft that I never seemed to start. I have an obsession with writing. If I were lost in a forest, I would have to find a cave where I could scratch on the walls with rocks or on pieces of wood with charcoal, and only then I would worry about food. And why not? If, as Eli says, my only alternative to writing is the love of a woman—to be loved by a woman rather than to just lust after one, or after dozens—then I had best stick with my writing. Unrequited love, in past ages, today, and forever. There is nothing new under the sun.

*

My name, Elah, refers to the small tree that produces pistachio nuts. I like the name, and it is not an uncommon one. I was, however, the only boy with that name in the Jerusalem neighborhood where I was born. Whenever my friends would eat elah nuts, they would then run over to me and pretend to gnaw on my skin. It was sort of funny the first five hundred times. One day, a girl was watching us. She was also eating elah nuts from a little bag. When the others left,

she came over and sat next to me. Tamar, that was her name. What ever happened to her? My mother, God rest her soul, told me her family had moved to Beersheba. Why did they do that! That's down in the Negev Desert! But her father was a merchant. To a businessman a desert is rich because traders travel through it.

Tamar looked at me. "Elah nuts are very delicious," she said. "I could live off of them. I have no need of honey, if I have elah nuts." She looked away from me and said, "I think your name is wonderful. You should be proud of it."

What could I say? I couldn't say anything about her name. Tamar! There must be thousands of women by that name. Were I to seek her now, everyone would laugh at me. *You are looking for a woman named Tamar! It is like looking for rocks in the Negev.* What could I say? I could not say to her, *You are beautiful.* We were both at the age right before boys and girls become aware of one another as delightful beings. As she continued eating, I imagined that she was feasting upon my thoughts, my dreams, everything I yearned for. I said, "Your words are beautiful."

She looked into my eyes. I detected a sadness and just the beginning of tears. I imagined later that she went home and cried. Her mother called her back inside their house. She must have thought we were flirting, and that we did not know what we were getting into. Why else would a boy who is not quite young man be talking with a girl who is not quite a young woman? Perhaps she was right.

I am satisfied with the name Elah. It described me perfectly as I grew into manhood. I had a continual interest in trees and flowers. As soon as I learned to write, I recorded descriptions of all the plants that I saw in Jerusalem. And outside of Jerusalem. I remember how amazed I was the first time I hiked on the hills around the city. There were little oak trees, of course, but also elah trees. Jerusalem has many orchards of elah trees, but the ones I saw out in the forest were wild ones. Elah trees did not have to be nurtured in gardens, like the lotuses in the pools of rich families or the oasis date palms. I imagined that God, through the boughs of the elah, scattered his blessings not just upon us humans but upon the animals of the forest as well. After all, on the sixth day of creation, God gave the world not only to humans but to all the animals, even to the creeping things, and gave it to all of us creatures for enjoyment.

Of course, I could not actually see God. I could see the birds, and the weeds of the vacant lots, and the fig trees. But the things they taught me in school, all about the laws of Moses and about God appearing in lightning and thunder atop Mount Sinai, did not seem real. I remember the disappointment I felt when I watched a thunderstorm and saw no God there. And so I began thinking. Thinking about everything.

By the time I finished school, I had no family. I had to find a job. Then the opportunity to work in at Regiment 25 in Jerusalem came along. The company of women, room and board, and time to keep writing. And the job was in Jerusalem, where I imagined there might be further opportunities. I was briefly thrilled.

*

As servants of The King, Eli and I spent all of every day, save for occasional vacations, helping to herd Regiment 25 of the King's Mares. The King had so many women that he could not keep track of them. We servants were the ones who assigned numbers to them and organized them into Regiments of twenty-four. So I only had to remember twenty-four of the women. Our regiment was Number 25, but none of us ordinary servants knew how many regiments there were. Twenty-five regiments of twenty-four…I tallied this up one time, but do not remember the number I got. But of course, there must be more than twenty-five regiments. The Chief Steward must have had a complete list.

In our regiment (which we unofficially call the Regiment of the Leviathans) we had two women who were officially wives, and sixteen who were officially concubines. Wives and concubines got the same connubial rights and compensation—in the form of room, board, and luxuries for themselves and benefits for their families—but only the wives had the right of inheritance. And didn't the wives let the concubines know it. Every day. The two wives had obviously been very beautiful women some time ago, when The King first bedded them, but by the time I knew them they had eaten too many dates and elah nuts. They slathered on the perfume as if they were embalming themselves. And since they knew no one could touch them, and that Solomon would not see them except at times that the servants arranged—and these times were as infrequent as Solomon could make them—they slouched around and let their enormous wiggly female roundnesses fall out of their garments. Hence the name, Regiment of the Leviathans. We considered "Regiment of the Sows" but that was already taken. Leviathans. That name was not fair to the concubines, most of whom were attractive, even the older ones. They had to be. The servants kept up a rating system for them, which did not much alter their connubial rights or their contractual compensation but certainly affected the gratuities they got when The King called on one of them. To top it off, both of the wives were named Tamar. Neither one of them, nor any of the three concubines named Tamar, was the Tamar I had once known. Maybe my childhood friend is safest out in the desert; at least she probably didn't end up in one of Solomon's Regiments.

And then there were six female slaves. They had more comfortable lives than most people in the Kingdom of Israel. But they had no rights. They had to bow to all the rest of us, and they lived in fear of the servants abusing them. I never abused them. I never asked Eli if he had done so. We could not actually rape them, because the King did not want their furrows contaminated with anyone's seed but his own. But I have heard that there are many and creative ways in which the slaves could be explored, conquered, and degraded.

The slaves were by far the most interesting women in the Regiment of the Leviathans. One of them had red hair—no, I do not mean hair colored with pigments, I mean hair that was somewhere between scarlet and gold, like one of The King's robes. I mean, it came that way out of her head! I swear I am not making this up. And her eyes were blue. No, I do not mean blue paint around her eyes. I mean the irises of the eyes themselves. How enchanting—and I mean

this literally, as an enchantment. Her irises seemed so open, as if she had no secrets, yet this only made the pupils a deeper black, hiding the story of her life, which she would tell no one, and hiding the heat of her resentment against the King she had to pretend to love. And her arms had splotches of color all over them, the same reddish color as her hair, against her alabaster skin. Lots and lots of little splotches. I often wondered how far into her clothes these splotches went. Solomon really liked her, but even though he was king he could not, or at least did not try to, change the law—she was a Gentile slave. Another Gentile slave had yellow hair. I mean this literally. And she too had blue eyes. Another Gentile slave had brown skin. She was the Nubian Tamar. She was very tall and thin. Because she seemed to have no breasts, the concubines talked about her with pity. But the tall brown woman never seemed to lack confidence in her beauty. Her hair was tightly curled and hung in long combers from behind the band on her head. She moved gracefully. And she was strong. One time I was trying to move a table. I was huffing and puffing and sweating. I did not hear her approach. When I saw her, I moved back, and she grabbed the table and moved it smoothly and firmly. She left without looking at me. She had an animal power. I believed that someday she might jump over the walls as easily as an eland and return to her country.

Our lives as servants were not very interesting. Did I say that already? We made sure the women got fed. Their food was pretty good. It was better than the food prepared for us servants, but we got the leftovers of the good food. Fine lamb with spices, cumin and mint and garlic, with yogurt sauce. Tabouli with slivers of almonds. Cakes of honey and elah nuts. Mint tea and, sometimes, tea from the trade routes, which had the most indescribable aroma, not sweet, not piquant, but somehow deeply satisfying. And always tahini, sometimes mixed with eggplant. And always bread, baked by a mysterious small woman who looked like a girl and who took her work very seriously.

We also waited at table for the evening meal. The two wives were insufferable. They were always complaining about the food. The meat was too dry, or too wet; the yogurt looked like vomit; and so on. The wives always spat in their leftovers, so we never got to eat any of theirs.

Oh God in the heavens, it got worse. The wives thought they could sing. I do not know if real leviathans—those large creatures in the ocean that, when stranded on land, look like the wives, but in the ocean they move as sleek as hawks—actually sing. But if they do I imagine they would sound like these two women. The stupidity of the words that the wives used in their songs showed that they must think about nothing, utterly nothing, all day, which has any relevance to wisdom. In their songs, the sky was like the sea and the sea was like the sky. Cheeks were like pomegranates and pomegranates were like cheeks. Pillars were like noses and noses were like pillars. Breasts were like camel backs; and camel backs were like breasts, except when they were like the rod of Solomon that they are riding. They thought gold and silver were actually sexual. It was, at first, all I could do to keep from laughing as I stood off to the side of the tables during the shrieking serenades, to which the poor harpist had to improvise an accompaniment—and for which in turn the wives insulted him.

But it got even worse. Some of the concubines could tell that I was trying to control my laughter. They, of course, did not have to control their laughter. They could whisper to one another and giggle, pretending that they were giggling about something other than the wheezing leviathan songs. Then one of them called me over and pretended to whisper a request for some extra yogurt. But when I came close she whispered, *Isn't there something you can do to take that poor animal out of its misery?* Dear God, I nearly collapsed. I had to run into the kitchen and sit on the floor, the tears rolling as I laughed. The cook, and the artisan of the bread—the young woman who looked like a girl—watched me in sympathy. And after that it was sort of like a sport for the concubines to whisper things to me and try to get me to laugh in the presence of the wives. They never quite succeeded.

*

In my own secret writings, I called myself Qoheleth, the Orator. I imagined this name to refer to an orator who has something wise to say to the people. The people I knew had no desire for wisdom, so I assumed I would never actually be an orator, just a secret scribbler. Besides, the things that I wrote would neither have roused the patriotic forces against our enemies, nor have entertained the people, nor have drawn money from them into The King's coffers. At first I was inspired by the return of life each spring, when the rains would moisten the fragrant ground and the lilies of the field would grow. But after a while, I began to realize that it was just the same thing over and over. What is the point? The scriptures don't help much. One priest added up all of the years in the scriptures and figured out that God created the world a few thousand years ago. He didn't get much of a response. Who cares? And for me, I knew that his ideas were ridiculous. All you have to do is to see that the wind blows, the rivers run, the mountains erode, and everything just goes on as it always has, pointlessly, and that this must have been occurring for long ages, perhaps forever. The prophets say that God is going to come and make everything right. But when has God ever done this? The mountains are silent. The cries of the poor and downtrodden echo off of them. And how can we even know what God is? We use the word *ruach* to describe what God is made of. This is the word we use for the breath of the body and for the wind in the trees. Are these all the same thing? When the wind blows in the trees, is that God passing through? Words, that's all they are, and we don't know what we're talking about. Who can know God's will? Yet I could not stop writing about it.

Chapter 2

Then came the day that lifted me out of the weariness of life under the sun.

Eli and I were assigned to accompany senior administrative officials to visit prominent Jerusalem families and discuss their contributions to a large building project that The King was planning. And it came to pass that I was selected to accompany a senior administrator to the house of Bildad the Shuhite, the stepfather of the black beauty.

I assumed I would not see the woman. But I knew that I would certainly see Bildad's walled garden, the best in Jerusalem. It was rumored that he had brought with him cuttings of plants that had originally been in the now destroyed Hanging Gardens of Babylon. He also had the popular new tree in Jerusalem gardens, the apple tree, from far northwest of the land of the Hittites. Their spring flowers, covering the tree before the leaves emerged, were hardly less pleasant than the uniquely flavored fruits. But Bildad, they said, had lots of different kinds of apples. And something called apricots.

When we arrived, The King's top administrator (his name was Eliphaz) introduced me as his assistant and mentioned to Bildad that I had an interest in trees and flowers. When Bildad heard this, his eyes widened and he invited me, then and there, to explore his garden. He told me to look for the trees with globular green fruits. The fruits were not ripe yet but would eventually have a color somewhere between red and yellow. Even the leaves had a unique odor. The people far to the east, farther to the east than any of us, including himself, had ever traveled, ate the fruits and even flavored their spiced meat dishes with the leaves.

Eliphaz told me, "Well, go on. Explore the garden. The door to the garden is right over there. Just come back within the hour."

Those moments were the most pleasant that I had ever spent up to that point in my life. Large trees created deep shade. A gentle breeze created a susurrus in the leaves. I found the trees with the scented leaves to which he referred. I found the apples too. And I recognized the different spices, which grow in the hills north of the Great Sea. And then, something I had heard only in rumors: in a pool, there was not only lotus, but also papyrus reeds from Egypt.

It was then that I saw her. I crouched behind a tree and continued to watch her. It was not my intention to surprise or upset her, but my astonishment was so great that I could not move. I hardly breathed.

Her skin gleamed in the light of the sun but was otherwise like night itself. Her hair, also black, fell in braids down upon her shoulders and over her lustrous colorful robe. I have a vague memory that the robe was red and yellow with complex patterns, and covered her form loosely, with large holes for her head and arms and which hung lightly on her shoulders. The features of her face, were they found in the face of a Jewess, might have been uninteresting: a large flat nose and swollen lips. But on her face, as part of her body, they were perfection. She had not noticed me, for she was reading a parchment. No, she was writing on the parchment. Oh, sweet God, forget everything I said about the weariness of the sun and wind and rivers and seas. To see this garden, then to see this woman who had a kind of beauty I had not previously imagined, and then

to see her writing, perhaps, the poetry of which I had heard. I knew that I would have to let her see me, as soon as I could awaken from my vision. Even in the shade of the tree, I was sweating.

I did not have time to introduce myself to her. She was sweating also. Then with a slight movement of her shoulders, she allowed her robe to fall down to her waist. I gasped when I saw her breasts, perfect in ways I had never seen but only heard described. Her skin was as black inside the robe as out. Then she looked over and saw me. She gasped—she did not scream—and grabbed her robe against her body, dropping her parchment and pen. We stared at one another, not moving.

A slight wind started to blow away the parchment toward a lotus pond. I jumped to action and grabbed it to return it to her. I looked at it but could not understand the marks upon it. I kept looking at it because I was afraid to meet her eyes, black pupils surrounded by brown irises surrounded by a perfect alabaster.

"Please forgive me," I started to say. Then I realized she was speaking at the same time.

"Please forgive me," she was saying also, her words to a slightly different rhythm than mine.

"I did not mean to intrude upon your privacy," I said, trembling, and utterly sincere. But I could not look away from her body.

"I did not know anyone was here," she said calmly. "And you were just walking in the garden, I assume with my father's permission." I nodded my head, drops of sweat falling from my forehead. "How could you know that you would even see me, much less that I would drop my robe from my shoulders! But it is hot. In the land of my birth, because of the heat, women do not wear clothing on the tops of their bodies. I let the cloth fall without even thinking about it. Please, relax! You have not offended me. And please do not be offended at the swarthiness of my skin. My ancestors spent too much time in the sun, and they baked!"

I was going to tell her in no uncertain terms that the color of her skin was not at all offensive to me. But all I could think about was the beauty of her voice. It was as deep as a man's but sweet. And the delicacy of her accent. And her use of the word, which I repeated, "Swarthiness?"

"Why, yes. It is a perfectly good Hebrew word, is it not? I am still learning your language, so please correct me if…"

"It is a perfectly good word. I have just never heard anyone use it. I have never heard anyone speak Hebrew so poetically."

"Well," she chuckled, "I try. I am writing poetry in Hebrew." She looked at the parchment that I held. "How do you like it?"

"It is beautiful," I said.

"How do you know? You are holding it upside down."

I turned the parchment around. When I read what she had written, I could hardly believe its beauty. Of course, I was also still in a trance, and I remember nothing of what I read that day. Soon I could not read any more, and I realized it was because I was crying.

"It is so beautiful," I said. "And you. I praise you for your beauty."

"You should thank God for my beauty. I simply received it. I had nothing to do with it."

When I looked up from the parchment, I saw her watching my face intently. And she was very nearly crying herself. She spoke without hesitation. "A man crying? And you are a strong man. You cannot be crying from babyness—is that a word?—or fear. Why, I believe you cry from happiness. At my writing. At me. This, I was not expecting. What I was expecting was that a man would stare at my swarthiness and think I am some kind of animal. And then think of the carnal touch. I fear I might be put in The King's menagerie." Just the previous week there had been a public celebration when a caged lion was brought up from south of Nubia, perhaps from the land that produced not just lions but this beautiful woman, and added to the dozen other astonishing beasts in his collection.

I could hear men's voices. I knew Eliphaz and Bildad were approaching. I spoke desperately. "I have to see you again. I cannot live if I do not see you again."

"Do not say that," she said. "Of course you shall live. Men do not just drop dead."

"I meant, I feel as if I am dying at the thought of parting from you."

She was not sure what to do next, other than to shuffle back into her robe, briefly revealing her breasts. "They will not let you do this. Unless you are a rich man to whom my father can give me."

I bit my lip as I continued crying. "No," I squeaked. "I work for The King, but I have nothing of my own."

She leaned toward me and spoke quietly. "I am Henna," she said.

"Like the henna plant," I said.

"I do not need henna to be dark," she said.

"A Hebrew name?"

"You could not pronounce my original name, even if I could remember it. All I remember is that I am from the Lemba tribe. Before Bildad rescued me from the merchants, I was just 'that black beast.'"

"Oh, sweet God, I am so happy that you were rescued."

"God? You called him El, just like the Canaanite tribes that you so despise. You use the same name for God as they. But which God is really up in the sky? Or down in the Earth—I think perhaps you look in the wrong direction."

"Oh, there you are, Elah," said Eliphaz.

"Elah," Henna pronounced my name as if it were a sweet fruit. "At least you could have told me your name."

"Ah, I see you have met my adopted daughter," said Bildad.

There was more conversation, to which I must have grunted answers at the right time. Eliphaz touched my shoulder and said that it was time for us to leave. I nearly fainted.

When I looked back to see Henna, she was pointing toward the wall of the garden. I did not understand. But in the purple world of my closed eyes, I saw an image. An image of a lattice window in the wall.

Chapter 3

"Oh, you are in bad shape, my man," Eli said to me when I told him about Henna.

"I am sick with love," I said. "Do you know what I mean?"

Eli took a deep breath. "No, not really. I know the desire for a woman's body as well as the next man, but that desire has never weakened me the way you describe. I've never been, as you say, sick with love. Here, have some wine."

"I can enjoy no wine except from the bowl of her navel," I said.

Eli came close to me. "Be careful what you say. Her stepfather is a powerful man. From what you describe, it sounds as if he likes you, but if you were to be a serious suitor?"

"I must see her, or I will die," I said.

"You are worse than sick," he said. "Of course, you could offer yourself to her as a eunuch."

"Please don't say that," I whined. Then I mumbled, "She invited me back."

"What? Did she say this?"

"No, but she gestured it. I think."

"The sweat and tears were stinging your eyes. You sure you don't want some wine?"

"I remember, at least I think I remember, the last view I had of her. She was pointing to a lattice window in the garden wall."

"Now, let me get this straight. I take it that she did not tell her stepfather that she wanted to see you, as if that would have made any difference. Right. A lattice window in the wall. That sounds like she was inviting you to a secret tryst. You must have been imagining it. Forget about her."

"It was early in the afternoon."

"The perfect time for you to be having an illusion. If you're thinking about trying to go there…"

"This week, I have no duties in the evening. I'll take that time to go looking for her. I'll remember you when you are feeding the leviathans, and I am springing through the streets of Jerusalem like a young buck."

"This is crazy. Your absence will be noticed, even if it is your week to have evenings off."

"No one will know unless a certain party calls it to their attention."

"Well, I suppose if someone asks I could tell him you were out looking for a prostitute. Just remember. I am not involved in any of this."

"I think I would recognize the street. I don't recall the name…"

"The King renamed all the streets, you know. They are all called Solomon's Glorious Way. But they are numbered. You remember the number?"

"No."

Eli became agitated. “Give it up, man! Look, with your writing, and your knowledge of gardens and the local mountains…You know that The King highly esteems these sorts of things. He fancies that he is a great writer himself. Have you read any of those proverbs he wrote?”

“Dear God, yes.” I laughed, which momentarily relieved my tenseness. “All this stuff about, *He who works for his own glory is doomed, but he who toils diligently for The King will be glorified.* And, *He who glories in his own wisdom will stumble, but he who delights in The King’s wisdom will walk without stumbling.* And, *He who does what is good will be approved, but he who works evil will be disapproved.* I think you could summarize his entire opus of proverbs as, *It’s good to be good and it’s bad to be bad.* Surely future generations will forget about Solomon’s proverbs. Especially since he equates goodness with a reverence for himself.” By now we were both laughing.

“You are ten times the writer The King is,” said Eli. “He will soon uplift you to being one of his scribes, and I don’t mean just for official documents. I mean, you could have a job writing all that stuff you already write on your own time. A bright future beckons, and soon. And I mean it. I’m not just saying that.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“Why should I need to compliment you?”

“You just said I have a bright future. I am a valuable person to know.”

“Well, so am I. The King knows how good I am with numbers. I can calculate in my head the number of Mares. And the number of measures of flour that the storehouse needs to buy for them each week, which is no mean task, since consumption varies depending on the number of feasts. I, my friend, will be Chief Steward. And you will be Chief Scribe. And we will each say about the other, *I knew him back when.* But none of this will happen if you sneak around Bildad’s garden—even if you can find it—and stare in the lattice window like a jackal. You’ll be out on your rear end begging in the street. The King will someday put us in a position to have any woman that is *reasonably* available. But not that princess from the Land of Sunburns.”

“It’s not sunburns. Her skin is black even on the parts where the sun seldom shines…”

“Quit thinking about her, you idiot! You’re going to ruin everything. And I won’t be able to help you get out of it!”

“I could request Bildad to hire me to work in his garden. Or, or expand it! I could improve it, with my knowledge of trees…”

“Yes, and you would then be able to slide off into the shade with Ebony Woman with the Alabaster Eyes. That is, assuming that she wants you.”

“Oh, she does.”

“I wouldn’t presume. But this affair could go on only until you got discovered. Or only until Bildad chooses a husband for her. Then it’s just you and the garden.”

“If I cannot make love to her, or at least see her, then I might as well die right now.” I stood up. “I will present an ultimatum. I will tell Bildad, either I become the lover of his stepdaughter, or I will kill myself then and there in front of him.”

"He would just laugh, and The King's men would haul you off and make you into a eunuch. For the leviathans."

*

I did not find Bildad's garden the first evening. I wandered randomly, only to discover myself going round and round like the wind and ending up at the same places over and over.

All the next day when I worked, my mind wandered. I thought about why God would create such desire in us as I felt for Henna, and yet prevent us from fulfilling that desire. This got me to thinking about what the Will of God could possibly be.

So I went to talk to the priests about this and my other Big Questions. But I found that all the priests were interested in is making sure there were enough tithes to keep their operation going, and to think of all the possible ways that there might be to violate God's law, and to avoid those violations. The priests calculated exactly how many steps you can take on the Sabbath without transgressing The Law. And in their herb gardens, they were very careful to pick exactly one-tenth of the mint and dill, and put it on the altar, and later when the cumin ripens, to count the seeds and put exactly one-tenth of them on the altar as well, to satisfy the tithe. They visibly agonized when the number of cumin seeds was not divisible by ten, and they sometimes had to cut off one-third of a cumin seed to make it come out even. The priests had to specially approve the menu of every meal to make sure that there was not the slightest suggestion that one of Moses' dietary laws might be subverted. Not just to avoid boiling an animal in its mother's milk, as prohibited by the Torah, but in the milk of any other kind of animal. Or the meat of birds either, even though birds do not have milk. The priests personally inspected all cloth that is used for priestly vestments or for Temple curtains, to make certain that different kinds of fibers were never woven together, something also prohibited in scripture.

When I arrived at the Temple, I found the priests discussing *tefellin.* These are the wooden boxes in which small pieces of parchment, each with a quotation from the Torah, were placed; the priests bound them to their foreheads and to their arms.

"Deuteronomy says that the Word of God must be bound upon our arms and between our eyes," said one priest, who had a firm deep voice. "This implies that the *entire* Torah must be so bound."

"But this is impossible!" said another priest, who had a gravelly voice. "How can you put the entire Torah into a box and bind it to your forehead?"

"There must be a way," said the deep voiced priest. "God would not have commanded something that is impossible to do."

I had to think about that one for a moment. By allowing me to see and inevitably to love Henna, God was, in fact, compelling me to do something that he was preventing me from doing. But I was sure the priests did not want to talk about my desire for a woman. They wanted to talk about a box.

"Such a box would be so large that, once it is bound to your forehead, you would be unable to lift your head!" protested the gravelly voiced priest.

"It depends entirely on how small you write," interjected a third priest, who had a high nasal voice. "Moreover, it's not like you have to go around all day with a big box tied to your head."

"Is that so?" asked the gravelly voiced priest. "Moses makes no mention of a time limitation for wearing the tefellin. We must wear them, I presume, even when we sleep."

"In that case," said the nasal voiced priest, "it also depends on the kind of wood you use for the box. I hear there are some trees with very light-weight wood far to the south, in the lands of unending warmth."

"Moreover," said the gravelly voiced priest, "the second book of the Torah says that the Word of God must also be a memorial in our mouths. Now how are we supposed to do *that?*"

"Perhaps," I spoke up to them, "God simply wants us to remember His words, in the brains that are inside of our foreheads, and to do them, with our arms, and to speak them, with our mouths."

There was utter silence except for the chirping of a swallow that had found its way inside the hallway of the Temple.

"Who are *you?*" the deep voiced priest asked.

"I am one of the King's servants," I said. "I work in Regiment 25. I came to ask you to share your wisdom with me."

"Wait until you grow up a little more," said the gravelly voiced priest. "Wisdom is for the hoary head. You look to be at the age where you have to figure out women. That will preoccupy you enough, without having to think about God's wisdom."

"Whatever *that* might be," said the nasal voiced priest.

"Besides, we don't have time for wisdom," said the deep voiced priest. "As you can see, we are trying to figure out righteousness. If we ever get righteousness figured out, we can think about wisdom."

"The King is a great admirer of wisdom," said the nasal voiced priest.

"Well, let The King figure it out, then," said the deep voiced priest. "Although I would think The King's time would be better spent by trying to beat some discipline into that son of his." Everybody knew what a brat Rehoboam was. Rehoboam thought he knew the answer to every question, except for the questions that did not interest him, which were most questions. Sometimes he was downright cruel to servants, especially to the women. He had his own harem, quite separate from those of The King, and from the rumors I heard at my place of employment, Rehoboam was more interested in humiliating the women than in enjoying them.

"Well, young man," said the gravelly voiced priest. "Please state your business—aside from the vague reference to wisdom—so that we can get on with our important discussion."

"Now, be polite to the boy," said the nasal voiced priest. "The King might have sent him. And we wouldn't want to inconvenience The King."

"The King would not want to know what we think about wisdom," said the deep voiced priest. "Or if he did, he would certainly not send this boy to consult us on his behalf."

"Well," said the nasal voiced priest, "it depends, does it not, on whether The King was preoccupied with something else at the moment."

"Preoccupied!" said the deep voiced priest. "I'll say. How does he do it? He preoccupies himself with those women all day and all night. And a wife, once in a while."

"Or else that is what The King wants us to think," said the gravelly voiced priest. "We don't exactly know what goes on in the harems. Maybe that big scepter he carries around with him is just for show. I highly doubt that this boy here is going to tell us."

"I am sworn to secrecy," I answered.

"And you had best keep our words secret from The King," said the gravelly voiced priest.

"You mean, *your* words," said the deep voiced priest. "*I* didn't call The King's scepter into question."

"I will say nothing to The King about our conversation," I told them, not admitting to them that The King never talked to me anyway.

"Get to the point," the deep voiced priest said, grabbing an elah nut from a plate and biting it sharply.

"I came to ask you what you might think about why God allows us to suffer."

"That's easy enough," said the deep voiced priest. "We suffer so that God can see whether we are willing to obey him even when it is painful to do so. Oh, and if you are going to ask what the meaning of life is, it's the same answer."

"Well, then," I continued, "What might be the purpose behind God's laws?"

"You mean, *purposes?* Plural?" asked the nasal voiced priest. "Each law has its own purpose."

"I meant *purpose,* singular," I said. "What is the point behind The Law, as a whole?"

"That is not a question that requires an answer," said the deep voiced priest.

"I suspect that if we figure out the answer to my question, then everything will fall into place." I looked around at the blank faces. "I suspect that all laws are one law."

And that was my entire discussion with the priests. After I left, I thought that maybe I could have a good discussion with one of the prophets. But the prophets live in caves or huts outside of the city. I couldn't take a chance being seen talking with them. I have a lot to lose. What remains of my family is not very rich, and this job that I have as a servant to The King is something that, for my family's sake as well as my own, I dare not risk. Sometimes I thought I could just give it all up and live in caves with the prophets. At least out there I would not have to worry about women.

*

I still did not find Bildad's garden on the second night, even though this time I took a systematic approach and, by the end of an exhausting evening, had hiked everywhere in the city, or thought I had. Nor would I have the opportunity to look for it the following night. The King requested that the servants of Regiment 25, including Eli and myself, accompany him on a two-day journey to one of the provinces.

At this time, Regiment 25 was still accepting new members. And it came to pass that on this journey, I got to see how The King recruited new concubines. When The King takes on a new concubine, he makes a contract with the woman's family: not only the woman but the entire immediate family lives at The King's expense. And the relatives, such as the woman's aunts and uncles and cousins, receive a stipend, not a lot but enough to assure their participation in the scheme. I call it a scheme. Needless to say, many of the almost-rich families saw this as a way of becoming rich and no longer having to work. All these families, should they be fortunate enough to have a nubile daughter, needed to do is to let The King have a look at the young woman, and the rest takes care of itself. Of course, poor families with nubile daughters wished they could do this, but the crucial first step was to get the daughter within The King's range of vision, and there was hardly any way that a poor family could do this.

After a long day of travel, Eli and I accompanied The King when he visited a prominent provincial family. The host's servants took care of everything, so Eli and I mostly stood around. We walked respectfully behind the host and The King as they strolled on the rooftop in the cool of the evening. Then the host said that he was going to bring something to The King and asked him to remain on the rooftop for a few moments and enjoy the sunset.

Eli heard it first—a splashing. We looked over a wall, and there was the daughter of the host, bathing in a pool. I could only see her back as she thrashed herself gently with bundles of herbs dripping with water. But Eli could, from his vantage point, see more. We were both transfixed. A moment later, The King heard the splashing, and came to the wall. Eli and I hid behind a fig tree, but we could still see into the courtyard. Eli was quietly gasping. I watched The King's eyes widen as he grasped the top of the wall. He smiled with all of his teeth. The woman pretended not to see him, and she stood and bent in various ways to display herself to The King. I could just barely see a bit of flesh here, a hand there, from behind the tree. Then the host began to stride back toward The King. He was not bringing anything to The King, nor had he intended to. The splashing stopped and I could see nothing more. Eli had his hands in his loins and after a moment he relaxed.

"How frustrating," Eli said. "How frustrating to see what one cannot touch."

"You could always become a eunuch," I threw his words back at him.

"Would you shut up?" he demanded. "How can you look upon a naked woman and not get filled with burning passion?" He smoothed down the part of his robe that he had ruffled.

"It's very simple," I said. "She is not Henna. The only frustration I feel right now is that it is a beautiful evening, and I am not walking about the streets of Jerusalem looking for Henna."

The King showed no embarrassment when the host approached him. He said, “Is that Abishag?”

“Yes,” smiled the host.

“You mean, the girl that I just met at dinner?” continued The King.

“Yes,” the host smiled even more grandly. “Is she not beautiful? Not a blemish in her, anywhere. *Anywhere.* What a fine companion she will make someday for a rich man. She has many suitors.”

“How soon can I have her?” asked The King, who looked very desperate.

“Well, the offer has to be better than any she has so far received,” said the host.

“You know what I offer,” said The King. “The usual benefits of a concubine.”

“You may find this hard to believe, Your Majesty, but some very rich men have shown interest in her,” said the host.

“The usual benefits for her, and for her family.” The King was getting impatient.

“Ah, now that is an offer I have not received from anyone else,” said the host.

“I’ll bet not,” said The King. “My servants have the contract out in their carriage.” This was the cue for Eli and me to get up and approach the two men. “Well,” The King told us, “go get the contract and fill in the blanks. I haven’t got all night.”

When Eli and I got back with the parchment contract, and ink and a pen, we had only a couple of blanks to fill in for the names of Abishag and her family. I handed the contract and the seal to the king. I warmed the wax in a little metal bowl that I held in the flame of a candle as The King hopped from one foot to another. He pressed the wax seal onto the parchment. The host affixed his seal also. Then Abishag came out and accompanied The King to his room.

The next morning, Abishag was dressed for travel. I had not looked closely at her face before. Her nostrils were turned a little forward in her round face, reminding me just a little bit of a cow. A pretty cow. She was not skinny; she had apparently grazed upon rich lucerne, rather than upon the scraggly grasses of the fields beyond the mountains, just enough to produce a pleasing plumpness.

When the palanquin-bearers (The King always traveled by palanquin) saw the second passenger, they groaned, out of earshot. One of them muttered, *I’ve carried worse.* And with that, our little group headed back to Jerusalem.

*

After yet another evening of searching, I could not find Henna’s garden. But the next day, I had a significant breakthrough.

Eli and I had long heard about The King’s plans for a Temple and for his own new palace. But one spring day it became official. The Publicity Department posted large wooden signs at the highest point in Jerusalem, with the floor plans of the Temple and palace painted on them.

Eli and I went to the mountain and looked at the plans for the Temple. It had the basic components of the Tabernacle as described in the Torah. The Tabernacle was a large tent where priests performed the holy ceremonies back when the Israelites wandered in the desert, and even to the present day. In its center was the Holy of Holies, where the sacrificial altar and the Ark of the Covenant were hidden from everyone's view except that of the High Priest and then only once a year. For all these years since the Israelites had conquered most of the land of the Canaanites, the Holy Place was still a tent. Call it a Tabernacle but it was still just a tent. The Temple was going to be a large and ornate version of the Tabernacle.

The Temple, unlike the Tabernacle, had lots of courtyards to keep the classes of people separate. For example, there was a separate courtyard for the common women, apart from the King's Beloved courtyard that was for the wives and concubines. Then there were courtyards for which admission privileges could be bought. Admission was free in the bronze and iron courtyards. It was a bit more expensive but within the budgets of most people to get into the brass courtyard. Prices went up steeply for the ivory, silver, and gold courtyards. Few people could afford the Alabaster Courtyard. No amount of money could buy admission to the courtyard of the First Families of Jerusalem. Most exclusive of all was the Founders Circle. Then I saw the prices for purchasing sacrificial animals, whose pens were scattered around among the courtyards. Even the turtledoves were expensive, not to mention the sheep. And for unblemished sheep? You can never be sure when a sheep will be born unblemished. Because the supply is unpredictable, you could only buy raffle tickets for them. I assumed the richest families would buy regular sheep as well as raffle tickets, and if they got an unblemished sheep they could sell their regular sheep to poor families at a markup. Wait, no. There is a little note over to the side. The note said that all re-sales are the purview of the Temple staff and subject to a processing fee. It was clear that the Temple would pay for itself when the people poured in to offer the sacrifices required by Moses.

I heard two priests, right behind me, discussing the sea. Not the real sea, but the big tub of holy water that was to be at the entrance to the Temple. The instructions issued by The King said that this sea was to be ten cubits in diameter and thirty cubits in circumference. But, one of the priests pointed out, this was numerically impossible. Either the diameter would have to be less, or the circumference greater. The other priest said the instructions indicated the sea had to be round, but not perfectly round, so the diameter could be ten-ish and the circumference thirty-ish. The first priest then said they could use the forearms of children to measure the diameter and the forearms of adults to measure the circumference, since a cubit is the length of a forearm. They were so satisfied about finding not just one but *two* ways around this problem that it seemed to flood their entire day with happiness and significance. And I thought my job was boring.

Then Eli and I looked at the floor plan for Solomon's palace. There were no revenue-generating mechanisms in this plan. Just lots of rooms. Big banquet rooms. Little banquet rooms. Offices for scribes. A huge bedroom suite for Solomon and his currently-scheduled bed partner.

"What's this?" asked Eli. "The Almond Sitting Room?"

"I suppose it is where people sit on almonds," I said.

"And this? The Phoenician Sitting Room? Is that where you sit on Phoenicians?" he asked in pretended seriousness.

Up in the left corner of the palace floor plan, a notice proclaimed in bright red letters, "Your Tax Money at Work."

Even in the new palace, however, the Mare Regiments were still to be housed offsite. And there was one major problem. The huge palace would cover the current site of the housing of several regiments, including Regiment 25. These regiments would have to be housed in temporary buildings, the kind that even the normally satisfied concubines would complain about. No wonder. Temporary buildings leaked and molded when it rained, and when it did not, dust would blow in through the cracks. And wasps loved them as nesting sites. I knew that, when this building plan was eventually implemented, I would be spending a lot of time swatting wasps and listening to the Leviathans complain even more than usual.

The King wasted no time in putting his plan into action. He had to get the resources. He planned to start construction over in the part of the city away from Regiment 25, so our lives would not be disrupted for another couple of years. But the efficiency of the King's plan took my breath away. It was then that I came to realize that he was a genius at government administration. You see, The King did not have to raise a huge amount of money. Instead, the first thing he did was to send his top administrators out to the lands of each of the twelve tribes and to enlist their service. That is, to require their service, in return for a more modest sum of money. The administrators delivered the message that The King required the service of each able-bodied adult man, except for the ones that were already in the army, for *one entire month* of each year. One month each year, during which they could not earn their own living or work for the provincial leaders. On the face of it this seems ridiculous; why would any provincial leader cooperate with The King in this undertaking?

But The King had done two things. First, when he assumed power, he systematically eliminated his military opponents. He had them killed, one by one, all the while pretending to be a peaceful young prince who, upon his father David's death, claimed to know little about how to run a kingdom and was just following God's commands, nothing more. His most prominent opponent was Joab, David's ultimately unfaithful general, who took refuge in the Holy of Holies itself. The King ordered him killed even as he held onto the handles of the Ark. The leaders of the provinces now found themselves faced with a formidable central army and no leader of their own. Collectively, the leaders of the tribes could have rousted this army; but none of the tribes was prepared to take the first step.

So far, it sounds like the typical military leader, like any king of Babylon or any pharaoh: your hegemony is enforced by an army that is amply rewarded with the spoils of war. But it is in this second way that The King's genius came in. When the administrators went out to the provinces to demand a month of labor from each adult male, the leaders of the provinces found that they were already intertwined with The King: *he had already married their daughters!* The leaders of each tribe therefore found their own personal fortunes dependent upon virtually

enslaving their own people to work for The King. Brilliant. And where did he learn this? His mother was Bathsheba, who had entrapped his father, King David, in the very way that the daughters of the provincial leaders were now appearing to entrap The King, by accidentally-on-purpose allowing herself to be seen bathing. And one of the first things The King had done upon assuming the throne was to marry Pharaoh's daughter, thus eliminating the chance of military attack from the south. I began to think that the sexual desperation that the King displayed when marrying or concubining a new woman was feigned: He was just pretending to fall for the women like a dog following a bitch in heat, but what he was really doing was entangling the fathers as allies. His evil brilliance overwhelmed me.

I was discussing this with Eli when something on the map caught my attention. The new Temple and Palace Complex was roughly square, but one corner had been left outside of its walls. Somebody's small bit of property was to be left alone. I looked more closely at it, and read the name written, in small letters, on the map. It was Bildad's garden.

"Hey, Elah. You were saying? You were saying something about The King's evil brilliance. Hey, Elah? You seem to be in some kind of trance. Can you hear me, little buddy? What's that you're looking at? On the map?"

"Bildad's garden is on Solomon's Glorious Way number 14, just north of Job's Well," I said quietly. Eli said nothing more to me as we returned to the Regiment building.

That evening I found it: Bildad's walled garden. I was sure of it. But when I checked all four sides, I could not see the lattice window. I went back and forth. I pretended to not see the pacing guard, and he pretended to not see me. Back and forth. I was about to conclude that the lattice window, and Henna pointing to it, and her love or at least friendliness toward me, was all a delusion, and to go back and have some wine with Eli. I started to wander back in the general direction of Regiment 25 when I realized that Bildad's garden must have had *five* sides, not four. And there, oh sweet God, there on the fifth side was the lattice window. I nearly collided with people in the street as I ran toward it, in a little alley faced by windowless walls. I waited until no one was looking. I wasn't quite crazy enough to not do this. It was by now early evening.

I looked in through the lattice boldly, which I was crazy enough to do. And as if God were not the grumbling thunderbolt-thrower who made Moses grovel before him on Sinai, but rather one of those clever pleasure gods of the Canaanites who made reality imitate a love poem, there was Henna, her black skin absorbing the golden light, her golden-colored robe reflecting the golden light, and she was looking right at me. Her eyes widened in surprise. Then she smiled. I shook the lathes of the screen and jumped like a goat. Then she glared at me in hostility. I stopped, like a goat that cannot comprehend why his keeper suddenly did something different. When I continued to smile at her, she glared even more grimly. I saw her stepfather just in time to slip my head down. When I lifted my head again, just barely and careful to have the silhouette of a tree branch behind me, I saw that Henna was leading Bildad by the hand. He was tottering, obviously drunk. He smiled at his garden. He must have looked right at me but did not see me. She led him on down the path. Before she vanished, she threw me a glance of love. That glance was like the thrust of a sword. I would write in my next poem, *You have ravished my heart with*

a glance of your eyes. I knew it would be a while before she led her stepfather to his chamber where he would sleep his vignette of slumber and she could come to the lattice. I kept checking the lattice window at reasonable intervals, about once every time a puff of wind blew, or my heart throbbed.

As the last golden rays of the sun touched the upper leaves of the garden trees, I looked in through the lattice. I then heard the creaking of a rusted metal latch and corroded hinges. Henna had opened an old gate. It opened maybe one quarter of a cubit. Depending on how you measure a cubit, of course. I was immediately slipping in through the gate, the rusted metal digging into my back. Actually, I had not seen Henna. I was suddenly fearful that it was the guard that had opened the gate. But I saw him on a distant wall. Before I was even through the gate, Henna had clasped me and buried me in her enormous kisses. All over my face, all over my neck. She breathed heavily into my ear.

"I knew you would come," she said. We held one another so tightly that there must have been no air between our bodies; our clothes were crushed like the lilies of the field under a herd of horses. We nearly fell onto the ground softened by the mulch of exotic leaves as we threw off our sandals.

I began to caress her, rapidly pressing my hands against parts of a woman's body I had never touched. She pulled away from me and let her robe fall. I beheld her beauty.

"There is little time," she said. "Our servant will soon notice my absence. We must act quickly." Then she began to pull my robe off of me. I think I tore a seam when I finished the job. She led me to a little piece of earth under a fruit tree. She half-reclined on her back and drew me to her. She had bathed, but there was a musk to her body that blended perfectly with the scent of cloves with which I imagined she must have rubbed herself with a double portion each evening that she imagined I would come. I kissed the entire landscape of her body, as she quietly laughed. She held my head against her belly. I then began to cry. A flood of salt entered the complex cliffs of her thighs. I was lost in a storm of thrill.

She pushed me away. "I hear something," she said. "Get your robe back on." She clambered to her feet and picked up her sandals. Fragrant soil clung to her thighs. She slipped her robe over her body. It clung to her sweat until she pulled on it tightly. I sat dazed, holding my robe against my loins. "Well, do something!" she said. "I am going to have to push you out through that door, which means you have to make yourself once again as thin as a sheet of parchment. Well?" She gave my face a little slap, stepped to the door, and yanked it open. I slipped on my robe, but it was inside out, and did not cover my belly or loins as I scraped painfully past the rusted metal. I had left my sandals inside, and my feet were immersed in someone's excrement outside in the alley. I tore off my robe, turned it the right way, and slipped it on, trying to hide from imaginary eyes in the windowless wall. My loins hung exhausted, scented like the rest of me with the aroma of cloves.

My sandals came flying over the wall. I grabbed them. As I started to leave the lattice window, Henna held out a piece of parchment to me.

Chapter 4

"You smell like cloves," Eli said to me. "I saw you washing yourself, and then rubbing clove oil all over yourself, when you got back a few nights ago. Like you couldn't get enough of it. Wait. Something happened. You can't hide it from me, little buddy. I know you. Something happened."

I was looking off into the sky as I stood with a basket of fruit, which I was about to take out to the table in the garden for the wives to throw and the concubines to enjoy. I snapped back to attention. "Sorry, you were saying something."

"You're about to drop that fruit." The fruit spilled onto the ground. "There, you went and did it."

As I hastily picked up the fruit, Eli continued. "Something happened. I've never seen you like this. Not even after the day you met…That was it, wasn't it! You found her! Why, you little jackal! You hacking little hyena! You found her! I wouldn't have thought it possible."

I held the basket and looked Eli straight in the eye. "I might have. I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"You can trust me, little buddy," he said. He obviously wanted to hear me tell about something, anything, that, whatever it was, had to be more exciting than anything he had ever experienced.

"And if Eliphaz asks you to tell him what you heard from me, what would you say?"

"I would deny knowing anything about it, buddy."

"And if he said that he had credible evidence that you knew something, what would you say?"

"I would tell him that, with all due respect, he must be mistaken."

"And if he held a sword against your neck, or your manhood, what would you say?"

Eli was silent.

"That is why I must tell you nothing. But, you know I am a writer. Let us say that I have begun to write a poem of love, and I just happened to show it to you."

"Based on?"

"Based on my imagination, perhaps."

"Based on Henna?"

"I will admit there are some striking similarities between my beloved, in the poem, and Henna. But I cannot confirm them."

"I assume you will write about the beauty of her blackness, as you told me last week."

"I might."

"And just how many black women, really black, are there in Jerusalem? It has to be her."

"Who says it has to be in Jerusalem? The poem, that is. There are presumably lots of very black women south of Nubia, the pleasures of whose beauty I can imagine."

"And you are going to show me this love poem?"

"Certainly. I know you are better at numbers than words, but I would still like to know what you think."

When it was time for everyone to rest, after midday, I slipped my parchment to Eli. I looked out the window, as if I were not interested in him as he read it. His jaw dropped.

"This is potent stuff," he said. "Like this part here. *Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of birdsong has come; the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, let me see your face, let me hear your voice. The fig tree puts forth figs, the vine blossoms diffuse their fragrance.* Diffuse, nice word. Then the stuff again about *Arise my love,* etc." Eli had begun jovially, but I could feel the tenderness building in his voice, and I imagined that I saw tears gathering in his eyes.

Eli continued, trying to toughen himself up a little. "And then, *Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead.* She must have nice hair. Nice and wavy. *Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing.* Must have nice white teeth. Not too many women like that. Oh, and this part. *…all of which bear twins; and not one among them is bereaved.* I guess she must have all of her teeth, right and left. *You are fair, my love; there is no flaw in you.* Now that's a rare find. I'll bet even that stunning Abigail, The King's favorite concubine in Regiment 12, has some flaws. Maybe you are just making all of this up after all. I'll bet even Henna isn't this nice…what are you looking at me that way for? I'm just saying. *Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies.* God in Heaven, this is potent stuff.

"Wait, this part right here isn't your handwriting. *My nard gave forth its fragrance.* Oh, is that what it smells like? That's not the way sissy-pants Isaac described it to me. *My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh, that lies between my breasts.* This is not your handwriting. This has got to be Henna."

"Not necessarily. But maybe I'd better recopy that part before anyone else sees it."

Later I showed some more parchments to Eli.

"What's this? *Let me know, my love, when you will pasture your flock, when you will lead your lambs to lie down in the shade.* That's your handwriting. And then, in this other handwriting, *Come to me, not in haste, but when the moon is new.* This sounds like you are arranging a tryst. Especially when, down here, this other handwriting says, *My beloved is mine and I am his, he pastures his flock among the lilies.* There's that stuff about feeding among the lilies again. Oh, and over here. *Catch us the little foxes.* Now, that makes no sense. That must be some kind of code to arrange a tryst."

Eli was right, of course. Everything that I wrote, and that Henna wrote, actually happened. The landscape of her body, the mountains and valleys, the glistening fields, the cliffs at the bottom of which the lilies grew, had become familiar to me. We needed to have a code to communicate. Little foxes burrowing into caves of delight. When she left me the note about the new moon, I knew that she was in the way of women, and that I had to wait a few days.

"*As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,*" Eli continued reading, "*so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. Sustain me with the sweetness of his fruit, for I am sick with love. Oh that his left hand was under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!* This is in that other handwriting. Under your shade, tasting your sweet fruits? I know what that means… And this refrain: *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or hinds of the field, let love slumber as long as it pleases.* That keeps showing up. Gazelles? Those animals live down south of Nubia, don't they?"

"Well," I said, "The King's menagerie has one. Maybe that's the one I'm referring to."

"That lugubrious thing? He, or she, is not prancing happily through any fields. Yes, this must be Henna! From the land where the gazelles run free! *A garden locked is my love, a fountain sealed.* Sounds like Bildad's place. *Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates…*He has pomegranates there? *With all choicest fruits, with henna and nard*…Henna! You let it slip, little buddy, this is about Henna! Of course," he said, handing the papers back to me, "officially, I am just speculating, and you are just writing poetry."

Chapter 5

At last the day approached for the dedication of the Temple and Palace. No existing structures had yet been destroyed, no ground had yet been broken, but The King had secured all the agreements for funding and manpower. One of the crews had already come to Jerusalem and erected a gigantic platform from which The King would deliver his inaugural address. All of us servants, in all of the Regiments, had a lot of work to do to get everything ready for the celebration. The busiest people of all were the artisans of the bread, including the young woman who looked like a girl, in our kitchen. She spent all day making some of her best bread and piling it on the kitchen counter. She brought out some of the loaves for the wives and concubines.

The wives tasted the bread and momentarily seemed to enjoy it. Then one of the wives looked at the other. One of them frowned and said, "Well, this bread is certainly not up to our usual standards."

The other wife said, "Oh, it's worse than that. It's no good at all. What did that little girl use to make it? Not flour, surely!"

The first wife said, "She must have used wood chips."

The second wife said, "No, worse. She must have used the dung of a cow!"

The first wife said, "I'll bet it was the dung of a camel!"

The second wife said, "I'll bet she went to the land of the Hittites and got some pig dung!"

"Or," said the first wife, "she might have gotten some of the night soil dropped by the concubines!"

The second wife had nothing to say in response to this, so she took one of the loaves, threw it on the ground, and started stomping on it. The first wife joined her, and started up a chorus of laughter among the concubines. When she wobbled and fell in the dust, there was silence. But she got back up, her ankle obviously injured, and started up the laughter again. The second wife continued stomping, while the first wife just jiggled.

I was in the kitchen when this happened. I saw the little woman who made the bread. She stood in silence, her eyes downcast. She was crushed.

I came up behind her and said, "Don't believe the Leviathans. Everybody—even they themselves—know that it is a lie. They are jealous of your skill. They know that they never have done anything half so good in their whole miserable lives and never will."

The little woman looked up at me, still not smiling. "I know," she said. "But it still hurts."

"I understand," I said, just as somebody threw one of the stomped-on loaves through the kitchen window. This brought one tear, just one, from the small woman's eyes.

"Well," said the woman, "there is no time for me to stand around mourning." She slung her head back and the tear fell away. "The dough is rising for more of this Hittite wood-chip-pig-dung bread that everybody except the Leviathans likes." She smiled just briefly and went over to

a bowl with rising dough, warm near the outside of the glowing oven. It was time for the second kneading, and she buried her hands in the dough and worked it like a masseuse.

"At any rate, I like your bread. I look forward to it, even the scraps that are left over for me, every evening. And every morning. Thank you, woman."

"I have a name," she said. "I'm Gomer."

I came over to her. I inhaled the scent of the dough. "Bread—your bread—has a wonderful scent. But the dough is even more redolent."

I wasn't sure if a kitchen assistant would know the word redolent, but apparently she did. "Yes," she said. "It is alive. It has a living scent, like soil, or even like the human body." She stopped kneading and looked up at me. "One could even say that it is sexual."

*

Somehow the bread woman in Regiment 25, and the bread women of all the other regiments, and all the cooks, and all the rest of us servants, got everything ready for the Big Day.

The morning of The King's address was the first hot day of summer. It was almost as hot uphill in Jerusalem as it usually was in summer down by the Sea of Arabah. There was not a breath of wind, and sweat poured inside of everyone's garments. Eli and I helped, with hundreds of other government employees, to set up the tables on which refreshments would later be served, a task we finished just before The King mounted to his podium. So numerous were The King's marriage alliances that the platform party, consisting of all his new relatives, was almost as large as the audience, and most of the audience was the construction workers. I had never heard The King speak. Had there been the slightest wind, I would not have heard him now.

The King was a middle-aged man who still looked young. His most striking feature was his big comber of black hair, framing his dramatic eyes. His robe appeared to be pure gold, and large rings covered every finger.

"Does he always wear those rings?" I asked Eli.

"Whenever I've seen him," he answered.

"How can he write with all those rings on his fingers?"

"I suspect that other people do his writing for him. As you may, someday."

The King spake. His voice was rich and deep, with an almost melodic tremble that made it sound like every word wrenched right from his heart. Every sentence was a rise and fall of pitch and volume. He nearly sang the words. "Four hundred and eighty years ago, The Lord delivered us out of bondage in the land of Egypt, and under the hand of Moses led us out into, and through, the wilderness, *unto* the very border of this land. He thus established us as a new nation, assuming its place among the separate powers of the Earth. This new nation was conceived in liberty and founded upon the proposition that all Israelites were equally worthy of approaching the presence of the Lord.

"But just as we had tasted liberty, we began to have our doubts. Some of us wanted to return to the security of Egypt. But Moses, Aaron, and Joshua kept us going, and finally took the bold step over the Jordan River and *unto* this land." The King raised his arms. "The Lord made it our land, but for many centuries, during the time of the Judges, we were harried on all sides by our enemies. And we were torn internally by strife. Even when God chose my father David as his king, there were dissenters who until the end of his days wearied him with their attacks. Here we were, in the Lord's land, the land of milk and honey, as scripture tells us and as we see around us, but we were not happy."

Then The King came out from behind the podium and spoke directly to the audience, as well as to the platform guests around him. He did not stand still. He walked around, swaying his hips dramatically. "Today, in your sight, that is all about to change. We now have no significant enemies. Pharaoh's household is united with my household." He turned to his Egyptian wife, who stood up from her bench as the others cheered. "King Hiram of Sidon is my friend. The enemy nations round about us now see the advantages, to themselves, of trading with us in peace rather than engaging us in war.

"And as for internal dissensions, where are they now? Every tribe, and nearly every major family, is represented on this platform. Each depends upon the other for prosperity. And thus, from without and within, we have been freed from the scourge of war. At last, the reign of the Lord will begin upon the Earth, and he will begin this reign with me. This land has waited breathlessly for centuries for the coming of my reign. We have never been this blessed before, and we may never be again. It is possible that my kingdom represents the apex of Israel's history. Let us, of course, hope that this kingdom does not undergo a decline."

I am fairly certain that the cheers that began were ignited by government employees scattered among the platform guests and audience.

"But why?" continued the King. "Why me? You are probably asking, as well you should. What is so great about Solomon? Well, I'll tell you why. God appeared to me in a dream, and he asked me what I wanted. He told me I could have anything I wanted. All riches, all physical pleasures. But what I asked for was the wisdom to lead the people into prosperity. And the Lord's response was that he would give me the wisdom for which I had asked, as well as the wealth and physical gratification for which I did not ask.

"And thus it is under my rulership that, at long last, the construction of God's house will begin. On top of this mountain, where people can see it from great distances, the Temple will proclaim the greatness of God's kingdom which proceeds henceforth from my reign. *I* will build the house in which God himself will dwell."

Then The King stopped and looked around. I imagined that he looked into every face, including mine. Then he said, "You cannot possibly believe what I just said." He smiled, then began laughing as he looked around. On cue, everyone else started laughing. "God? Ruler of Heaven and Earth? Living in a house? You shouldn't believe this, even if *I* tell you!" The laughter continued until the king had been silent for a while. "But, although this Temple cannot contain God, this is where God's *particularly concentrated presence* will be, in the buildings that

you can now only imagine. The Temple will be the visible focus of God's presence, here in the center of Israel, halfway between Dan and Beersheba. The Temple will give us a place not only to assemble for the sacrifices required in the Torah, but a place to turn our eyes in times of trouble.

"Yes, I know that on this blessed day it is hard to imagine that there could ever be any trouble. Ah, but this is exactly the time that we should prepare for it! For example, suppose that any man among you sins against his neighbor—for there is no one who does not sin—what can you do? You can make restitution, yes, and resolve the difficulty, of course, but can you really wash away the greed and animosity that produced the sin in the first place? No. You must also turn your eyes toward this great Temple and repent before the Lord. Without this Temple, all you could do is look around and hope the trouble goes away and stays away. If, as a result of the sins of the people or the rulers, there is a pestilence in the land, or a famine, then look toward this Temple and ask the Lord to forgive our sins and to restore the fortunes of the people. For know as surely as this Temple will be built, that all misfortune results, somewhere and somehow, from sin. For surely God could prevent any and all afflictions if they were not deserved, somewhere or somehow. But if you look toward this Temple, you can know that, as surely as this Temple shall stand forever, so your sin is taken from you forever! Breathe the breath of happiness and rejoice!" The King waved his arms and got cheers, then continued.

"And the benefits of the Temple do not end there! We are at peace with foreigners. As a result, many of them will visit, and sojourn in, our land. They will come, as likely as not, without the knowledge of The Lord. And when they ask us, what is the source of your prosperity and your peace? We can point toward this Temple and say, *Our God who fills this Temple creates our peace and prosperity.* It is He who makes this into a Land of Grace. And when they return to their lands, or their friends visit them, the word will go forth unto all the Earth that the Lord is God." This time the cheers were spontaneous, loud, and went on for several minutes.

"He's good," I whispered to Eli. "I realize that other people wrote his speech, but, well, he almost has me believing that God is speaking through him."

"That's what he wants you to think," said Eli. "And, for all I know, maybe he's right. I just know that people resolve their conflicts for practical reasons, that we win wars because of armies, we avoid wars because of alliances—and The King is pretty good at those—and that foreigners sojourn in our land because they can get jobs here. Government jobs, but jobs nonetheless. None of this has anything to do with building a Temple, except the jobs part. And, of course, The King has said nothing at all about his big palace."

"It just really bothers me," I told Eli, "that The King said that all affliction results from evil, somewhere, somehow. That makes no sense. If a man steals, should God punish a bunch of other people? As if God's anger misses the mark like the arrows of a drunk archer? Like he's throwing a fit or something? No, collective punishment for individual sin makes no sense. What happens is not God's justice, but just one damned thing after another under the sun."

"But suppose," said Eli, "that a man visits a fair maiden and has intimacy with her, without the knowledge of her father. Then God should punish that man, and not everyone around him. Does this make sense to you?"

"You're still worried about me, aren't you," I said.

"Well of course I am. And about the affliction you might bring down on the rest of us."

"Relax, Eli," I said. "What the man in my poems is doing is not a sin. It is beautiful. God smiles on us. And the woman thinks so too."

"You are drunk with love," said Eli.

I had no answer for him.

Then The King began to call on his platform guests. One after another, the prominent officials droned on and on about the great king, about great Jerusalem, about their great tribe and how much benefit their tribe would bring to the kingdom. (The old man representing the tribe of Naphthali was the worst.) And they all had to thank each other by name. Even The King was getting tired of being thanked after the first hour. As the second hour was drawing to a close, The King must have figured that this event was taking longer than he had planned. He tipped his head toward Chief Steward Eliphaz, who jumped to action and gave us our instructions.

In a few minutes, we had lifted dozens of large casks of wine onto the tables and dragged dozens of wooden boxes up behind them. Cheap clay flagons were piled on the tables as well. When the platform guests saw this, they became restless, and the restlessness spread to the audience. Before the last speaker had finished, The King said, "Thank you. Esteemed platform guests, you may now proceed to the tables." As trumpets blew and drums clanged, the honored guests marched and waddled and padded down the steps and back to the serving tables where we stood. "And now, as my gift to all of you, you will find on the tables behind you the finest of wines, from my own vineyards. These wines…" Before The King had a chance to describe the vintages, the audience arose and started running to get in line behind the platform party.

The first guests had already filled their cups from the casks when we opened the first of the wooden boxes. Sawdust was scooped away. Chunks of ice lay exposed to the hot sun. Each chunk had been transported last winter from Lebanon, in large wooden boxes, then stored deep in The King's cave in medium-sized wooden boxes, and finally emerged in small wooden boxes. We got out our hammers and chisels and started splintering ice and scooping it into bowls. The crowd whooped and everybody trampled everyone else to get the ice for their wine. Men and women shoved and pressed against one another. The men touched the women in ways that, on the street, would have gotten them arrested. It was chaos. The few bowls of tahini and bread that we had put out were quickly trodden upon. The King must have depleted nearly his entire store of ice. But he knew what he was doing. The people loved him drunkenly and wholly.

During the ceremony, I had carefully looked all about for Henna. She would have stood out like a dark jewel on a plain of dirty salt. I did not find her. I did, however, see Bildad. I slipped away and ran, carrying some ice, to Bildad's garden. I did not see the guard but that made no difference. I called Henna's name. She heard me and came running to the door. We rubbed ice all over one another's bodies and transferred ice from one mouth to the other as we

kissed deeply. For the first time, we loved one another without any fear of imminent discovery. When I returned to my room, drunk with love, none of the other people noticed how I, who had consumed no wine, stumbled as badly as they.

Chapter 6

For us servants in the Regiment of the Leviathans, as for everyone, life was easy when it was boring and difficult when it was interesting. One morning later in the summer we discovered that our lives—not just my life, which I had abandoned to an ever more reckless intimacy with Henna—were going to be interesting. Our regiment had been selected to accompany The King on his vacation in the mountains of Lebanon. The King had contracted with King Hiram of the Phoenicians to purchase hundreds of gigantic cedar trunks from which to build the palace and Temple. And he wanted to oversee the beginning of the timber extraction himself. This meant that I would be away from Jerusalem—from Henna—for an extended time. The thought hovered over me as a continual gloom.

During my week off from evening responsibilities, I had visited Henna every evening. But once my evening duties resumed, I had to slip out at night and go to the lattice window. Of course, Henna was inside the house by that time. But she always left a little scrap of poetry in the lattice window, and I exchanged it for mine. Our poems grew increasingly bold. I wrote, *You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its clusters. Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth.* Eli read my poems, and knew exactly what I meant when I wrote *I will eat my honeycomb with my honey.* Henna, equally reckless, wrote, *I will give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranates.* When I wrote *Let us go forth into the fields; there I will give you my love,* Eli asked me if we had actually tried to escape from the city out into the mountains that I loved so well. I smiled and said, “At last, Eli, your imagination has outstripped reality.”

But in all this I could not write to Henna that I was going to be away, possibly for weeks. An evening without work was coming soon, and I planned to tell her face to face at that time.

Then at the last moment, one of the other servants was ill, and I had to work that evening. I had written to Henna that I would meet her. I waxed poetic when I said that the waves of the sea could not keep me from her. But then, my job of entertaining and cleaning up after Leviathans did exactly what I said the waves of the sea could not do.

The next evening, I went to the lattice window in the golden sunset, our holy time. I found a note, and read it quickly. My heart sank. Gone was the poetry. Large letters written with a trembling hand said, *Where were you? Have you left me? Have they done something to you? God save us!*

She saw me at the window and came running. We were fortunate that the guard was not looking, for she did nothing to hide the fact that she was speaking to me through the lattice. She was crying, and had been all day. She let me inside and told me everything that had happened. Here is what she wrote, once she had recovered her mind the next day.

Upon my bed by night, the fragrant garden bed, I sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. I called his name—I whispered, then I spoke, then I shouted—through the lattice. There was no answer. I told myself, I will arise now and seek him. I will go about the streets and squares of the city. But I had put off my garment; how could I put it back on? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them? Then I thought I heard him put his hand to the latch; my heart thrilled in me. But he was not there. I grabbed my mantle and wrapped it around myself. I went out of the gate. I looked everywhere for my beloved, but could not find him. I ran across some guards, and asked them if they had seen my beloved. They laughed at me, and pulled my mantle from me. They beat me and touched me. I did not resist them, because all I could think of was to ask them over and over, have you seen my beloved?

After she read this poem to me, she told me the rest of the story. The captain of the guard had come by, and seen his guards handling her naked form by the light of the torch, for it was now fully night.

"You idiots!" the captain cried.

"This naked woman, she is crazy," said one of the guards.

All the while, Henna was weeping. She even ran to the captain and threw her arms around him, pressing herself against him, saying over and over, "Where is he? What have you done with him?" She was certain that some guards had caught me at the lattice window and arrested me.

"Do you know who this woman is?" said the captain, after he freed himself from Henna.

"One of the Nubian slaves?" said one of the guards.

"No. You're going to get us all in trouble. This is the stepdaughter of Bildad the Shuhite!"

"Who?"

"The rich man with the big garden. This is his stepdaughter. You offal-heads had better hope she is so much out of her mind that she doesn't remember who we are, or we're in big trouble. No way will Bildad believe that we just found her like this out in the street." When he handed her mantle back to her, Henna seemed to recover her mind for an instant, and tried to wrap it around her body, with little success. "We must get her back to her garden."

"And that," Henna told me, "is exactly what they did. I could not sleep, worrying about what might have happened to you. At least I knew these guards, the Jerusalem guards, had not detained you. But who else might have? And then you came. I have never known such relief.

"And so, my love," she continued, "I cannot spend a single day without you. I finally regained my mind, but come the night, I will lose it again! Come to me, come to me, even in the middle of the night. Promise me! Tell me right now, you will come to me every night!"

I do not remember the words that I finally found to tell her that I was going to be gone.

We were too exhausted and shocked for intimacy. I cradled her in my arms. I did not see her again before we left for Lebanon.

Chapter 7

A king does not simply get out of town for a vacation. His servants have to assemble a big procession, not only with the large tents but also food for the whole entourage. And extra clothes. And coats and blankets, since the mountain nights can be cool. There is no point in trying to keep such an entourage secret, so The King assembled his trumpeters and drummers. And rather than to just go straight out of town on the northern road, we paraded around the city. I was close behind The King, and saw him smiling benevolently on and waving to the crowds of people.

We went past Bildad's garden. I knew Henna was watching. But I did not expect her to burst out of the house and run to the parade. She ran right out of the front door, and stumbled on cobblestones. She looked desperate. Her hair was no longer braided and orderly, like a flock on the mountainside, but was disorganized and matted. Even so, her beauty shone. She saw me and smiled as she fell upon her knees. I feared that my response to her would reveal our affair. But I could not stop myself from smiling back at her.

Surely The King would notice!

And he did. He looked at Henna. But then I saw the feature of his mind that was both his strength and his flaw: his immense vanity. I could tell that he thought Henna was admiring *him.* He smiled and waved at her. She did not return his gaze, but he did not notice this, because by then he was talking to his chief servant. He asked a question and the servant answered. The King puffed out his chest, smiled, and looked forward into the clear blue northern sky.

Henna and I looked at one another until the crowds made us invisible to one another.

*

It had been a long time since I had been out of Jerusalem, except for little hikes in the mountains to look at the trees and wildflowers. We left the gates behind us, and a hundred guards rode beside us with their spears sticking up into the air. And, to tell the truth, since the first day of our journey was mostly for show, we got hardly as far as Gibeah before we stopped. Gibeah was a major city, and word had preceded us, so all of the ranking officials had houses to stay in. The families of The King's wives were almost fighting to be his host. Eli and I chose to camp rather than to stay in one of the dirtier houses of Gibeah. We sat inside of our tent.

"So, what are you going to do?" he asked me.

"About what?" I responded.

"You know what I'm talking about. About that stunning black woman."

"She has a name, you know."

"What are you going to do about Henna?"

"First, I am going to just do the best I can to deal with my intense feelings of carnal frustration."

"I won't watch. Then what?"

"Then? What does it matter? I think things have gone so far that fate is going to take its course, whatever that is, and we cannot do anything about it."

"Maybe her stepfather will meet a nice man and betroth her while we're gone."

"Eli! You camel's-furrow!"

"Face it, Elah. It's for the better."

"Nothing is for the better, or for the worse. Things just are. I will enjoy Henna when I can have her, and I will bless her as far as it is within my power. And when our world collapses, I will either accept it, or will kill myself. I will decide which, when the time comes."

"So you admit it is going to end."

"Well, of course, you idiot! Everything is going to end! A generation goes, a generation comes, but the Earth remains forever. The sun rises, the sun sets, then it rushes back to rise again. Why doesn't the sun get tired of it all?"

"The sun is not a god, Elah. It is just a thing that God made. So it has no mind of its own, no, what would you call it, volition."

"Very good, Eli! I didn't know you knew words like *volition*."

"Come off it, Elah. Just because I think that the things you write about are a waste of time doesn't mean that I cannot *understand* them."

"Round and round goes the wind…"

"Yeah, I know. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. You told me already."

"All things are…"

"Full of weariness. I have to listen to this stuff from you all the time, little buddy. I like you and all, but sometimes one cannot understand a problem better simply by repetition."

"Sorry, Eli. But if you won't listen to me, who will?"

"You expect me to answer that?"

"No. But I'm making a point here. The King thinks he is advancing history toward some kind of a climax point, which God is working out his plans in the Kingdom of Israel in some way that is entirely new in the history of the world. He thinks he is the focus of God's entire mind."

"Yeah, he's annoying all right, but just ignore him. He pays us and feeds us."

"But what has been done is what will be done, and what has been is what will be. There is nothing new under the sun. Somewhere back in time, there was an earlier Solomon who thought he was the chosen one of God. And someday in the future there will be another one."

"But it won't be that idiot no-good son of his, Rehoboam. You heard what he said, didn't you?" asked Eli.

"You mean, when some of the provincial officials complained about the enforced labor?"

"Yes. The King simply said, *As long as you are at my table you are under my command.* He was so calm and friendly when he said it. But Rehoboam, what did he go and say?" Eli sat up from on his bedroll as he continued. "He said, *My father scourged you with whips, but I will scourge you with scorpions.*"

"My point exactly. One power-hungry king after another. Forever."

"Rehoboam also said, *My little finger is thicker than my father's loins*."

"I hadn't heard that one. But it figures."

"I see trouble brewing there," said Eli, lying back down.

"I'll bet the Pharaohs, a thousand years ago, two thousand, who knows, thought they were the center of God's attention. And a thousand years from now? One empire after another. The Assyrians have already consumed the Chaldeans, and you just know the Babylonians will consume them next. And then, who knows? The Persians? The Hittites? There is no end to it. What does it matter, anyway. Nobody is ever going to remember any of this. All of these kingdoms—ours, the Babylonians, whoever else, will be forgotten. They will find our carvings in marble, and not understand what they mean.

"It makes me sick, Eli," I continued. "It is an unhappy business that men have to busy themselves with. Take us, for example. We feed the concubines. They laugh. Once in a while they have sex with The King. Then they defecate, and eat some more. They rub oil on their skin, or have the eunuchs do it, but eventually the skin wrinkles and then they turn into hags and die. Everything in the earth and sky is connected with everything else. When the servants bury the feces in the sand, along comes some of those scarab beetles that—go figure—the Egyptians worship, and they roll it up into little balls and push it across the sand. That's their world, Eli. And we aren't accomplishing anything more than they are. We are just pushing balls of shit around."

"And then we die, buddy."

"And are forgotten."

"But," said Eli. "What you and Henna have—that is not just a weariness of the flesh. You two…"

"You're jealous."

"Sort of, except when I think about what is going to happen to you and soon. But before that, you two have something that is truly exceptional…"

"And which will be forgotten. My love poems, and hers, will be lost forever. You know, Eli, I used to want to study all of the trees and flowers, to know what they all are. But I cannot just study them. When my mind starts asking questions, I am inevitably led to futility. The more knowledge you have, the more sorrow. Not knowledge of flowers, but knowledge in general."

"Seems to me, Elah, you're forgetting something. There are good things in life. Like friendship and love."

"I suppose, Eli."

"No supposing, Elah. That's an important part of life. God has put us here to help each other. And that's a good thing. Regardless of whether by helping one another we prosper, or we fail, regardless of whether people who do not help one another prosper, or fail. Two are better than one. If one falls, the other can lift him, but woe to him who falls alone! That's us. And though an attacker might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. That's us. A rope bound from two cords is *more* than twice as strong as just one cord. That's us. When two

are together, they are warm, but how can one be warm alone? That's not us, friend. That's you and Henna."

"Good point, friend. I'll put that in my writings someday." I turned over and started to fall asleep. I assumed Eli had done the same. Then he spoke.

"Elah, think about this. Right now, you are alive. Right now, you and Henna love one another. This is your opportunity. A living dog is better off than a dead lion."

I sat up quickly. "That's a good one. You mind if I write that down too?"

"Won't do me any good. I'm the numbers guy, remember. So, my point is this. Go for it. If you end up dead, well, you would have been dead anyway. And how many people, after all, die peacefully in their beds of old age? The evil man who accumulates great wealth, or the wise man who helps other people to discover wisdom? Seems to me, both the evil man and the wise man have an equally likely chance to have calamity befall them, or to live out a ripe old age. Me, I'm going to live carefully, and try to reach old age. But if I were you, I would grasp the opportunity."

"Very well," I said. "Meanwhile, Henna is not here, and I am filled with hunger for her."

"I won't watch, buddy," Eli said, and turned over to sleep. I blew out the candle.

Chapter 8

We made fairly rapid progress once we started the journey north of Gibeah. The expedition leader, Chief Steward Eliphaz, knew exactly how far we had to go each day. We entered the hill country of Ephraim. I had never before seen how vast were the fields of wheat, now ripening, and barley, its grains still green. Interspersed among them were fields of sesame and of beans. Everywhere, men and women were in the fields pulling cockleburs from the rows. Men were sitting in the shade of trees sharpening scythes they would soon use. Around many of the fields, elah trees were already producing their nuts and date palms their fruits. The word that kept coming to my mind was *abundance.* It was so unlike the dry, poor lands of Gad. For just this day, my fantasies about the weary wind and seas seemed far away. And the farmers seemed happy. When the procession went past the fields, they would run and kneel and bow before The King. But they waved to the rest of us also.

There were no large cities in this region, except for Shiloh, which was not directly on our path. So we camped along the road. The land was so rich that crops grew right up to the road. So when we began to erect the tents, we had to trample over some of the crops. I sat off on a little rise to watch. A family of farmers approached Eliphaz and began to argue with him. He laughed at them and turned away. Then they walked in my direction. The father was broken by hard work, the mother wrinkled by hard work. Two sons were still strong, but their wives, though young, stooped, both the one with children and the one without. They could not have been more than twenty-five years old, these women, but their skin was wrinkled and dry, forming furrows around sunken eyes. These were the happy farmers I had seen from a distance.

As they walked past, the old mother turned and walked toward me.

"Mother, what are you doing?" asked one of the sons.

"I must confront this man," she said.

"Do not anger him," said the other son. "There is nothing we can do. Besides, it is not his decision."

"I will confront him. What can he do about *that?"* the old mother threw back at her sons. She approached me and took a deep breath to begin speaking. She stopped when I spoke.

"Yes, old woman. I will listen to you. Please, speak."

This surprised her, but not for long. She regained her anger. "This is our field. You are trampling it. We will lose our crop. What are you going to do about it? The man in charge, up there on the big horse, he will not listen to me."

"I do not think he would listen to me, either. I have no authority here," I said, intending it to soothe her anger.

"What are we going to do?" she shouted. "How will we survive? We have worked hard on The Lord's land, taken good care of it, and it gave us its blessing. And then you come along and destroy it. Not even to eat it, but just to put your soft plump seats on it."

"Don't talk to him like that!" said the first son.

"I will not harm her for her words," I told him.

"A guard might harm her, and us," said the other son.

"I will not call any guards," I said.

"Is it not enough," continued the woman, "is it not enough that you require of us a month of labor every year, and we have to give you so much of our crop? How can this be fair in the eyes of The Lord? You could have gone just a little further, up the road, up to that pasture, where the soil is not so good, and where the rich men graze their cattle. You could camp there without trampling any crops."

I had heard something about this. "The King's wives do not like the smell of cow dung," I said.

"Oh, *well,"* said the woman, "we wouldn't want their nostrils to have to smell the dung, would we? As they bathe in milk and honey! We plow the dung into the soil, and sometimes burn it for fuel, and its scent is always present with us. But, of course, we are not the soft little women of The King, are we? Oh, we will starve!"

"Please, Martha," said the old man. "We will not starve. We have friends. They will not let us starve." Eli's words about friendship from the previous night ran through my memory.

The woman ignored him. "But we gladly give our lives so that The King's women can have a little more comfort and not have to smell the dung! Is that what you think? Is that what you think The Lord desires?"

"I wish I could help you," I said to all of them.

"Oh, you wish, you wish! As if you were innocent of this matter! Look at you!" she yelled at me.

"I do not understand," I said.

"Oh, and I'll bet you think you are wise, like The King. He has not the understanding that God gave to a piece of wood! That's what his head is, old splintery wood! You do not understand? Look at yourself!" She planted herself in front of me.

"Please, mother," said one of the sons. "This will do nothing to help us."

"I understand your plight," I said. "And do not suppose that I can do nothing to help, in general. I can write, and may someday be one of The King's scribes. I can write about how the rich oppress the poor. I will publicize your story."

"Oh, you can write about it! You and the prophets! And nobody listens, except other prophets and their shabby followers!" She raised her arms to heaven. "Your writing is of less use to me, to any of us, than the dung. The dung at least we can work into the soil and the crops can grow. Or, they could have, until tonight."

"Please, Martha," said the old man. "Why do you yell at this young man, when he is not in charge?"

"Are you blind also?" she shrieked at him. "He is one of them. Look at his fine clothes, and his soft skin. He does not work. He grazes upon the riches that our labor provides to The King's vast household—months of labor, and so much of our crops! Just like all of the rest of them, he rides upon us like a tick upon a cow." She turned to me. "Yes, go ahead and write about

how the rich oppress the poor. You are one of the rich. Look at us, remember us in these few days before we starve, and tell yourself that you are not one of the oppressors!" She finally ran out of power and allowed one of her sons to pull her away from me. They did not look at me as they started to walk down the road.

"We won't starve," the old man repeated.

One of the young wives stopped and turned to me. Her face would have been beautiful—she looked a little bit like The King's favorite, Abigail—were it not creased with cares and stress. Her eyes were alive. She sneered at me, revealing a big gap in her teeth. Through this gap, she shot a very accurate glob of spittle right into my face, then turned away. I watched the family recede into the dirty distance, not wiping away the spit that I knew I deserved.

Later, Eli found me writing near the tent door. A brisk wind ruffled the parchment, which I pressed angrily against my knee.

"Why don't you save it for later?" he asked. "You're on vacation."

"I am writing about the uselessness of all of the labor with which men busy themselves under the sun," I said.

"That's what you always write about," Eli answered.

"Yes, but today I have seen it, and it has touched my heart. You know, Eli, these poor farmers work like beasts, but at least they have something to show for it. They can look at their fields and see the crops they have grown. That is, unless The King's entourage comes along and camps on it."

"Yeah, I noticed. I don't feel too good about that either."

"But us, Eli. What do we have to show for our work? What do rich people, who live off of the food and labor of the poor and oppressed, have to show for it?" I read to him. *"Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let him sleep."*

"I wouldn't be so sure," said Eli. "I don't think rich people worry themselves too much about the fact that they are parasites living on the work of the poor. They sleep just fine, from what I hear. You ever hear of any of the wives and concubines in our regiment having trouble sleeping?"

"I guess I wouldn't know," I said. "Except I do sometimes see Tamar…"

"Which one?"

"The Nubian concubine. I see her walking around on the rooftops at night sometimes, looking at the hills and the stars."

"That doesn't mean she is worrying about the rich food and comfortable life she has. She probably just wishes she was back home in Nubia. Although I've heard life's not any better there than here. So, what else did you write?"

I read to him, "*Again, I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed; they have no one to comfort them! Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness…*"

"Whoa," said Eli. "Better come inside. You don't want any of the guards hearing that. It might get to The King. He likes to think he dispenses perfect justice. Here, I got some tahini and honey and flatbread."

"I suppose one of the farmers gave it to you," I said, slipping my papers and quill into my robe pocket and picking up my little well of ink.

"One of the farmer's daughters," he said, winking, as we went inside.

"What did she get in return?" I asked him.

"I gave her a coin," he said. "I have enough. And it was more money than she will ever see in her life. I told her there were more where this came from. It's only fair to warn you, little buddy, I might need this tent for a few minutes tonight. But probably not. Her father grabbed her up before I could tell her which tent. Maybe I should just sit around outside for a while where I can be seen."

"So, you think she really desires you?"

"She acted like it. They all acted like they were happy. Wait, you're getting at something," said Eli as he sat beside me.

I continued reading. *"Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness."*

"Criticizing the priests too, are you?"

I slapped down my papers. Eli jumped back a little, surprised at my outburst. "A curse upon those who could make our world good and fair, who have it within their power—especially now, in this time of peace, as The King says—to make this world fair, but who will not! A curse upon them! A curse!"

"Calm down, buddy," said Eli.

"It's just not fair," I said. "Does what happens down here on Earth make any sense to you?" I shuffled through my papers and found one. *"Again I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them."*

I continued reading. *"I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work."*

"Yes, I suppose everything will be set right someday," said Eli. "I can hardly wait for the hand of God to lower the boom on us, starting with that King whom you have not heard me criticize. Wait, why are you looking at me like that? You must be about to tell me that you do not believe what you just said, about God bringing ultimate justice."

"I said in my heart regarding the sons of men that God is showing them that they are nothing but beasts. For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same ruach, *and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is despair. All go to one place; all are dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the* ruach *of man goes upward and the* ruach *of the beast goes down into the earth?"*

"Sweet God, little buddy, now that's depressing. For what it's worth, I agree. I look in the eyes of a dog, or a horse, and I know I see some mind there. What makes us think we are so different from them? I have heard that down south of Nubia there are beasts that look like men, with eyes in the front of their faces, with arms and legs like ours. All covered with hair, but you can say the same thing about that fellow Reuben, can't you? That guy gives me the creeps. Anyway, The King, they say, is going to get some of those human-looking beasts for his menagerie. You know, maybe if we had those kinds of beasts around here, we would not be in so much of a hurry to think that we are a special creation, in the image of God. Those heathen, down south of Nubia, don't think we are in the image of God.

"You know," Eli continued. "You're right. Even The King is going to die someday, and he will be a grinning skeleton. And meanwhile, just like the beasts, he eats and then he takes a dump and the scarab beetles go roll up his shit. A man, whether wise or fool, whether rich or poor, whether strong or weak, gets out in the desert and gets lost, and pretty soon he is a greasy stain on the ground and his bones are scattered. Just like a beast. But that's so depressing. You got anything better to end up with?"

I continued to read. *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in the ground to which you are going. So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; who can bring him to see what will be after him? And I commended enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat, and drink, and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God has given him under the sun."*

"Well, then, let's enjoy this tahini and honey, my fellow beast," Eli said. Then he got up.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Gonna go feed the scarab beetles," he said.

"Tell them I said hi," I said.

Chapter 9

The shortest route would have been around the south side of Mt. Gilboa, but The King wanted to take the scenic route. We went two days to the northwest, on a high trail overlooking the Plain of Sharon, which was even more fertile than the hill country of Ephraim. The trail went over the shoulder of Mt. Carmel. We stopped for a brief view of the sea.

And then we headed down into the Valley of Megiddo. The moist wind from the sea was blocked by the range of mountains, creating a desert. Everyone, including myself, rode along in a kind of bored trance. But then, something happened in my mind. Maybe it was the wine. I did not drink much of it, but I had been sweating. A golden color rang in my head. The desert around me glowed with life. Amidst the rocks and the sand, I saw one large flowering plant. Magenta flowers clustered on a large spike, and delicate structures projected from each flower. Here beauty was defiant against death.

I had entered a new phase of my separation from Henna. Depression had followed desperation, but now a new joy welled up within me. I imagined Henna to be with me. I looked off into the splendid distance, and bade her to behold the sea. The splendid sapphire sea, glinting in the sunlight. I told her, in my mind, what if we could get in a boat and travel on the sea? What if we traveled with the Phoenicians? They tell stories of the island of copper, and the islands of the northern seafarers, and eventually, far far to the west, the sea drew up like the string of a purse, and you could go through a narrow gorge out into an even vaster sea, the Great Ocean. *What would we find out there, Henna? Would we find great civilizations? Or would we discover that, after all, the land of The King is the most luxurious civilization in the world, the only one where we can write poetry? What if the life we have is the best that the world has to offer? What gods or demons might be beyond that gorge, which dare not enter into our big little sea?* When I realized that I was almost speaking aloud to her, I whispered, *But we know there are no gods or demons. A storm is just a storm, and there are no gods living on the snowy peaks.*

We stopped to rest the horses. I sat with my back against a rock. I looked at a little plant growing out of a crack in the rock. It was a kind of flower that I had never seen. Filled with the spirit, or some suitable substitute, I stood up and began to speak aloud.

“Oh, little plant, you are so tiny. But behold, you are growing where there is almost no water, out of the hardness of the rock, and where even now the wind is buffeting you. The sand encrusts your tiny leaves like jewels. But how do you respond to such treatment? Do you grow into a tough little ball? No. You open up delicate white flowers to the sun. Your beauty *defies* the desert. You are like my love, whose love *defies* the desert of the human heart. Oh, my Henna…”

I stopped as my gaze fell upon a pair of shoes. With feet in them, of course. And they were no ordinary shoes. They were laced with leather straps, and encrusted with gold and jewels just as the sand encrusted the leaves of the little plant. The robe that hung over their tops was of the finest, shiniest red, and heavy with gold, which clanked in the fitful breeze. Before I even looked up, I knew I was seeing the feet of The King. I could not speak.

"Go on," said The King's mellifluous voice.

I could not speak.

"Please, continue. It sounded like poetry. Your words were really beautiful."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," I croaked.

"You are very observant," he continued. "All around me, my supposedly educated courtiers were saying that nothing grows out in this desert. I simply pointed to one of these little plants, and they became silent. I smiled my smile of wisdom at them. Next time, I said, look around you before you begin to speak about the world. And then I saw you looking at these flowers, and walked over; and I heard you speaking, so I listened. I was admiring these flowers, but I could not quite put my finger on what it was that I liked about them so much. The contrast between the delicate flowers and the desert. Then you had it. Defiance. That's it! Brilliant. Look up at me. Now. There." His dark eyes really were enthralling. "Beauty defies adversity. Even the desert is a land of grace." His voice had that trancelike quaver that had enthralled the crowd a few weeks earlier.

"From your clothes," The King continued, "I see that you must be simply one of my servants."

"Yes, Your Majesty," I said.

"And don't you ever get tired of serving bread to a bunch of women each night?"

"No, Your Majesty, it is my pleasure to serve you in whatever capacity you deem."

The King had started to turn away, then whirled back upon me. "Really? Come on, be honest with me. Don't you envision yourself doing something worthier of your skills?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, of course."

"I've heard about you," The King said.

I froze, wondering what he could have heard about me.

"They say you are always writing things," The King said.

"You have heard correctly, Your Majesty."

"And if your writing is half so skillful as what I just heard you saying, then you should be one of my scribes."

I nearly jumped. "Your Majesty does me great honor."

"I'll take that as an acceptance," The King said. "Not now, of course, but when we get back to Jerusalem. Of course, I can write perfectly well myself, I've no need of scribes, but…"

It was obvious that he wanted me to finish his sentence. "But you are very busy, Your Majesty."

"And?"

"You have so much wisdom, Your Majesty, that you cannot write it down quickly enough yourself."

He smiled grandly. I knew I had said exactly what he wanted to hear.

"And?" The King persisted. When I could not answer, he said, "Why do you think that I asked you to be one of my scribes? I have plenty."

I looked him in the eye. "It was my insight about the defiant beauty of the flower."

"So, you think," The King persisted, "that I could use a little help with insights?"

For some reason I said, "Everybody could use a little help, Your Majesty. We are all mere mortals."

The King smiled and laughed. "An honest man! We artists, though we love praise, we love honesty better. Be sure to thank that little flower; it just got you a promotion. Oh, and sometime you must show me some of your writings. Not now, of course. Whichever ones you wish to show me. Oh, one little thing."

"Your Majesty."

"You referred to the little flower as henna. Aside from the fact that both henna and this plant have white flowers, there is not much resemblance."

I was suddenly in shock. Could he know about Henna? Surely he does. But could he know about Henna and me? Probably not. He probably thought I was just referring to the henna flower. But I had to think of something. "I…I was just letting the words pour out of my mouth, Your Majesty. I would have edited it later."

"Fair enough," said The King. "Not every scribe is an editor. That's valuable."

By now the courtiers had found The King and surrounded us. The King introduced me to them as the new scribe. They bowed, and looked at me, some smiling, some glowering. Over which of those heads had I just been catapulted into promotion? I took my leave.

From outside the circle of courtiers, I heard The King say, "That young man was singing the praises of this flower. The tender flower in the hostile desert. There is a song in there somewhere." He cleared his throat. "*Love me tender…*"

*

Back in the tent, Eli could not have been more surprised at my turn of fortune.

"You'll put in a good word for me, won't you, buddy?"

"Of course. And I can do so honestly. You *are* good at numbers."

"You'd better not show him the writings you have shown me. Either about Henna, or about the heaviness of life."

"I'll think of something," I said. "Besides, with the sweet taste of this new opportunity, I am beginning to rethink my previous thoughts. As a scribe, maybe I could work my way up, and then…" I jumped up from the bedroll. "Eli, maybe I can after all ask Bildad for his daughter's hand."

"How long is it going to take you, working your way up as a scribe?"

My heart fell. "Probably longer than Bildad is willing to wait." Then I became excited again. "But I will certainly tell Henna, at the first possible moment. And maybe she can talk Bildad into delaying things. She can be very persuasive, especially when he has been drinking."

All the next day and into the following, I was stoked. The King waved at me, directly at me, several times, and smiled. I was so stoked that I almost didn't notice one little problem. As his scribe, I would have to write things specifically to lubricate The King's capacious vanity. I

assumed I would have no trouble doing this; I can write honest words, but I can also write empty ones. I even practiced writing a few proverbs. *He who misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit; but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance. He who hardens his heart to the Lord will fall upon his own staff; but he who fears the Lord will prosper. He who is evil will suffer evil; he who is godly will enjoy the goodness of goodliness.* I scratched the last one out; it was a bit over the top. But I was getting the hang of it. And if The King took credit for writing those things himself? So what? So long as my Song of Henna, and my Song of Qoheleth, remain my own. I must keep them secret, because the Song of Henna is incriminating and because the Song of Qoheleth is heretical.

*

We passed inland from Tyre, whose king Solomon did not entirely trust, despite a formal alliance; no daughters were involved. We feared no attacks from them, either. And we did not approach Sidon, the home of King Hiram, because both he and his lumberjacks were already headed up into the mountains. That's where we went also, following the River of Lebanon through the mountain pass. I had thought that Mounts Gerizim and Ebal back near Jerusalem were pretty big, but the mountains now before me were much higher. The horses flexed their muscles, climbed the path, and ejected their droppings as they began their way up the suddenly steep trail. And we came upon vast fields of wildflowers. I recognized them as poppies, each with four large red petals and an army of little structures that produced the yellow dust that bees carry when they visit one flower after another. The wildflowers of Israel had withered months earlier, but these were still fresh. In some places, a few patches of snow still melted and watered the flowers.

The caravan stopped before one of the vast fields of flowers. The King ran out into it, and danced around, like his father David dancing before the Lord, for which David's first wife Michal hated him. The King sang out, "The hills are alive with the sound of birds, and the celebration of flowers." When The King stepped nimbly back to the caravan, his courtiers all met him and praised him for his singing. "Oh, it's nothing," The King said. "It is nothing but the howling of a dog."

"And so," said The King to his courtiers, "what say you about this field of flowers?" He picked one and looked longingly into it.

I was afraid he would see me and ask me what I thought, so I hid.

"Their glory is nothing compared to yours, Your Majesty," said one, and the others agreed. One of them added, "Even one of your garments is more glorious than all of these."

As we proceeded up the mountain trail, The King looked down into the meadow and saw a young goatherd with a girl. "Ah, the pleasures of young love," he said, then began to sing. *"The girl and the goatherd…"*

Chapter 10

Nothing could have prepared me for the beauty of the cedar forests. It had become a cliché in Jerusalem, saying that this or that or the other thing was as mighty or tall or strong as a cedar of Lebanon. Young men particularly enjoyed likening their pillars to them. All that, even though practically nobody had ever seen one. There were a couple of large wooden posts in Jerusalem that were rumored to be Lebanese cedar, but this could not be confirmed. King David had contracted with King Hiram to import some, but the continuing civil violence had prevented this commerce from beginning. Soon, however, all of Jerusalem would see the great cedar trunks that The King would use for his palace and also for the Temple.

But they will see only the trunks, or the lumber sawn from them. I was seeing the trees themselves. I had never seen anything so tall. The little oaks around Jerusalem looked like rats compared to these stallions of Lebanon. Their needle leaves filled the air with fragrance that was not so much spicy as refreshing. Somehow, for reasons that I do not know, the air at this elevation is easier to breathe, although I have to breathe more of it to keep from feeling faint. The cedars were tall, taller than any buildings except for those that will be built from them, and their branches reach out like god-arms. There seems to always be a mist round about them, and birds flew among the boughs. And they were everywhere, on every slope and every pinnacle, forming a continuous shade of green. Surely this must have been the inspiration for the story about The Garden of Eden.

There were lots of wildflowers in these forests. Some of the flowers were small and pink, each with five petals. Other flowers were small and pink with five petals, but the petals were a little wider and had a tint of yellow. Other flowers had yellow petals and an army of structures that produce the yellow dust. Yet other flowers, instead of leaflike petals, had four leaflike petals and one spur. I stopped to think about why this might be. Of course, maybe the priests were right, that asking why something was one way or the other was a waste of time. I saw an insect land on the flower and extend a long tongue into the spur. Perhaps I had just seen an example of divine blessing: the flower was not meant just for humans to admire but to feed insects, and, in this case, only insects with long tongues. And, growing beside a little spring, there was a rose bush.

The flowers I admired most, however, were the lilies. They came in all different sizes, shapes, and colors. Some had large white flowers that looked like a scepter held up in the air. Some were small and looked just like the other wildflowers, except that they had six petals instead of five. Lilies have six petals. Sometimes three of the petals were small and green, sometimes all six were colorful. Sometimes they had three of the structures that produced yellow dust, sometimes six. One of the lilies was a large spike of flowers with the dust structures delicately extending into the air. Even the flowers that had not yet opened, with dark streaks outlining the white petals, were beautiful.

And then I found the most delicate lily of all. Its small white flowers hung down on hairlike stalks from a nodding stem like little bells. It was not noticeable to a person standing up. To see the flowers, you had to be down on the ground. Little insects, looking up, would be able to see them. It was as if God had made these flowers for the insects, and not for us at all.

I looked around and imagined talking with Henna about the trees. A conversation, projected over the vast distance that now separated us, a conversation in which I could see the trees and she could not.

So these trees, my love. Are they as tall as the great tamarisk in my father's garden?

Oh, my sweetness, my life, they are much taller. They seem almost as tall as Jerusalem is high above the Sea of Arabah.

But this cannot be, my love. Trees so tall?

You are probably right. But trust me, you cannot imagine them. Unless there are trees this tall in the land of your birth, south of Nubia.

I cannot remember much about the trees in my land, my love. I just remember it rained a lot.

The trees here in Lebanon reach up into the sky as if they are trying to climb into the heavens and approach the very throne of God.

Ah, my love, but do they have deep roots? The throne of God is down in the Earth.

And, my delightful Henna, the river. I have never seen such a river. The water is clear and fresh.

As clear and fresh as the Brook Kidron?

Forgive me if I laugh at you, my beloved. But…

Go ahead and laugh. I love it when you laugh.

Oh, your laugh is so melodious, like dark honey. What were we talking about?

The river that runs through the forests of Lebanon.

Oh, yes. The pools of water are blue, not brown or green. Green are the ferns that hang over them, but the water is blue. And that's not all.

Tell me more, my love, my Elah.

The pools of water are blue. But in the river itself, the water is white.

White? How can it be white? Like the waves of the sea which, I remind you, I have never seen? Unless we take that trip over the sea that you told me about a few days ago.

White, because the water rushes faster than the fastest stallion, faster than the wind, and crashes against the rocks, and jumps and sprays into the air. A thousand thousand little drops of water reflecting the white sunlight. That is why it is white. Can you imagine it?

I am trying. I am trying.

And that's not all. I am looking at the river from the top of a tall cliff. The roaring of the water fills the entire canyon with thunder. The water thrashes against the boughs of little bushes down by the river, and they wave back and forth. And oh! Look!

I cannot see, my love. You must tell me.

There it goes, leaping among the bushes by the river. It is a hart! Its footing is so sure. It leaps among the rocks as surely as a man walks on the smoothest road.

Is he feeding among the lilies?

Yes, I suppose he is. I am not. I will return soon as I can. Oh, the power of this river! There is only one thing to compare with it. Only one thing more powerful.

I know, my love. I know what it is.

Eli and I were sitting outside our tent, waiting to begin our evening duties. I told him about my imaginary conversation with Henna. He had come to simply accept such crazy things from me.

"Did you write any of it down?" he asked.

"Just, shall we say, the main point. *Love is as strong as death. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it*."

Eli fell silent.

"Well? It's nice, isn't it? And true, too."

"My friend, think about what you wrote. The love that you feel, and that has consumed you. Watch out, buddy! Watch out!" He suddenly almost began to cry. Almost. "This love that you are experiencing, it has more power than the river below us. Love can crash all boats, tear up whole villages along its banks, and throw humans and their temples like toys from its white crests. You and Henna are playing with a force that is bigger than anything else. Just remember that. It will overwhelm you."

"I know, my friend. I have already accepted this. What happens will happen. I will either be a dead lion that has loved, or a living dog that has not loved. The living lion option is probably out of the question now."

Chapter 11

The King thought it would be a grand idea for us—the Regiment and servants—to take a nature walk. And so we assembled on the second morning outside of The King's tent, which he called The Tabernacle. I should not have been surprised that he asked me to be first in line; he knew about my knowledge of plants. We walked along the trail that was parallel to, and far above, the river.

The King took a deep breath and smiled, looking up into the lofty branches. A few of the wives, concubines, and slaves of the regiment could see him; most were trailing behind like the end of a snake. Already, the sound of chopping filled the air. We saw one of the largest trees fall. It didn't take too long, because the iron axe heads were very sharp and strong. There were no such axes in Israel; the Sidonians kept their foundries hidden and the construction methods secret.

"Soon," said The King, "I will bring these lofty trees to Jerusalem, where they can praise the Lord, rather than out here in Lebanon where nobody can see them!"

Then we began hiking. The King spent most of his time back in Jerusalem sitting around, and I was surprised that he sprang with vigor along the trail. I managed to keep up with him, but the concubines needed some encouragement from their eunuchs. The King had to slow down for them. At the very end of the snake, the two fat wives were huffing and puffing, sweat showing clear through their robes. Their whining voices were clearly audible to the rest of us. *This is the stupidest idea I ever heard of. What does he think he is doing? So he wants us to go see some trees! We can see trees from back in the camp. We can see trees back in Jerusalem! Somebody's going to have to carry me! I can't breathe—what is wrong with the air up here? There's nothing out here, nothing! Except that river. I hope I don't fall in. Is that what Solly expects us to do? Fall in? Right. I suppose he thinks he can get rid of us that way. Somebody's going to have to carry me! What was the idea, bringing us out here without a palanquin? The trail is too narrow? Well, then we shouldn't have come. That's planning for you! And that head steward is supposed to be a wise man! Ew, I stepped in something. What is it? I don't know. It's squishy. I think it's an animal. Somebody's going to have to carry me!*

Then "Solly" stopped and let everyone catch up. He even beckoned the ones in the rear to gather around him. I was sitting next to him, something that had become almost ordinary on this trip. Of course, back in Jerusalem, I would probably never see him. Just as well.

"Our friend Elah here…" The King began. "He knows a lot about trees and plants. And so, Elah, what is this plant?" He reached over and pulled a sprig of leaves. It was the plant with the little white bell flowers. "What is this?"

"I do not know, Your Majesty," I said. "It is a kind of lily, but I do not know what kind."

"Well, I suppose then that we can name it anything we want." He looked thoughtfully at his signet ring. "I think I will name it 'Solomon's-seal.'" The courtiers all praised The King, the concubines exchanged tired smiles, and the wives snuffled and frowned.

A bird flitted overhead. It was a little, plain bird, except for a patch of red on the very top of its head. “And that bird?” The King asked me.

“I do not know, Your Majesty.”

“Well, then I think I will name it ‘the little king’s bird.’ I mean, ‘the king’s little bird.’ Help me out, here, Elah. What would be a good name?”

“Kinglet?” I suggested.

The King smiled. “Excellent! And what is the name of the river below us? The tributary?”

Eliphaz spoke up. “We could name it The King’s River.”

“Excellent,” said The King.

I saw my chance to score a point or two. “I would rethink that decision, Your Majesty.”

The King smiled and looked straight at me. “Why so?”

“Well, Your Majesty said that it was a tributary. A tributary to the Lebanon River. Your Majesty does not pay tribute to Tyre or Sidon.”

Amidst the human silence and the noise of the river below, The King proclaimed, “Brilliant! Thank you, Elah, for saving me from a potentially embarrassing situation. Well, then, what shall we name it? Let’s see. What are those little bushes down by the river, Elah?”

“I don’t know, Your Majesty. I think that, perhaps, every plant and tree that grows here is different from the ones in Jerusalem, or even Mt. Carmel.”

“So, we are explorers of new lands,” said The King.

Then I said, “But they look like the willows that grow by the Brook Kidron.” I forgot to add, Your Majesty, but he didn’t notice. “Let’s call this river the Little Kidron. Even though it is bigger than the Kidron in size, it is smaller in importance.”

“Excellent, Elah. And that little bird? The one going *tit-tit-tit?* Did you see it? Down in the willows. Why, it just dived into the river! Amazing! Why did it do that? Ah, I can imagine. It must have been that the little bird was so sad at the loss of his love that he threw himself into the waves. Surely you can imagine such a feeling, Elah?”

I froze as I realized that, just possibly, one of his administrators had sneaked into my tent and read my writings. *Love is as strong as death. Many waters cannot quench love.* Then I realized that The King was not thinking of anything quite so deep or important. He said, “Then we will call the bird a tit, the trees tit-willows.” Nobody dared to laugh. Then The King began to sing. *“In a tree by the river…”* His voice was actually very good. I threw my eyes back over the crowd of women and courtiers.

I was the first to see her, but I made no indication of it, because I did not understand it. The Nubian Tamar had been slipping back to the rear of the assembly. She crouched and crept a little bit upslope under the trees. The assembly then noticed something when they saw my face. My face registered surprise when I saw Tamar remove her robe and wad it up in her hand. When she saw that the others had noticed her, she began to run. She ran around the back and down the trail, as gracefully and as sure-footedly as a doe. Her bare feet crushed almost audibly against the rocks, but she gave no indication of pain. She suddenly stopped. She may not have considered

that there would, of course, be guards ahead of us on the trail, as well as behind. She turned around and began to run downslope, not far from us. She was magnificently naked. She did indeed have almost no breasts; but against her brown skin there were nipples as dark as night. They swayed slightly, like medallions of honor from her home country. She whirled her head around, flinging her curled hair in every direction. She bared her teeth like an animal. Her body was skinny. Her buttocks were small, tight, and totally muscular. Now I understood why she had removed her robe. Her long leaps were totally unencumbered. She leapt over logs that made the guards fall over when they tried to climb past them. She was running so fast that I believed it would be inevitable that she would escape. She must have thought so, also, as she held her wadded robe up in the air with a triumphant arm. But where would she go? She could go into the Valley of the Hivites, then through Bashan and down the east side of Israel. But then? The Negev Desert? The Sinai Desert? All this, before even reaching Egypt, north of Nubia. But as I watched her astonishing slimness, and her hair streaking behind her like the legendary hair of Absalom, son of King David, I truly believed she could do it.

Then she stopped. She had reached the edge of a cliff. She turned around. She was at some distance, but it was clear that she had trapped herself on a peninsula jutting out into the dizzying air above the dizzying river. Now the guards, approaching from all directions, had simply to walk, with their swords out. Before they had gotten very close, however, Tamar called out, her teeth flashing, “Solomon! I will never love you! You disgust me!” Then she turned and leapt from the cliff, looking like a little ornamental stroke of the pen on a parchment.

Within a few minutes, The King and I and several others (except for the guards who stayed to make sure no other women fled) walked down to the place form which Tamar had flung herself. We looked down. There were boulders everywhere, and all of them were hidden under rushing currents. All of the cliffs that we could see were quite vertical. We believed that there was no way that Tamar could have survived. We also did not see her body anywhere.

When we rejoined the rest of the regiment and servants and guards, The King simply said, “Well, she was one of my favorites. But that’s how it goes. Leaves an opening in the regiment.” He nodded to Eliphaz, who smiled as if he knew exactly what to do.

Chapter 12

We took a different route back to Jerusalem. The Chief Steward had arranged for boats, and we floated down the Jordan River, which was a ribbon of green between dry hills. We passed through the Sea of Chinnereth and the Plains of Moab, through the beautiful desert to the east of the mountains. From the vast Lake of Arabah, we took the trail along the Brook Kidron up to Jerusalem. I kept thinking about the Nubian slave, and the power of love and of hatred. I wondered if she had known the power of love, compared with which the forced love of The King was so horrible that she chose death or at least the risk of death. I couldn't actually believe that The King was that disgusting.

When we got back to Jerusalem, I immediately ran to Bildad's garden.

I did not see Henna, nor were there any notes in the lattice window.

Nor did I see her or any notes the following night. My note was still in the window.

When I saw Eli's face, I knew that something terrible had occurred.

"So, you haven't heard anything?" he asked me.

"No, nothing. Eli, what's going on?"

"So, Elah, I have to tell you everything?"

"Yes. Please. Get on with it."

Eli almost couldn't move. He could barely speak. "The opening created by the disappearance of the Nubian woman has now been filled. She is in our regiment. And she is The King's favorite. After just one night, he made up his mind. His newest concubine, someday to be his newest wife, is staying with him in his palace."

"You know, Eli, I haven't been able to find Henna."

Eli raised his eyes lugubriously. "Do I have to tell you everything?"

The sudden shock of understanding made me explode in impotent rage. I looked for something to throw, or a knife with which to stab myself, but Eli had carefully hidden anything that I might damage or with which I might harm myself. I started screaming, "No! No!"

"Please try to be quiet," said Eli, securing my wild arms. "Nobody knows about you and Henna. And it is important that nobody does."

"I will fight The King! I will kill him!"

"You had better hope nobody other than me heard that. Fight him? He doesn't fight. One nod of his head, and a guard will cut yours off."

"He's probably already…" I contorted my face into a mask of rage. "Yes. He has probably already fed among the lilies."

"You're right. He usually doesn't wait."

"But what about Henna? Does he not care what *she* wants? She wants *me!"*

"Control yourself, Elah." He was still struggling with my arms. "You're stronger than I thought. You might hurt me. But I am going to keep you from hurting yourself or anybody else. Listen. You say that what is most important is what happens to Henna, right?"

"If, by my death, I could assure her happiness, I would embrace a thousand tortures."

"Well, what might The King do to Henna if he found out she had been your lover? And…Listen to me! Stop hitting me! Listen to me, you camel's-furrow-pile-of. Just get hold of yourself! Ouch! I said to stop hitting me! Listen. You say that you would be willing to die for her. But are you willing to live for her? Do you think she wants your death? Your death's no good to her. She wants you alive, even if she cannot have you. She has, as far as I am aware, said nothing about you. She has sacrificed herself for you, my man. Listen. I know this is going to sound stupid right now, and it is, but I think it will help us understand the situation a little better. Remember that story about The King and the two harlots? Ah, that calmed you down. Quit looking at me that way. I'm serious."

"That story? It didn't even happen."

"Well, it's popular legend now. The two harlots who both claimed the same baby. They brought the baby to The King and asked him to judge which one of them was the mother. The King then said, well, there is a nice equitable solution to this. Just divide the baby in half and give half to each woman! Of course, the real mother said, No, I would rather that this other whore have the baby than that the baby be harmed. Solomon then gave the baby to the woman who was obviously the real mother. Now, I know it didn't happen, but it tells you something about The King. He knows how to manipulate people. To me, that's the main point of the story. Wisdom is his weapon. He sucks up wisdom like a bottom-feeding fish, wisdom invented by other people, then uses it to advance his own interests. But, just like the real mother who gave up her son to save him, Henna has given you up to save you. Ah, I can see you hadn't thought of that. And if you go make a scene, you will ruin her sacrifice and her future."

"This is going to be very hard for me, Eli. Though now a scribe, I remain assigned to Regiment 25, in which Henna will soon be imprisoned."

"And you have to pretend that you do not know her. And now, my man, I think you are ready for the note."

"The note?"

He pulled a small parchment out of his robe pocket and handed it to me. It was Henna's writing. At first I could not read it because I was so overwhelmed by the beauty of her script. It read simply, *We must pretend that we do not know one another. I would suggest that we never make eye contact. You have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes. Well, we cannot let that happen now. The King will probably keep me apart from the other women anyway, but just in case. And, our time will come. I swear by whatever God there is in heaven or in the Earth, our time will come. Watch for it. But until then, please do not act as though you know me or anything about me.*

"Oh, this is her most beautiful note," I said, crying.

Eli slipped it from my hand and touched it to the flame of a candle.

PART TWO

Chapter 13

The next day I was back at work serving the Leviathans and the concubines. I felt totally depressed, and could not smile at anyone. I noticed that the concubines elbowed one another and pointed at me. But I did not care. I was doing my job as a servant. Later, I would write some letters for The King. I did not meet The King directly—I could not have looked into his eyes, and surely he would have wondered why—but the chief scribe told me the gist of the letter I was supposed to write. The King assumed I would put my customary creativity into the letter. He assumed wrongly.

By evening, after the dishes were cleared, I was alone in my room. Eli stopped in.

"I know how you must feel," he told me, "but keep on keeping on."

I smiled. This, I think, surprised him. "Keep on keeping on? That little statement, Eli, is why I am the poet and you are not."

"Well," Eli said, "I'm glad to see you smile a little."

"Oh, I have a very clear and calm mind. Like the bottom of the sea. The waves and the storms are all on top." I did not meet his eyes.

"You're getting at something," he said.

"It's quite simple, actually," I said. "I am going to kill myself. And then I will be at peace, like the bottom of the ocean."

Eli froze. When I looked up at him, he ran over and grabbed my shoulders. "You can't do that," he said.

"Well, who's going to stop me?"

"Just how are you going to kill yourself?"

I looked down. "I don't know yet. I'll figure out a way. It is a strange feeling. I am actually enjoying the mental stimulation of trying to figure out the right way of committing suicide."

"Think about what Henna would feel," Eli said.

"I know," I answered. "I know my death would sadden her."

"It would devastate her, my friend. You can't do it."

"She sacrificed herself for me, didn't she? It's, as you say, over. When I am gone, she will eventually reach a feeling of peace and forget about me. She can't do that if she sees me here. That is, when The King eventually lets her out of the bedchamber."

"Yes, you are right," said Eli. "She will forget about you eventually. And you need to forget about her."

"There is only one way I can do that," I told him.

"Maybe. And maybe not," said Eli. "Consider some alternatives. You ever hear of Uriah the Hittite? A few decades ago. King David saw this woman taking a bath…"

"Bathsheba," I said. "Everyone's heard about her."

"Well, Uriah the Hittite was her husband. Knowing nothing of the lust between her and the king, Uriah was willing to be the bravest soldier in the army. He got himself killed. With a little help from King David, that is."

"This isn't working, Eli," I said. "There are no wars, remember? Because of The King's effective diplomacy and the letters written by The King's excellent scribes. I can't volunteer to get killed in war. Any other ideas?"

Just then we both noticed the little woman standing at the door.

"Hey, little girl, you scram. Can't you see we're talking here?" Eli snarled.

The woman approached us. I recognized the artisan of the bread. "I came to check for any dishes that need washing," she said, with a colorless high voice. She saw a used bowl. "I'll just take it and be on my way."

"She's the girl that bakes the bread. She is not some dishwasher. I don't believe her excuse," said Eli as the small woman left. "She was eavesdropping. Maybe still is. You think she heard anything?"

"What was there for her to hear?" I responded. I spoke very quietly. "You were about to tell me something."

"Yes, I was. You need something to take your mind off of Henna. I know what can help." He got up to check around for the little woman, then came back. "I know some of the guards who can arrange for you to make private visits to some of the concubines."

"What?" I exclaimed. "If I got caught doing that, I'd get killed."

"You said you wanted to die, right? So, what difference would it make?"

"But the guards might get executed for letting me visit the concubines, and even the concubines might get executed...this sounds like a bad idea for everybody, Eli. Why would the guards take a chance like that?"

"Money."

"Very well. Why would the concubines take a chance like that?"

"Try to imagine, little buddy, just how boring life must be for those concubines, in the long stretches of time between The King's visits. Do you think they are satisfied with just sitting around and doing nothing?"

"They have ways of filling their time," I said. "The eunuchs bathe and massage them."

"You think the concubines would be satisfied with a backrub from a eunuch?"

"Well," I said, "there are the household gods." Household gods were very smooth pieces of wood, phallic in size and shape, which had minimal carving on them to make them pass for idols. But they have been part of women's armamentarium of sexual satisfaction for at least a thousand years. Rachel, wife of the patriarch Jacob, stole some from her father's household. She hid them under the pillow she sat on, and she would not move, claiming that the way of women was upon her. It's right there in the first book of the Torah.

"That's not mainly what a woman wants," Eli said. "You know this perfectly well, little buddy. Would that satisfy Henna? Sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned her. But a woman doesn't just want a piece of wood sticking up in her you know what. I mean, that works some of the

time. But what she really wants is to be embraced. And no eunuch is going to do that in any convincing fashion."

"Yes, you are right. Backrubs and pieces of wood just won't do it. So, what are you getting at?"

"The guards want extra money, and the concubines and slaves want satisfaction. I can arrange for you to sneak in and visit some of them. A bit of a risk, but nobody's ever been caught."

"You've done this?"

"I'm not saying."

"What if one of the concubines or slaves gets pregnant?" I asked.

"How would The King know? With seven hundred concubines—and God knows how many slave girls—he would never keep them all straight. The Chief Steward would know, but a little extra money would take care of that."

And that is how I ended up making secret visits to some of the women. Which ones? To keep us all safe, I was not allowed to know which ones I visited, nor were they allowed to know which man was visiting them. As part of the security procedure, I had to keep my eyes closed as a guard led me to the concubine's room, which was completely dark and curtained. For the slave women, we met in a dark corridor. The women in Regiment 25 all looked different, and you would think, on the basis of such characteristics as breast size, I might be able to at least guess whom I was with. But in the heat and the darkness it is not quite so easy to distinguish one from another, nor is it at all worth thinking about. All of the women were freshly bathed, as was I. I would go around the next day with a dreamy look on my face, looking at each woman and wondering which one I had just spent a few moments of pleasure with. I think all the women knew that I was one of their visitors. Sometimes one concubine or another would brush up next to me—something a slave woman would never do—perhaps thinking that I would recall her particular aroma. But they all seemed alike to me, except that none of them were small enough to be the little baker woman. None of the women had the aroma of my beloved Henna. When in one of these dreamy moods, I would forget about Henna for whole minutes at a time.

My writing lost all of its creativity. I was pretty good at faking it, so when The King asked for an occasional love poem for one of his women, I could always come up with something. And I was not totally uninspired. I never knew which of the poems might be read to Henna. So, I always slipped something in, something very subtle but something that Henna would recognize as coming from nobody but me, even if The King claimed to have written it. Something, just a word or two, from the poems we had written for one another.

And I stopped worrying. There was hardly a day when I so much as thought for a second about the suffering of the poor or why God allows good people to perish and bad people to prosper.

Chapter 14

One night, I returned to my dark room. I knew exactly where everything was, so I had no need to light a candle. As soon as I sat upon my couch, however, I knew that somebody was already in it. I touched a body, and it turned toward me with an almost silent rustle.

Before I could say anything, the voice said, “I think I’d keep my voice down, lover boy.” I could tell from the colorless high pitch who it was. She must have known that I had just had an encounter with one of the forbidden women.

“You’re the artisan of the bread,” I said. I touched her shoulders and her hips, lightly and gauzily draped. “Nobody else as small as you around here.”

I heard her sit up. “I have a name,” she said. “I’m Gomer.”

“I suppose you want what the others want,” I said.

“You suppose wrongly,” she piped. “That is not why I am here.”

“How did you get in here? There’s a guard outside.”

“The guards don’t know I’m here. I am smaller than the shadow of a torch, and I can move around without making the slightest sound.

“Now, as to why I am here,” she continued. “I think we could do a lot of good for each other.”

“You want money,” I said.

“No.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to be your wife.”

I was surprised but not alarmed. “That’s presuming a lot, isn’t it? I mean, I’m moving up in The King’s administration—let go of my hand—where are you putting my hand? It won’t do you any good—and one of these days I will be able to find a wife out there somewhere, someone who has a lot more prospects than you do.”

“It might not be as easy as you think. Marriages aren’t just about your money, but about your family’s money. And your family? I know you don’t have any family to speak of. Neither do I. But go ahead and satisfy yourself by trying to get a wife. I can wait. You won’t find a better woman than me. Maybe with bigger breasts, or with more money, but not a better woman. And my name is Gomer.”

“That is entirely a matter of opinion—mine,” I said. I touched her hot face. “You’re blushing.” Then I added, “Gomer.”

“At least I’m not crying. I try to never do that.”

“Then what kind of woman are you?”

“I am a survivor. And I would make a good partner. You let me into your life, and you will never find a more faithful partner.”

“Words, words,” I said. “You promise me the future. But what can you do for me right now?”

"It's simple," Gomer said. "You want to commit suicide. I can help you do that."

I was stunned and asked her to repeat what she had said.

"Where did you hear that?" I asked. "Were you eavesdropping?"

She ignored my question. "Obviously, I don't want you to kill yourself. But as your partner—which I will start being right now, if you like—I will help you do what you feel you must do."

I suddenly felt at peace with this unseen slip of a woman in my bed. After all, if death was my imminent objective, as it is everyone's ultimate fate, the consequences of my actions with Gomer might not matter.

"And how do you plan to help me kill myself?" I asked.

"I have heard—along with everything else, and I mean everything—that you know a thing or two about plants," she whispered, drawing me down into the couch with her. "But perhaps you have not heard about death lilies."

"I think I have. They're poisonous."

"Of course they're poisonous," said Gomer. "They're death lilies. But you don't know which plants they are or where to find them. You know gardens and the woods and fields around Jerusalem, but I am familiar with the deserts. That's where the death lilies grow. There are two kinds of lilies that look almost alike. One of them is the death lily. The other one is the saffron lily. You could go with me to gather herbs for the kitchen and I might just happen to find some for you. Of course, everybody would know that we had a special tenderness for one another, going out in the desert together like that. And the death lilies bloom in the spring along desert washes. So, we have to wait until spring, since summer is now well advanced. You have to wait until the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land."

I recognized that line. "You've been reading my writings!" I exclaimed.

"Of course. I slipped into your room and read them. I can slip in anywhere, just about," she said, letting go of my hand. "The guards check your room for intruders, but I can hear them coming, and when I hide under the covers of your couch, they can't tell that anyone is there. That's the advantage, perhaps the only one, of being small. Yes, I have read everything. So, if after several months you still want to kill yourself—something from which I hope to dissuade you—I will help you feed among the lilies. Now, come, Elah. Come to me. We must seal our partnership."

"You can slip in anywhere? That means you can take messages to Henna."

I felt her suddenly become tense. She said, "No, I don't think so. The King's chambers are pretty well guarded."

"Maybe, when she moves here? She's been assigned to our regiment, I heard."

"The King won't send her here. You know that."

"You might just have to take some bread to her…"

"She eats from The King's kitchen, not ours. I only bake for Regiment 25." She started untying the sash of my robe. "Now we need to seal our partnership."

"What if I say no?" I responded, when she had pulled my robe open. Without my hearing it, she had slipped the robe off of her shoulders, as I quickly discovered. "I said, woman, what if I say no?"

"Gomer. Call me Gomer. And you won't say no. If, after a while, you still feel that you do not value my partnership, just tell me, and I will leave you alone."

"Well, I'm telling you now, woman."

She grabbed me. "Not yet," she said. "You need to try out my sweet friendship for a while. And my name is Gomer." She made a quick move. I don't know what she did but I fell down on top of her. Though not a large man, I encompassed her. She kissed my ear. "You don't need me. I'm not stupid enough to consider myself indispensable. But blessings like me don't come along very often." She moved to position herself just right.

As she started to draw the power out of me, colors splashed before my eyes, the only light in the darkness of my room.

Without thinking, I blurted out, "Henna, I love you."

Gomer tensed up again. "She's not here. My name is Gomer. Say it."

"Gomer."

"Say it. Say the whole thing."

"Gomer, I love you?"

When I said that, she just melted against me and I swooned into unconsciousness.

When I awoke the next morning, Gomer was gone from my room. At breakfast, our eyes did not meet.

Chapter 15

One day in late summer, when I returned to my room after writing a few letters for the Chief Steward, I found a plate of pastries made from elah nuts and honey. Of course, I knew who had brought them, and I stopped by the kitchen to thank Gomer.

The head cook, a woman named Rebekah, greeted me. “Gomer’s not here at the moment,” she said.

“What makes you think I was looking for Gomer?” I responded.

“It’s not everyone Gomer makes her pastries for,” said the cook. “I assumed you two knew each other pretty well.” Gomer had slipped into my room many times. The first few times she had done so secretly, but then one of the guards asked me about her and I gave her permission to visit me any time she wanted. The guards had apparently told everyone else. “I’ll tell Gomer you were here to see her,” said the cook.

When I found Eli, he smiled at me. “You seem a lot happier now, what with Gomer and all,” he said. “Guess we don’t need to arrange for any more dangerous liaisons with the concubines and slaves. That Gomer is a sweet girl.”

Everyone seemed to know about us. But I knew what no one else but Gomer knew: she was the partner who was going to, in the fullness of time, help me commit suicide, and the pleasure of whose company I would enjoy right up until that time.

*

One afternoon, as I was finishing my work, the Head Scribe told me to enjoy my day off.

“Day off? You mean, tomorrow? I didn’t know anything about it.”

“Oh. The Chief Steward told me that you and the little baker were going off to gather food in the hills.”

When I saw Gomer at dinner that night, I whispered to her while she was rushing around to serve everyone, which now included me, “What’s this about going out in the hills tomorrow?”

She did not answer my question until she was in my room. It was hot and we were lying on top of the sheets, our arms and legs spread out to be as cool as possible. “Everyone’s been asking why we didn’t think of it sooner,” she said. “We both know about edible wild plants. The kitchen might be able to make use of something we find.”

“But I didn’t think of it,” I said. “You did. You are the one who seems to have made the arrangements. Without my permission.”

“I told the head cook, who told the Chief Steward, that it was your idea. I knew you would be all right with it.” She went back to her own room.

*

The next morning, while it was still dark, Gomer came into my room and nudged me. “You getting up or what?” she asked. “Before the heat of the day,” she added.

It did not take me long to get prepared, especially since Gomer had already packed some bread for breakfast.

“Did you bring your parchment and pen?” she asked me.

“No,” I said. “I’m off work today.”

“I mean, for writing some of your poetry.”

“I don’t write my own poetry anymore. Not since Henna.”

“Bring your parchment, pen, and ink. You might feel like writing.”

“Since Henna, I have no heart for writing. And Gomer, I really like you, but I just don’t feel poetic about you.”

“So, don’t write about me. Write about what you see out in the hills. And put it in that sturdy leather bag. I think we might get rained on.”

And soon we were on a camel heading out of town along the Brook Kidron road. The sky was solid and low, and the wind was fierce. Gomer was small enough that she fit right in front of me between the camel humps. The wind kept throwing her hair into my face. It smelled good.

“Gomer, couldn’t this trip have waited? I mean, this looks like the worst possible day for a trip out into the countryside.”

“Every day has its own kind of beauty,” Gomer said, tilting her head back just a little so that I could hear her words against the wind.

“But the beauty of some days are best enjoyed inside rather than outside,” I said. Gomer did not answer.

After riding for a few minutes, right at sunrise, we reached Musicians’ Rock. It was actually a whole mountainside, not just a rock. Steep white cliffs covered it. It was called Musicians’ Rock because the little oak trees whose roots clung to the cliffs were gnarled and their wood was very strong and was prized for making lutes. Because of the rough terrain, only a few trees had been cut down, and because the trees were short, the trees were considered worthless for anything but making lutes and most had been spared from the axe which had denuded most of the mountains around Jerusalem. A servant was riding on a donkey alongside us. He guided our camel off on a little side trail, into the trees, and up a steep path around the cliffs. The trunks of even these strong little trees swayed a little in the wind. I was not surprised at our detour, for I knew that Gomer must have had our whole day planned out. When we stopped, I slipped down off of the camel and helped her to the ground. I could almost hold her with one arm.

“Over there,” she pointed. “There is a perfect place for you to sit and write. On top of that cliff.” Before I could ask what she expected me to write, she said, “You’ll think of something.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m gathering elah nuts,” she answered.

"The pantry has plenty of elah nuts," I said. Jerusalem had plenty of elah groves, just outside the city walls.

"The wild ones have a different flavor. Stronger. Some people find it distasteful. You know, the elah that grow in the wild are stronger than the ones in the orchards where they have everything done for them." When she said this, I wondered if she meant me instead of the trees; if she meant that I would have been a stronger person if I had grown up as a wild man rather than spending my entire adult life indoors, first as a servant in a whorehouse, and now as a scribe.

Gomer sat with me on the cliff. There was a patch of clear sky in the east. The sun had now fully risen, and the golden light made Gomer's face glow. When I looked at her face really close up, I saw its rugged beauty: a small face, with big eyes, small nose, and even smaller mouth. Only the little wrinkles indicated that she was not a girl anymore. Then she examined my face. I had not shaved. She rubbed her cheek against my whiskers, then resumed watching the scenery. On the road below, men were trudging off to work. Merchants struggled with heavy wagons. Women carried water urns on their shoulders, tottering in the strong wind.

Then I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye. It was a young lion.

Gomer could feel me freeze. "Don't be frightened," she whispered to me. And, indeed, the lion quickly vanished among the cliffs. "He, or she, has been out hunting. Lions hunt at night. Not all that different from people working during the day. All animals and all people have to work in order to eat. Animals, people, it's all part of God's world."

"What if the lion sees us and considers us to be the reward for a good night's work?" I asked.

Gomer looked into my eyes. "I'm not afraid of lions. People, they can be frightening. But I am not afraid of lions. And you, my friend? You want to die anyway, so you should not be afraid of a lion even if you think it might kill you."

"It would be an awful way to die," I said.

"There are worse ways," she answered. Then she started to rise to her feet. She briefly nibbled my ear. "Even the death lily. You convulse and tremble and retch before blessedly losing consciousness. There is no magic potion to make you die. The human body wants to survive, and it fights against anything that might kill it.

"Now," continued Gomer, "you just sit there and write something. I'll get out of sight and try to not make too much noise." She slipped away behind me and when I turned around I could not see her.

I unrolled the parchment and got out my pen. I found a stable place to put my little bottle of ink, held in place by crevices in the white rock. Write? Write about what? She told me to just look around. What is there here? I know what is not here. Henna. She is not here. Who knows what she is doing? Probably something disgusting with The King. I have to write something, I told myself. Maybe I'll start with what Gomer told me to look at. The lion coming home from work, and the people going to work as the sun rises. And the trees. They have to work too. They spend all year making acorns and elah nuts. All trees eventually die, but the only trees that have descendants are those who produce seeds. All trees in the whole world are the descendants of

trees who worked as hard as they could to produce as many seeds as possible. The whole world was trapped in a cycle of travail, as endless as the wind going round and round. No, this cannot be what Gomer thought I should write. I should write something about the beauty of the dawn, a beauty that the supposedly wise King probably never sees.

A sudden gust of wind nearly tore the parchment from my grasp. I dropped the pen. It wedged into a crevice and I retrieved it. It was when I was sitting back down on the cliff that I felt the sudden rush of inspiration, unexpected although not uninvited. I started noticing things. The clouds had blown away in the east and I saw the Morning Star. The sun's effulgence had nearly obscured it. I looked away, then back, and this time could not see it. There is a season for everything—a season for elah nuts, a season for lilies. That is, except far to the south of Nubia where it is always warm and rainy and everything is available all the time. Or not. Actually, I did not know. And there is a moment for everything—a time to see the Morning Star and then, a moment later, to not see it. A time for lions to hunt, and a time for them to sleep; a time for people to sleep, and a time for them to work. The moon was always changing. The sun too. I did not know what the sun was, but I knew that it was not temperamental. It knew when to get up and when to go to sleep, just like every one of the creatures kissed by its light. Not just the things themselves, the sun and moon and animals, but the dance of time as well, were part of the beauty of God's creation. I felt ready to write something.

God made the moon to mark the seasons,
and the sun knows when to go down.

This was not a very auspicious beginning for a poem, but at least I had started writing. Then I wrote,

God brings darkness, it becomes night,
and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
The lions roar for their prey
and seek their food from God.
The sun rises, and the lions steal away;
they return and lie down in their dens.
Then people go out to their work,
to their labor until evening.

Then I heard something. It might be that lion, I thought, but I was not afraid. I was not even afraid that a lion might hurt Gomer. Gomer, who had to be lovely in her own way, if she can see the loveliness of the world. *A beautiful mind,* I thought. *And a not unpleasant face and body. I'm growing accustomed to her. I have even started whispering hers when we embrace, and doesn't that please her. It pleases her so much. How unreasonable it is for my mind to keep clinging to Henna, when Gomer is right here, my constant and continual companion.* But I

forced myself to concentrate yet again. I am not supposed to be thinking about Henna. Not even about Gomer. I should be thinking about the sky and the trees and the lion.

I heard the sound again. It came from the cliff. It was a little animal scurrying in and out of the crevices. It was a hyrax. It was as much at home in the little rock crevice as I was in my little room and as The King was in his palace. The hyrax neither knew nor cared that there was some other creature—for we are all creatures, and will all return to the earth—who feels that he cannot be happy unless he has a big palace and a retinue of people to kiss his toes.

A long-lost memory returned to me. When I was a child, I had been up in the mountains. I do not remember the circumstances. I just remember being fascinated by the mountain goats, which could scramble around the cliffs as sure-footed as I was clumsy. I also remembered seeing a stork with its nest up in a juniper. The hyrax, the goat, and the stork were all at home. The trees were at home too. It made no sense to learn about the trees and the animals as isolated things; it only made sense to learn about animals and plants in their homes. Someday scholars will study animals and plants at home. For now I could only marvel that the world was abundant and overflowing with animals and plants, all of them finding their own homes. Some of these homes, such as the cedars that I had recently seen in Lebanon, were stately; some of the homes are, by human standards, quite uncomfortable. I started writing again.

The trees of the Lord are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
There the birds make their nests;
the stork has its home in the junipers.
The high mountains belong to the wild goats;
the crags are a refuge for the hyrax.

I looked off into the desert. The wind stirred clouds of gray dust. The Brook Kidron snaked into it. Along the brook there were willows and there were probably birds singing in them. There were probably wild animals, such as wild donkeys, that come down to the brook to drink. Some farmers irrigated wheat and barley fields using the Kidron's water. I wondered if the farmers, sweating at their work early in the morning (so that they could rest in the heat of the afternoon), thought of themselves as part of the vast cycle of life, just like the trees and the birds and the lions. Probably not. They probably just wanted to get home and drink some wine. But these simple pleasures were part of what God has made us to enjoy. I saw a dove land near a little pool of water, dip down, and start gulping water. I have never seen any other kind of bird do this. All the other birds scoop up the water and let it drain down their gullets. Perhaps that dove is deriving as much pleasure from drinking water from a little pool as men do from drinking wine. We are all just creatures at home. And we are unhappy when we are not at home. I resumed writing.

God causes springs to pour their water into the ravines;
the water flows between the mountains.
The creeks give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
The birds of the sky nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.
God waters the mountains from his upper chambers,
and the land is satisfied by the fruit of their work.
God makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—
bringing forth food from the earth:
wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.

And then I began to think about the distant ocean, not only too far away for me to see but in the opposite direction to the one I was now looking. I remembered seeing the ocean from the mountains on our way to Lebanon. I knew almost nothing about the oceans, except that they were full of fish and ships traveled on them. Also, I had heard legends about sea monsters. But if lions were just creatures going about their business, why not sea monsters also? Maybe the sea monsters were not evil, but are just having fun? I smiled at this ridiculous thought. When a leviathan slapped the water with its tail fluke, upsetting a boat and sending the sailors down into death, maybe the leviathan was just having a good time and had no blessed idea that anybody would get hurt.

There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number—
living things both large and small.
There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.

I was finally starting to feel that life is good. How astonishing that I should have this feeling while deprived of even a glimpse of my beloved Henna. I even dared to think that this kind of joy-of-life was what Henna wanted me to feel. *Of course, it is. She loves me and wants me to be happy. She doesn't want me to drown myself in wine and seek shallow happiness in parties, but to experience a world of happiness, just as I am now,* I told myself. *Just as I am with Gomer.* The wind goes round and round, the sun goes round and round, the rivers never fill the ocean, but it is not weariness. It is a celebration. I started writing again, my thoughts crowding faster than I could scrawl them.

All creatures look to God
to give them their food at the proper time.
When God gives it to them,
they gather it up;
when God opens his hand,
they are satisfied with good things.
When God hides his face,
all the creatures are terrified;
when God takes away the breath from their bodies
they die and return to the dust.
When God sends his breath upon the world,
everything is created all over again.
God renews the face of the ground.

Now this, I thought, is what those pitiful priests should be writing in little slips of paper to put in the little boxes that they latch onto their foreheads or their arms or try to stick into their mouths or why not latch them onto other parts of the body of which they are ashamed but which are, must be, equally holy. All of life is one big dance, of eating and drinking and birth and living and dying and rebirth. And the love that Gomer had for me and I for her was just as much a part of this celebration as is anything else. I was still fairly sure I was not in love with her. She seemed more like a little friend. But her love was sweeter than honeyed wine to me.

I lay back in the dead leaves and fell asleep. When I awoke, Gomer was sitting beside me. The wind was even stronger and we could smell rain. Gomer looked at me and pushed an elah nut between my lips. I sat up and kissed her lips. She touched my fingers with hers. We stood up and she guided me down into a little ravine. I put a rock on my parchment to keep it from blowing away. She lay on her back and pulled the robe away from her skinny form. I had never seen her body in full light. It was a sand-colored desert landscape with a few dark rocks studded about in it, like those dark rocks that they say fall from the sky, and her ribs were like the ripples in the silt left in the desert by spring floods. Her navel was a pool without wine and her ravine of lilies was dark and mysterious and not very large. The wind blew dead leaves over her body. Before I gently rested myself down upon her, a centipede scampered up over her shoulder. It lay upon her like God's very necklace.

We had to scamper up from where we lay when the rain started. Gomer thought only of rescuing my poem. She crammed the parchment, pen, and ink bottle into the leather pouch. I grabbed her burlap bag of nuts and stashed it into a saddlebag along with my pouch.

Gomer and I sat on the ground and ate from the handful of elah nuts that she had grabbed out of the bag before the servant stowed it away. The rain poured down on us.

"Those nuts are going to mildew," I said. "Getting wet like that."

"I'll dry them in the kitchen beside the hearth," Gomer answered.

"These nuts really are more pungent than the ones from the orchards," I said. I opened my mouth to drink the sweet rain between bites of elah.

"I'm surprised you didn't know that," said Gomer. The rain had plastered her garments against her body.

"I used to, but it has been years since I've climbed around in the hills. By the way, Gomer, this was in fact the worst possible day to go gathering nuts."

"I love elah nuts. I could live off of them. I have no need of honey, if I have elah," Gomer said, not looking at me.

I jumped up and asked, "What did you say?"

"I merely meant that these nuts are just fine the way they are, even though they are not in a pastry." She patted the ground beside her for me to sit back down. "What was that all about?"

"You just reminded me of someone I haven't thought of in a long, long time," I said.

"An old lover?"

"We weren't old enough to be lovers. Her name was Tamar."

"Oh, that's unusual."

"She said exactly what you said right then. And then she moved away. I never saw her again. Come to think of it, she looked a little bit like you."

"All little girls look a little bit like me."

"You didn't used to live in…I mean, you didn't used to go by the name of…I mean…"

"I don't see how that is possible."

"You're right. I guess you can't be her."

"I suppose not, Elah. But in a way I am. All women are one woman, in some ways."

"No, they aren't, Gomer."

"In some ways. And, as you found when writing this morning…"

"You read it?"

"You were meant to write those words, and I was meant to read them. You fell asleep a few moments, and I read them. And, as you are discovering, all stories are one story."

"And what story might that be?"

"You tell me, Elah."

"Very well. Let me think." The rain was now just isolated drips "All the world is part of a gigantic cycle, the circling of the sun, the moon, the wind, the water, the rain, the flying of the birds, the seasons throbbing like a very slow heartbeat."

"Good start, Elah. But what about love? There is only one story, and it is the story of love. The story of costly love. The story of sacrificial love." The rain had stopped but the wind tore drops of water from the oak leaves and threw them at us.

"Let me think about that, Gomer. Love is…love is…when one part of the cycle clings to another part of the cycle for a few moments before all of them fall into the earth."

"Love me, Elah. Love me." Her hair was plastered against her scalp. "Love me. It won't last. Soon we will descend into the earth. The love of any one being for another cannot last forever. They just cling to one another for a few moments in the history of time. But we are here,

now. Things happen, Elah. Sometimes love must end even before the lovers descend into the earth. But we cannot know when this may happen. Just accept *us, now*."

"You want me to marry you."

"You knew that already."

"It certainly makes sense. Let me think about it."

"I know that I am a small woman, and that my breasts are small, but I can bear you children and nurse them. My mother was a small woman and she had me and she would have had more except, except for things I don't need to tell you about right now but they weren't anything to do with her body."

"There's nothing wrong with you or your body, Gomer."

We sat in silence, then I said, "You mean, you want me to tell you *now* that I want to marry you?"

"Waiting isn't going to give you any more information, if that's what you are waiting for, or any more wisdom. Wisdom comes when you open your mind to it. And that's what you did this morning. You've got all the information and all the wisdom you need. Just say it."

"I still need to think about it."

"Just say it. Just say, *Gomer, I want to marry you*."

"Actually, Gomer, we haven't figured out what we are going to do after getting married…"

"That comes later."

"And there's a lot I don't know about you."

"You will never know all about me. Nor I about you. As a wise man, you must know that sometimes you just have to act when the opportunity is right, even when you haven't figured everything out."

When Gomer said this, I had a brief flash of memory: Henna's brilliant robe in the walled garden. I had, in fact, acted impulsively with Henna. And look where it had gotten me! It seemed to me that making an impulsive decision about Gomer was no more likely to be a good move than the impulsive decision I had made about Henna.

"Our love, Gomer, is not a spring wildflower that opens for a day. My answer is not yes, and it is not no. It is wait."

Gomer exhaled quietly and slowly and did not look into my eyes as she stood up and started walking back toward the camel, the donkey, and the servant.

It started to rain again and the servant led our camel as quickly as possible back to Regiment 25. When we arrived, the head cook Rebekah greeted us. We were dripping from the new storm that had rinsed us of all pride and pretense.

"The King's favorite liked your pastries very much," Rebekah said to Gomer. "She wanted to know what tasted different about them, compared to the usual elah pastries. I told her they had wild nuts in them. She wanted to thank you personally, and I told her you were out gathering more wild nuts. So, she charged me to express her appreciation to you. Elah, she says, is her favorite."

My head reeled. “Wait,” I said. “What happened?”

“Why, the woman known as Henna came to lunch today. Even though Henna will probably not be living with us, The King wanted her to meet the fellow members of her regiment.”

“Henna was here?”

“The two wives were not pleased, of course. They made disparaging remarks about her being black. Black as charcoal. It won’t wash off. Things like that. But you could tell they were just miserable with jealousy.”

“Henna was here?”

“The King sent servants with her. You would have had nothing to do except sit and watch.” Rebekah turned to go back into the kitchen. “We have to get dinner ready,” she said to Gomer.

I grabbed Gomer and thrust my face into hers. “You knew this was going to happen.”

Gomer was expressionless. I imagined that her heart was beating as fast as that of a little mouse caught in the talons of a kestrel.

“You tricked me, got me out so that I would not see my…That’s why you wanted to go out today, even though we got rained on almost as soon as we left. It was a horrible day for gathering nuts, but it *had* to be today. And that’s why you tried to insist that I offer to marry you. Today. So that it would be too late to change my mind. You…”

Gomer pressed her face into mine and whispered. She was frowning even more than I. “Of course I did it, you idiot. Don’t you see? I did it for *you*.”

“No, you did it for *you.* So you can have me.”

“You will never have Henna, don’t you see? And for the last few weeks, you have relaxed and started forgetting about her. Today, if we had been here at lunch, it would have blasted away all the progress that you have made at becoming…” She started to cry, without withdrawing her face. “…at becoming a happy person again. Just tell me,” she said wetly, “just try to tell me that you weren’t happy today. I read your poem. You were happy. If you had stayed here you would have started up another season of self-torture. It worked! I made you happy today! And the happiness you wrote about is no delusion. All those things you wrote about, as well as the love that we share, are real! But your idea that you might someday get together with Henna is utter fantasy! Here we are, Elah. That’s real. You getting together with The King’s favorite concubine? There is no hope for that. There is more hope that a dead dog will rise out of its grave than there is that you will ever so much as get to speak to that woman again!”

“You’re probably right, Gomer,” I said, kissing her forehead. “But…”

She pulled away from me when I said *but.*

“But Henna did say that Elah is her favorite,” I finished.

“She meant the nuts, you idiot!” Gomer’s breath was convulsive and rasping.

“Probably. But during our last communication, she told me to listen for a message from her.”

"Well, that wasn't it!" screamed Gomer. Rebekah watched quietly from the kitchen, ready to intervene if necessary.

"Well, dear Gomer, if that *wasn't* it, then I have to keep listening for when she does leave me a message."

Another thunderstorm had rolled in. A blinding flash of lightning filled the hallway, obliterating the light of the torches. When the thunder hit, Gomer spoke into my ear. "Won't anything convince you?" she asked. She tore from me and ran to Rebekah, who put her arm over Gomer's shoulder and led her into the kitchen.

I knew Gomer would be waiting for me in my room when I, after delaying as much as I could, returned to it. She nestled against me in bed and said nothing as we listened to the storms thrash against the closed window and against the rock cliffs in which the hyraxes were at home.

Chapter 16

It was the middle of a mild winter. Most of the food got delivered to the kitchen and the Chief Steward signed off on it, but there were always a few items that Gomer wanted to look for in the marketplace herself. And I usually went with her on those days.

Gomer found exactly what she was looking for and started walking toward it, leaving me behind. I stopped and watched her striding confidently among the men and women, all of whom were larger than she. I was about to run after her when I saw her stop, pivot on her feet, and walk back toward me. Her eyes were big. A man was following her. I had my knife ready, but I knew Gomer had hers ready too. I was only her backup, not her principal protector.

"I'd given up looking for you," the man called after Gomer. "And here, just walking in the market, I find you. God is good. You, stop. I have the authority to order you to stop."

"You don't look like a member of The King's guard," I spoke to the man as I approached. Gomer stopped and looked at both of us.

"I'm not," said the man. "My name is Ishmael and I am the heir of this woman's master."

"Leave me alone," spat Gomer. "You don't know what you are talking about."

"Oh, I cannot possibly be mistaken. I would know you anywhere," the man said expansively. "You are a slave. You belonged to my uncle."

"You are full of wine," said Gomer. "You pick out some woman at the marketplace, you pick a small one who looks vulnerable, and then you try this stupid story on me. I've never killed anyone."

"Who said anything about killing?" said the man. Terror exploded on Gomer's face. "How could you know that? That is indeed exactly what happened. I watched you kill my uncle. You just admitted it."

"Please, explain this to me," I said to the man, to buy some time while I figured out what to do.

"This woman is a slave," the man said. "She belonged to my uncle, and I am his heir. My uncle really admired her. And, as was his right, he asked her to be his concubine. For some reason or other, she declined. My uncle approached her. Then she—this girl, I swear it—ran up and stabbed him. How she got hold of the dagger I cannot imagine. She escaped and we have been looking for her ever since. And God has now delivered her into my hand." He smiled grandly.

"I didn't do it," said Gomer. "But I wish I had. Sounds as if your uncle deserved far worse than he got."

"My uncle had no intention of hurting her," the man said to me. "Why, he would have treated her with the utmost tenderness…"

"Oh, is that so? Well, if he was going to treat her so tenderly, it would have been the first time," Gomer said with quiet intensity.

"How could you know that? Woman, you entrap yourself over and over. Now let me call on one of The King's guards, and this man here can verify along with me that you have tripped yourself up in your own lies. You are wanted for murder, *and* you are my property!"

He started to look around for a guard. I had to act fast. I grabbed Gomer, holding her in a tight clamp, and said to the man, "Do not worry. She cannot run away. There is time for us to discuss this matter. Come, let us retreat into this quiet corner. It is so noisy out here that we can scarcely talk." I started leading Gomer around a corner to find a quiet space. I kept myself between the man, who followed us, and Gomer.

When we were in a relatively quiet spot, I turned on the man. I was still holding Gomer. "You must be mistaken. This woman is with me. We are servants in the same household. We both grew up in that household. I have known her since she was much younger than she could have possibly been in your account." I looked into Gomer's confused eyes.

"This has gone on long enough," the man said, looking around again for a guard.

Right then, Gomer burst into action. She sprang from my hands and kicked the man in the groin. As he bent over, we ran away into the crowd.

"Well," I said breathlessly as Gomer and I reached the road that led to the Regiment 25 building. "What was that all about?" Gomer led me further up the road until we were inside the grounds of our refuge. "I think you'd better tell me what is going on, especially if you want me to marry you."

Gomer thrust herself against me and spoke quietly into my ear. "He was telling the truth. My life is in your hands, Elah, my love. One word from you, and it's death for me. Now you know the truth. If you have mercy on me, then I will know that you love me. For from this point forward, each day that you remain silent to the authorities about me, you are guilty of harboring me. You know, they could imprison you for that. I'll be your slave, Elah. I'll do anything for you. You don't even have to marry me. Marry a murderess? A slave? I offer myself to you now as a slave, not as a wife." She fell to her hands and knees and kissed my foot.

"Get up," I said.

She kept kissing my foot.

I grabbed her chin and lifted her head. The rest of her body followed until she stood at her full, petite height. I looked into her face and said, "Why would I care that I am in danger from protecting you? You are going to help me kill myself anyway, remember? I don't care what anybody might do to me."

"I have more to lose than you do," she said. "I am wanted for murder."

"You were defending yourself," I pointed out.

"Oh, please, Elah. Nobody will ever believe that. I'm a slave."

"All you have to do is to deny the whole thing," I said.

Gomer turned and pulled me to my chamber. Once we were there, and she pulled the curtain across my door, she turned her back to me and slipped her robe away from her right shoulder.

"I don't understand," I said. I had been naked with her many times, in dim light or darkness, and had seen her body in daylight the day we got rained on in the forest. What was I supposed to see that I did not already know about?

She turned around and pointed to a small scar on the left side of her back, at the base of the spine. It was some kind of family emblem. It could only be the family of the man who had identified himself as her owner. Her breath was heaving. Then she crouched down, her back still toward me, and started crying desperately.

I touched her shoulder and guided her to a chair. I sat and slid her into my lap. She cried on my shoulder. When she calmed down a little, I spoke to her.

"You were born into slavery?"

"Yes."

"How far back has your family been slaves?"

"Three generations."

"Well," I said. "The second book of the Torah indicates quite clearly that, during every Jubilee Year, all slaves are to be released. At some point during your three generations of slavery, your period of servitude ran out. Now I know that the Year of Jubilee has never been observed. But the law is the law. You are a free woman."

"That law only applies to Hebrew slaves."

"Well? Am I missing something?"

"I am the granddaughter of a Hittite captive. I am also a murderess."

"As I said, you acted in self-defense."

"Well, now, at least, you know everything about me. I guess I have to do whatever you ask of me, anything, anything at all, forever, so that you will not identify me to the King's guards. Well, name your price."

"Gomer, you're forgetting something. I am not in love with you, but I love you."

"And that means?"

"That means that I place no conditions upon you. Your secret is safe with me."

"I am your slave, Elah."

"No, you are not. And you had better not act as if you are. If you start behaving differently toward me, people will notice, and will start asking questions. You have to act as if nothing has happened, Gomer."

"This is the most difficult thing anyone could ask of me, but I know that it is what I must do. And I assume that this means you are not going to marry me. Forget I asked that. The very idea is stupid. You *can't,*" she said.

"I will make that decision, Gomer."

"I'll do anything you demand, Elah."

"I demand nothing. But I do have a favor to ask."

And I then asked her to do perhaps the most painful thing she could possibly do.

*

Because she was small, Gomer could slip into and through places that no one else could. And this included the garden of The King's palace. She could slip through a gap in the wall, and she could observe everything in the palace courtyards, gardens, and patios unseen. This is what she did day after day. Finally, one day, she told me that she had been successful.

"I found Henna," she said quietly, not looking up from her feet as she stood before me.

"Oh, thank you, my beloved friend," I said, reaching for her.

She knelt before me and would not stand back up. "When she got close enough to the shrub behind which I was hiding, I spoke to her quietly. Whispers carry further, and someone might have heard me whisper. But only Henna heard my voice. I told her everything at once, so she had no time to react. She just kept looking in the same direction as before, giving no sign that she had heard me. I told her, *Elah desires to meet you in your stepfather's garden. Please let me know when you can visit the garden, so that I can pass the message on to the man who adores you and will see you again, even if death is the price.* Then she said, *I'll make arrangements as soon as possible. Will you be here tomorrow at this same time?* I told her that I would. Tomorrow, I shall bring you her answer, Elah."

"Oh, thank you," I said, crouching down to kiss her.

She moved away from me and looked at me fiercely. "Until this is over, I am your slave, not your lover. Please allow me to function in that role." She kept her head down and stepped further back from me. She slept in her own room.

The next day, Gomer came to me again. She knelt before me and would not look up. "Four days hence," she said, "Henna will be visiting her stepfather. Once she has put him to bed, she will wait for you at the gate." Then Gomer looked up. "You realize that The King will send guards to protect the garden. However, as per policy, the guards are from our regiment. Three of them. I know them all. And I have promised them whatever reward they might desire in return for their cooperation." She looked down again. "And I have to make good on my promises in advance. Don't try looking for me for the next three nights."

I stood up in astonishment. "Gomer? You are…you are prostituting yourself for me?"

"I know how important this is to you," she answered.

"No, Gomer. This has gone too far. I didn't realize what a cost it would be to you."

"Elah, I love you and I must do this for you. It's too late to back out now. All the arrangements have been made." When I started to say something, she continued. "If you do not go ahead with this, I will turn myself in to the authorities. If you love me, Elah, and do not want to see me beheaded, or worse, then you will have your tryst with Henna. And I will arrange as many of them as you wish. If you love me, Elah, if you love me, you will let me do this for you."

"Oh, what does it matter," I said. "I am going to die anyway. Maybe we can commit suicide together."

Gomer looked up at me as if she was considering whether this might be possible.

*

Four nights later, I approached Bildad's walled garden. It was almost the longest night of winter and it was cold. The full moon was shining. Many of the trees had lost their leaves—not, of course, the camphor trees and the tropical trees with the yellowish-red fruits, but certainly the apples. There were fewer places to hide than had been the case when Henna and I first met. It was fortunate that Gomer had bedded all three guards.

I approached the guard who was nearest the trellis door.

"Elah? That you?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I know where the gate is, and Henna will find me. You just stand where you are."

"How did you get that pretty little girl to, you know, give herself so that you could do this? You must know something about her. And you? You're taking something of a risk. You could get killed for this. Just what is it worth to you?"

"Which one are you? Ofer? Ofer. Listen, Ofer. This is a job to you. You got a wife and family. Me, I have nothing except love. If you get caught helping me, you could lose everything."

"Nobody would know, if you get killed," he said.

"You're forgetting something. What you are forgetting is that love is as strong as death. Gomer loves me and is willing to die. I love Henna and am willing to die. I'm counting on it, actually. I have nothing to lose, my man, except my life, which is worth far less than love. The only person here who has choices other than love and death is you. Which is why you should keep your mouth shut and let me do what I came here to do."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"You would not believe how serious I am. Now leave me alone."

The guard went back to his job of studiously ignoring me as I waited at the gate. I had to let the moonlight shine on me so that Henna could see me.

She did. She opened the latch and let me slip in, the rusted metal scraping against my stomach. It was chilly but we were soon sweating with the intensity of our kisses. I threw off my clothes and we pressed ourselves together. We were under a camphor tree, almost the only shade from the moonlight. We did not talk, and could hardly breathe, because we were kissing. We were devouring one another. Her scent was unmistakable. I had forgotten its intoxicating power. The King had ordered his eunuchs to anoint her with every sweet spice, but I could still smell the musk of her skin, and she had quickly rubbed some clove oil upon herself. I hesitated before entering her, through the same opening The King had violated so many times, but she pulled me against herself.

We were utterly exhausted, lying with our faces together.

"Elah, I could die for you," she said. "I would, only it wouldn't make any difference. I'll either be The King's living concubine, or his dead one."

"Henna, I could die for you, I responded. "I would, only it wouldn't make any difference. Our only hope is to remember one another, and to try to meet like this, once in a while, just often enough to remind us that there can be love and beauty in the world. But we don't ever know if we can meet again. We have to enjoy each time as if it is our last."

"Elah, my love, forgive me for mentioning this. But I have to." She looked away from me. "That young woman Gomer. What she went through to make this possible! She loves you, Elah, and I truly believe she expects nothing in return."

"It didn't start out that way, Henna," I explained. "She manipulated herself into my confidence. You know that day you visited the regiment, and I wasn't there? Gomer did that. She kept me from seeing you, and you from seeing me."

"That's because she loves you, Elah," Henna said, looking back at me. "Never mind. I just had to say that. I want you, forever, or as close to it as I can get. But you said we must remind one another, by our caresses, that there is good in the world. Gomer is good. Don't forget that. Tell her I said this. Treat her right in between our visits, will you?"

"I'll tell her you said that, Henna."

*

"She told you to tell me that?" asked Gomer.

"Yes, she did," I answered. "And she's right. Love isn't just something you feel. It is something you do. And you have done it. You are a lover the like of which I cannot recall ever having heard about anywhere else. I don't deserve your love, Gomer. I'm a selfish man, at the base of it."

"And I'm your slave," she said to me, rising to her feet from her kneeling position.

"I'd prefer you didn't kneel like that," I said, rising to my feet also, and embracing her.

"I'll do this until, at last, you may decide to marry me. But I now doubt that this will happen. Now that I've actually met this woman Henna, I understand. She is as desperate as you are. This can only end in tragedy, Elah, a tragedy that I must helplessly watch."

Chapter 17

It was not quite spring. The buds of the almond tree right outside my window swelled, then did nothing. It was frustrating, but something of a relief. When spring comes, we must leap into action. But meanwhile, right before spring, even the farmers just rest and wait. The King was off on a trip, and had taken his favorite concubines, which included, for the moment, none from our regiment except Henna. Thus, it was impossible for me to see her, and impossible for Gomer to make any such arrangements. Gomer and I could actually relax together in the bed to which she had returned.

One evening she told me a story. It was, she said, a true story she heard from her aunt, who was a Hittite slave in the service of David the King. The aunt was present and she saw everything that happened. I promised Gomer that I would write the story down, in the hopes that some future historian of the Jewish people might include it in their records. I have changed some words here and there, but what follows is essentially the story that Gomer told me.

*

His hair was like snakes, sandy like the desert, curling around his ears and neck, poised to strike. The lightning of distant thunderstorms was in his eyes, and his grin was a snarl around his palisade of perfect teeth. Yet every movement and word of Absalom, as he dined with his half-brother Amnon, was pure grace and goodwill.

“I rejoice that you have accepted my invitation to dine,” said Absalom. “And my invitation to come out to Beth-Eglon, while I celebrate the season of shearing sheep. I am glad all my brothers and sisters, all of us children of King David, could come together here, but I especially wanted to see you. It has been too long.” He lifted his fine strong arm, and his bronze flagon, and toasted Amnon.

Amnon lifted his flagon slightly, not taking his silent eyes from Absalom, and drank. Some of the blood red wine dripped down the scruffy beard that weeded Amnon’s fat face, and slipped down onto the fine robe that covered his corpulent form. “It has been awhile,” he allowed.

“Two years,” said Absalom, looking into his half-brother’s eyes over the dark pools of wine in their respective cups. Then Absalom closed his eyes, turned his face towards the tent top, and smiled to the heavens. “What a pleasure is wine, and lamb, and bread, and spices, after a hard day of work.” Amnon looked down at his own fat belly, and at the fat weak legs hidden within his fine robe.

Absalom again held up his cup. “Drink up! Celebrate!” Absalom drained his cup. Amnon took another sip, then another, and then could not stop drinking, helplessly sucking the last drops from the flagon. Absalom continued, “Aren’t you glad I’m your brother? This wine, for example. You just swallowed the entire cup. But what if it had contained shards of glass? You would have

swallowed them, and they would have cut your gullet into a thousand little slits. But of course this will not happen, because you can trust me, I am your brother. Ah, here is the bread!" He looked up as the serving woman, an old Jebusite who had lived on the very spot where King David's manor now stood, brought in perfectly shaped loaves on a tray.

Absalom grabbed a piece of bread and tore off a bite. "I am famished!" he proclaimed.

"Should we not first thank God?" asked Amnon.

Absalom put down his bread on the low table between him and his half-brother. "Of course." Absalom closed his eyes, and prayed, "God in Heaven, we thank you for sustaining us with the grain of the fields, and flesh of the beasts, the dew of heaven, and for saving us from all our enemies. It is you, O God, and not we ourselves, who will give us vengeance against all our enemies." He opened his eyes and looked at Amnon, who had not closed his eyes or moved.

Then the serving woman brought in the meat and spices. Absalom hooted in pleasure and grabbed a piece of meat as soon as the woman set it on the table. He dipped it in the spices, then ate. Amnon picked up a piece quietly and ate a small bite, then another, then another. His eyes widened and he began to eat hurriedly, gasping for breath. The fat from the mutton dribbled down his chin as the wine had done. He dipped bread and meat in the spices, and continued cramming them in his mouth.

"Aren't you glad I am your brother?" asked Absalom again. "These spices are mint and sage and wild onions from the hillsides. I gathered them myself; as I spend so much time outdoors, I know where to find the best ones. But if I had been someone you could not trust, this bowl might have contained poisonous parsnip and hemlock and the diced bulbs of the death lily. By the time you noticed, it would have been too late. But relax, you can trust me." Absalom smiled, and his snakes shifted in their slumber.

Finally the serving woman brought out a tray of small cakes. "Ah, raisin cakes!" exclaimed Absalom. "My favorite! I'll bet they have dates in them too! And you know who baked them, don't you?"

As Amnon lifted a raisin cake to his mouth, he stopped and looked silently at Absalom.

"Guess who baked them," said Absalom, tearing off a big bite with a big smile.

"The serving woman?" said Amnon, in a voice much quieter than his usual grating whine. The serving woman stepped through the curtain door.

"No, no! You must remember who the best little cake-baker in the world is—our sister Tamar! I'm sure it must bring back memories." He grinned grimly and ate another bite.

The cake in Amnon's hand shook. Amnon stifled a burp. A scent of sulfur arose from inside of his robe and slowly suffused through the tent. Yes, he remembered the cakes, and Tamar. It was only two years ago that he had been in love with Tamar, his half-sister, and had designed an intricate plot to get her alone with him. Amnon had feigned illness, and asked for Tamar to bake raisin cakes for him, then bring them to him, alone, in his bedchamber. There he had grabbed and overpowered her. Then, almost as soon as he retracted and slid his bulbous body from hers, he hated her. He had driven her from his house and bolted the door. The family

had been quiet about it; Amnon had lived alone, and King David simply hoped the whole affair would be forgotten.

"Speaking of whom," said Absalom. Amnon heard footsteps at the door, and knew they were not those of the servant. Tamar emerged through the curtains, behind Amnon's back.

"Have you been out in the fields?" Absalom asked his sister.

"Yes!" Tamar said from behind her veil. She put down a cloth bag, then tore away the veil that had covered her face and shoulders. Her forehead was high and her dark eyes deep, her smile was broad, and in a world of yellow teeth hers were white from the fresh herbs Absalom had shown her and which she chewed every summer. Her hair was clean, an angel's hair, not that of a greasy woman. Her light robe lay closely over her bosom, and revealed bare arms, flawlessly smooth and white, untouched by the summer sun. "The first berries are ripe! I love this time of year," she said, removing an outer skirt that had protected her robe from the briars. Her lower legs were now bare, runneled with sweat. Perspiration made pearls above her thin but perfect lips. She panted. "Running through the fields..." She looked down at her leather-stockinged feet. "It is my only pleasure these days, and probably will be until my dust mingles with that of our fathers."

Her first indication that someone besides her brother was in the room was the smell of sulfur, different from the scent of the onions. The second was when Absalom said, "We have been immensely enjoying your raisin cakes." Her eyes adjusted to the half-light of the tent, and the saw the robed body of a fat man with his back turned. She continued panting, but in nervousness not delighted fatigue, when Absalom said, "Our half-brother Amnon accepted my invitation to dinner."

When Amnon turned around, still sitting on the floor cushions, his eyes met Tamar's bosom. The roundnesses moved like waves of the ocean, and Tamar's face dissolved into a plainness the creases of which showed that smiling was an infrequent exercise. She turned and ducked through the curtains, her thighs and hips creating a smooth dance in the robe. No childbirth, thank God in Heaven no childbirth, no gross child of a fat man, had pushed apart her slimness.

Amnon, however, did not see her fine derriere, for his mind had flashed back to the time he had feigned illness, and from his bed had watched Tamar prepare raisin cakes. As clearly as yesterday, he could recall the grace of every little movement, her wrists emerging from the long sleeves that virgins wore, her hands kneading the bread as if caressing a lover, working in the raisins and dates; he remembered seeing just the tops of her fine breasts as she bent over a water jar to wash the sticky dough from her hands; how she moved like a dancer when she slipped the loaves into the oven; how she smiled innocently as she sat beside his bed and talked with him. About his favorite subject (food) and about what he planned to do if he should be chosen to succeed his father David the King. *It's such a beautiful day outside,* she had said. *It might as well be dreary and cold,* he answered. *Don't be silly,* she said with a girlish flick of her head and a smile as bright as the lilies that lasted only a day. He smiled and smelled like a muskrat. They talked about the exotic spices and pastries that the Arabic traders brought from secret locations

across secret oceans, and they laughed. *Oh,* she said, *I almost forgot the cakes!* She jumped up, her robe lifting to reveal the fine insides of knees that knew how to run on the mountains and would never kneel before any husband who would keep her inside. They were alone when she brought Amnon the cakes. He really did love to eat her honeyed cakes, and even yet regretted that they had fallen to the ground when he jumped from the bed to grab her.

Amnon came back to reality and turned back around to see that Absalom had been staring at the back of his head. Absalom smiled. Amnon thought about finally, after all this time, apologizing for having raped Tamar. Then he thought, *I am a prince of Israel and can do whatever I please.* He had just started to think, *but Tamar is a princess, and Absalom a prince also,* but before he could think further or speak, Absalom handed him his cup, freshly refilled.

"Drink, my brother," Absalom said. "Forget the past. What does the past have for us? Only the future matters. The future belongs not to those who wait for covenants to materialize, but who are ready to seize the opportunities that await. Those who are slow, and at the end of the procession, get eaten by the wolves." Absalom smiled more brightly. "Aren't you glad I am your brother? I will protect you from the wolves."

Once Amnon had begun drinking, he could not stop. Nor could he stop laughing at Absalom's funny stories, especially the one about Eglon, the fat Canaanite king who had been assassinated by a left-handed Israelite hero. The dagger slipped deeply into the blubber and vanished, hilt and all, hilt and all! The assassin left, and the servants did not discover the murder until much later, for they assumed that Eglon was at his toilet, which often consumed over an hour of each morning. "My Baal, the servants said, the king sure is spending a long time in the shithouse!" said Absalom, who with Amnon was laughing hard enough to cry.

Then Absalom said, "King Eglon had a fine toilet. Yes, very fine. It had water running through it like a stream, did you know? The latest invention from the island of Crete in the Great Sea. And it was scented like flowers. No wonder he liked to sit in there. He must have read lots of papyri and written lots of royal edicts from his, er, throne."

Right then a voluminous flatus emerged from Amnon, thundering between his Goliath buttocks. Amnon was not normally embarrassed by his intestinal noises, but this time there was a wrenching pain in his abdomen, which told him that a surprise attack was underway. "I need..." was all he said.

"And you, dear brother, in your rich house, also have a sweet-smelling commode, with an ivory seat, I am told. So does my house. But out here, during sheep-shearing season, all we have are the tamarisk trees out back." He pointed to the back door, opposite the one through which the servant and Tamar had entered. Amnon rose and waddled through the curtain, and saw the tamarisks several cubits distant. His movement was the worst possible combination of fat and muscle. He found the place where night soil was deposited, and added his own gross slurry to the doe-like nuggets of Tamar and the strong, well-defined feces of Absalom.

When Amnon looked up, he saw Absalom standing beside him, his hands in his robe. Absalom smiled and moved closer. Absalom removed his right hand from his robe, showing that it held nothing. Amnon was certain that the other hand held a dagger, and he lost his footing,

collapsing from a squat, sitting in his own mess. But Absalom's left hand was also empty, as he bent closer and kissed Amnon.

Out of Absalom's hair came a snake, which bit Amnon on the neck. In the few moments before Amnon thought to scream, his neck swelled grayly. By then, his windpipe had swelled shut. The last things of which Amnon was aware were the thunder of the distant clouds on the horizon and the lightning in Absalom's eyes.

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"Absalom was the son who revolted against King David," I said.

"Yes. He was the one with the big hair that got caught in the branches of the scrub oaks as he tried to escape. He might have made a great king. But instead we got Solomon." Gomer lay against my shoulder.

"Well, it could have been worse," I said. "We could have gotten Amnon."

"No chance of that," Gomer said. "Absalom had power, and Solomon has diplomacy. But what did Amnon have? The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind."

"You mean, he really died from a snake bite?" I asked.

"Of course not," said Gomer. "That's just a legend. But someday all of these stories will be gathered together in a big scroll and people will believe that they really happened!"

Chapter 18

"There's been a big shake-up," Eli told me. "That tryst you have planned with Henna tonight—God in heaven, little buddy, I still can't believe you managed to pull it off this many times, I have to admit it still takes my breath away—might be the last one for a while." After a moment, he said, "Didn't you hear what I said? I said…"

"Oh, I heard you. I can wait for Henna. The love that Henna and I have for one another is eternal. We found a way to come together even after The King took her. And we will find a way again. Or not. If not, I have been of all men most blessed. And I will die with that blessing." I smiled calmly at Eli as I said this.

"God, you're messed up. *You* found a way? You mean *Gomer* found a way. But now there will be new guards, none of whom know the other. It was sheer luck—pure, random luck—that we were able to get the guards we have now to trust one another long enough to organize your visits to the walled garden. I suspect that this cannot happen again."

And when I lay with Henna for one last time in the fresh spring soil of the garden, I found that she already knew that the arrangement we had with the guards would come to an end. She even thought that The King had suspected that something was going on and had taken steps to ensure that they would not continue.

Henna was astonished at how calm I was. She asked me how I could be so calm. I could feel her soft fragrant flesh trembling beneath my hand.

"Is there a Heaven?" I asked her.

"There is some place where some God lives," Henna answered.

"I mean, a Heaven that humans can go to after death?"

"How am I supposed to know the answer to that?"

"Well, whether there is or not, death is a peaceful land."

I felt Henna's muscles tense. She seemed to know what I meant. She said, "My sweet, sweet Elah, my man the like of whom I will never touch again, I want you to be happy. But I want you to be alive. Alive! I believe you can be both. But if you must choose, please choose life."

*

I was not, however, quite yet ready to make the choice Henna had told me to make. It was also the choice that Gomer wanted me to make. I still thought a lot about death and the death lily. The spring rains, large and gentle like a good wife, had come up from the south and nourished the soil. Now was the time for the desert flowers to bloom. I reminded Gomer, who found one excuse after another for not taking me out into the desert around the Sea of Arabah. It was I who arranged the trip this time.

"What are we supposed to be doing out in the desert?" asked Gomer.

"I told the Chief Steward that The King wanted me to find him a special aphrodisiac out in the desert. He had heard that there was a spring wildflower with special properties. I told the Chief Steward that I would keep my eyes open for it."

"I will dig for onions while we are out there," said Gomer. "They are more potent than the onions in our gardens."

"Onions are a type of lily," I told her.

She looked into my eyes and said nothing.

As we rode out along the Kidron Road toward the desert, it was just as stormy of a day as it had been the previous fall. It was the same servant and, for anything I knew to the contrary, the same camel and donkey. Gomer and I did not look up at Musicians' Rock. She sat right in front of me and pressed her back against me. The wind blew her hair comfortingly and annoyingly against my face until she pulled a shawl over her head. The rain cleansed us.

"Here. Here is a good place," she said to the servant. We were in a broad flat area, near a wadi that had been dry a few minutes earlier but now ran with brown water. But in this vast plain, carpets of wildflowers bloomed. I felt no poetry within me even when looking upon them. I smiled, thinking about how the Leviathan wives would say that the wildflowers were like carpets and carpets were like wildflowers. I saw only the vastness of the fields and knew that the answer to my future lay somewhere amidst those flowers.

"Well, where is it?" I asked her.

"Where is what?" she asked, removing her shawl as she walked out into the flowering shrubs.

"The death lily." I followed her.

Even though the shrubs were small, they hid us from the servant as we sat down in the ground. She crouched next to me and kissed me.

"Later," I said. "First, find me the death lily."

"And if I don't?" she said, continuing to crouch.

I sighed. "Very well, Gomer. We can do this the hard way. I know what a lily looks like. I will look for it myself. Yes, I remember you told me that the death lily and the saffron lily look very much alike."

"In that case, go find them yourself," Gomer said, vanishing into the bushes. I rushed after her and looked everywhere I could, but did not find her. So I decided to look for the lilies myself.

First I found a *rakah* bush, whose small blue flowers each had five petals. Then I found two kinds of pea, one a bush with white flowers, another a small tender plant with red flowers. The flowers had petals that looked like a boat, with a sail at the top and a keel in front. I saw the *parosheet galonit* with yellow flowers. Each flower, on a long stalk emerging from a clump of leaves, looked like a cluster of little flowers. The leaves emitted a pleasant odor. I even saw a *silon kotzani* shrub with blue flowers, each with four petals, which was somewhat unusual. None of these were lilies.

Then I saw flowers that looked like they had to be deadly. A long spike of yellow flowers emerged directly from the ground, without leaves, as if it were feeding directly on the underworld of death. Surely this must be the death lily. But when I got closer and saw that the flowers had five lobes, not six petals, I knew I had found the *yahnuk* plant of which I had read but had never seen.

And then I found a lily. But it was just an onion. I saw where Gomer had dug some onions up.

I searched for hours, or it seemed like it. I sat down to eat one of the pastries that Gomer had made and carefully wrapped in cloth. I climbed carefully down into the wadi to drink the muddy water, trying to not dislodge a lump of mud and fall into the stream.

I sat on a little rock, unstable in the fertile mud. Between two branches, I saw Gomer sitting on another rock and looking down into a small pool of water from which reeds emerged. She was watching a heron, and the heron was watching, neck bent, for something to eat. The heron remained immobile for several minutes. The pond dried up each summer and the reeds died down to their roots. But briefly each spring eggs would hatch and fish and frogs emerge from the mud. When the heron saw one of them, it quickly grabbed and swallowed it. The whole process was so rapid that I almost didn't see it. The only evidence that it had occurred was the slight bulge inside the heron's neck as it stood in exactly the same pose for several more minutes. Gomer had not moved at all. She has, I thought, the same kind of patience that a heron has.

When I found my way back to the servant and the animals, Gomer was sitting on the ground waiting for me. A cloth bag sat beside her.

"What did you find?" I asked, indicating the bag.

"Onions and spices, mostly," she answered.

"Mostly?" I asked. "Anything else?"

"Look for yourself," she said, handing me be bag.

I looked inside the bag and grabbed a handful of plant matter to look at. There were branches and leaves but no flowers. I knew how to recognize some plants just by their leaves (or, for the yahnuk plant, the lack of them), but not well enough to figure out which of these specimens might be a death lily. Lilies have leaves in which all the veins line up rather than branching out. I found some specimens that fit this description in Gomer's bag. I found a lot, of several different kinds. I finally had to admit that I did not know whether she had any death lilies in her bag, or, if so, which leaves and stems they might be.

"Is there any death lily in this bag?" I asked bluntly.

"There might be," she answered, not meeting my eyes.

I looked back into the bag. "I could eat a little of everything," I said.

"You wouldn't get enough death lily to have any effect on you, that is, assuming there is some in there," she said.

"Gomer, I order you to give me some of the death lily!"

"Elah, I will decide whether and when to do this."

"Gomer, you told me you were my slave, remember?"

"I will decide what to do. I am your slave. I am disobeying you, which gives you the right—since I am a Hittite slave, not an Israelite—to kill me. Please feel free to do so if you must."

"Gomer, don't be crazy. I couldn't kill you. I couldn't so much as make the smallest cut in your beautiful skin."

Then Gomer reached into the bag and pulled out some leaves. The leaves had parallel veins. I knew they might be death lily, and Gomer knew that I knew. She said, "We will either live together or we will die together." She put the leaves in her mouth and started to gently moisten them. Then she put her hands on my shoulders and drew me toward her as we lay down on the ground, walled on all sides by the desert shrubs. We put our lips together and both chewed on the leaves, slowly mashing them, slowly swallowing. We started to breathe in synchrony. I felt my tongue tingle and then become numb. I believed that, after all, Gomer had agreed to our joint suicide. I put my arms around her shoulders and held her as tightly as I could, more tightly even than when we coupled, concentrating on our prolonged kiss. I could feel the light slowly going out in my mind.

When I awoke, my senses were clear and my mind was alert. I scrambled up from lying beside Gomer. She sat up with a wise half-smile on her face.

"You swine," I said. "That wasn't the death lily."

"Call me whatever you wish," she said. "We Hittites do not despise pigs the way you Jews do. You know," she said, sliding up next to me to speak quietly, "since I work in the kitchen, I have the opportunity to obtain some dried pork from the Arabic traders who do commerce with the surrounding tribes, and I might have slipped some pork into something that you ate, thus defiling you without your knowledge."

"You swine," I repeated.

She reached for the small bag in which she kept her food. She pulled out a tiny gleaming knife. She handed it to me, holding onto the upper part of the handle, offering the lower end of the handle to me. "So, kill me," she said. "Nobody will blame you. Remember that I have been branded a slave, and it would be very easy to prove who I am."

"I can't do that," I repeated.

"Very well. I am a swine. Despise me, then. Your choices are to be alone, with no chance of ever touching that woman again, or to be with me. Or to kill yourself. But after today I have made up my mind that I am not going to help you kill yourself. I want you to see the flowers come anew to the desert and the mountains each springtime, and to know that Henna also sees these flowers, and hears the voice of the turtledove, and knows that you hear it. Some other man, who fancies himself a god, grasps her clusters. But she knows you are alive and thinking of her with each gentle breeze among the lilies. I love you and want you to live, even if you never touch me again, or even if you kill me. Here, take the knife. Do whatever you wish with it."

I pushed her hand away. “Forgive me, Gomer. You are no swine. I spoke to you as if I were as filled with hatred as Amnon was toward the Tamar who had treated him so well. Am I a fetid beast like him? If you will accept me—I, who cannot stop hoping that I will again touch Henna—then I will remain your secret partner. I will live, and you will live.”

Gomer and I sat side by side, our shoulders touching. We were relaxed, now that we had worked out at least a truce in our relationship.

“You write so beautifully about the turtledoves and the lilies of the field in the springtime,” said Gomer. “Your love for Henna inspires so much beauty from your mind.”

“Maybe I should write some for you,” I said. “For your friendship is a kind of love that is as beautiful as anything in the world around us.”

“Your writing makes it sound as if the whole world around us was a pleasant garden, like Bildad’s,” Gomer continued. “But this is not true. The little plants all around us—some of them are poisonous. Why would God make poisonous plants?”

“Sometimes we need poisons,” I said.

“I think you can come up with a better answer than that,” she told me, looking into my eyes. “Remember what you wrote that beautiful wet day when we were on Musicians’ Rock, about the lions coming home from their work and people running off to theirs? That was a little simplistic. To the lion it is work, but to the prey animal, it is terror followed by painful death.”

“And your point is?” I prompted her.

“The plants produce poisons not for us but for themselves. They are trying to keep animals from eating them.”

“Then why aren’t all plants poisonous?”

Gomer thought about that. “Good point,” she said, looking away. “Actually, out in the wild, all of them are, to a greater or lesser extent. We have bred our crop and garden plants and our orchard trees to be edible. But in the wild, all plants are at least a little toxic. Don’t go trying to eat any oak leaves; they will make you sick, even though they will not kill you. And the acorns are edible only after you grind them into flour and pour hot water through it to soak out the mild poisons. You see,” she continued, looking back into my eyes, “God did not make the world for us. Every plant, and every animal, does everything it can to promote its own success. Sometimes, in your writings—if you will permit me to say this one negative thing about them—you sound as if you are a little offended that God has made the world so sorrowful and boring for you. Round and round and round. Well, maybe the lilies and the turtledoves think that we humans are boring. Maybe they do not care about us. You talk as if the death lily exists just so that you can use it to kill yourself. Just how different is this kind of selfishness than The King assuming that the whole human race exists just to provide concubines for him? That heron I was watching—and that you saw me watching—does not care what we do so long as it gets its food and its mate and hatches its eggs.”

“And so,” I said, “we all die, but during our brief lives we can appreciate beauty in the world, even if that beauty is an illusion.”

We stood up, smiling at one another, not touching. The servant looked around at us and stood, ready to conduct us back to Regiment headquarters. He naturally assumed we had coupled down in the mud and the fresh sprigs of grass. Our clothes were certainly muddy enough. Let him assume whatever he wants, I thought. I loved Gomer. Not the way I loved Henna, but it was love.

PART THREE

Chapter 19

The days passed and settled into a landscape of gentle comfort. I spent a day writing poetry for The King to use to woo daughters of foreign kings (one was even for the Queen of Sheba! I never saw her but I used my imagination) or to humiliate his critics. Then I sat at dinner with the Regiment. I was now one of the most honored members, receiving viands as choice as those given to the wives. The wives actually treated me with some respect now and, with The King's permission, I wrote some poetry for them, which of course they tried to sing. The King offered me my own quarters in Jerusalem, but I told him that I liked the little garden outside my door, and the wall that kept the bustle of Jerusalem commerce away from my notice, so I chose for now to remain with the Regiment. At dinner, I actually talked with the wives and found that, as incredible as it may seem, they had interesting stories about their lives and how Solomon had swooped down upon them.

And Gomer served me at each meal. Everyone knew about us. There was no point in hiding anything. So she would press a little morsel of her fine bread into my mouth and ask if it pleased me, and I always said yes, at which time all the others, even the wives, were eager to eat it also. She maintained all proper decorum otherwise, kneeling before me, until near the end of the meal she would slip her small self onto my lap and let me hold her against me, right in the full view of everyone. Life could hardly get better for either of us—I, the only person there who did not actually have to live with the Regiment, and the delightful girl I had chosen as my companion. Eli had been promoted, and dined with several different regiments, visiting us occasionally.

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Gomer sat beside me in bed one evening when a soldier came by. He came to see both of us, and to escort us to an undisclosed location. It was, in fact, one of the small palaces off to the side of The King's residence. It was the residence of Rehoboam, The King's brat son.

"Have a seat," said Rehoboam, motioning to some cushions on the ground near where he sat. Gomer and I settled unstably on the cushions. Even though he was older than Solomon, Rehoboam was trying to grow a beard and moustache. Empty flagons sat about the low table beside his couch, but Rehoboam drank straight from a bottle. He wiped his mouth on his yellow sleeve with gold filigree.

"To what do we owe the honor of this visit?" I asked, formally.

Rehoboam took another swig from the bottle and burped, putting the bottle down. "This stuff is not mere wine," he said. "My servants heat the wine over a fire, and the ghosts arise from it. Some of these ghosts form little droplets on the outside of a pipe through which cold water flows. These droplets fall back into the wine. One drink of this stuff and you will be seeing visions for days. This might enhance the work of poets like you, Qoheleth, but for people like

me, it is a pleasure reserved for the evening. Anyway, the business at hand. My fine woman, I know who you are. You are an escaped slave."

I felt utter panic but I pretended to be calm. "That is ridiculous. Who told you such nonsense?"

"A certain rich man has been asking around," Rehoboam said. "He described a woman who can only be you, Gomer, and told me where on your body I could find the evidence. A slave brand. It would be a simple matter to look for it. Of course, you are welcome to demonstrate your innocence in the matter, Gomer. Just show me your back. If I am wrong, then show me, and I will let you go." When both Gomer and I remained silent, Rehoboam continued, "Just as I thought. You know I could crush both of you, the murderess and the seditious writer who has harbored her."

"We are both ready to die," said Gomer, looking first at me then at Rehoboam with an utterly placid expression. Her calmness engendered the same feeling in me.

Rehoboam looked at us with amazement. "Let me simply explain that you are wrong about two things. First, if you think that death is the worst thing that can happen to you, you are totally mistaken. Second, if you think that I am stupid enough to reject the benefits of your cooperation, you are also mistaken."

"Benefits?" I asked.

"Come now," said the prince, stretching himself out on his cushions. "I am The Prince. And I have been studying everything that my father has done, and has failed to do. And I have studied all the other powerful men in this kingdom. I have even—like both of you—studied the wilderness. Every plant and every animal does everything it can to promote its own success. And what I have discovered is this. Sometimes a Prince must kill. But more often, a Prince must get others to follow him. And I want both of you to be my followers. It's very simple. Now, how does a Prince get others to follow him? This is done partly through intimidation."

"We have heard," said Gomer. "You said something about how your little finger was thicker than your father's loins."

Rehoboam smiled. "Yes, yes. That was a pretty good one, wasn't it. And the remark about the scorpions. Yes. Brilliant, don't you think?" He looked at me.

"Whatever you say, Honored Prince," I said, without looking into his eyes.

He slapped his cushion and sat up. "Come now. Taken by itself, my statements—which have been spread abroad throughout the land—are pretty stupid. If I antagonize everyone, I will have no power. What I do, though, is I get every man—well, almost every man—to believe that I am antagonizing everyone *but him.* Getting back to the point. I know things about you that could get you both executed. But I want you to be my accomplices. *Willing* accomplices. What do you say?"

"Accomplices in what way?" I asked. "I cannot answer unless I know a little more."

"You've heard of Jeroboam," said The Prince. "The military leader. He is very popular among the ten northern tribes. He hates me and I believe he will never, under any circumstances,

submit to my rulership, when my father at last goes to that great Whorehouse in the Sky. Jeroboam is my enemy and I must eventually eliminate him."

"You are The King's heir, O Prince," I said. "I have sworn loyalty to The King, and I presume that means his heir also."

"It's not quite that simple," said The Prince. "My father, as you have no doubt noticed, gives very little attention to running the affairs of state. He has too many whores and wives. And this could go on for a long time. He could live for many years into an old age of dissipation…" He took a swig from his bottle. "…and I might, myself, be pretty old before I get a chance to become the ruler. I'm not sure I am willing to wait that long. And I'm fairly confident that Jeroboam will not wait. The time to act might come sooner than later. And when that time comes, I want you—both of you—on my side. I want you to join me for an exciting new future for this kingdom. I do not want to force you to do so by the threat of revealing yet other secrets."

"Other secrets?" asked Gomer. "Just what else do you know about us?"

The Prince smiled. For just a moment he looked like his father, but that moment passed. There is no way that this young man could enthrall a crowd with his oratory. "Let's just say that I happen to know that you, Qoheleth, have made the intimate acquaintance of one of my father's concubines…"

I stood up in desperation. "Who told you?" I almost screamed. "Besides, it was before your father acquired her."

"You are not a very good liar," said The Prince.

"Maybe I should take lessons from you!" I yelled.

"Keep your voice down," said The Prince. "This is just a friendly chat, as far as anyone knows. And, yes, you should take lessons from me. One of the guards told me all about your recent trysts with Henna."

"I will die for her," I said.

"There's no need for that," said The Prince. "Although I must again say that I am astonished to see such love—love that is as strong as death, as *a certain poet* has said. Your love for Henna, my man, and yours, dear woman, for this man who can hardly see you, so dazzled is he by Henna. This is almost enough to make me believe that love is real, rather than just a tool of power. Love is a tool of power, Grandmother Bathsheba always told me. Now, tell me, Qoheleth, what you think I am going to do to weaken my father's power?"

"I am sure that you need no advice from my poor wits," I said, sitting back down.

The Prince arose and started pacing about. "Yes, yes, your poor wits compared to my effulgent wisdom." I had only heard this word used to describe the sun and God. Even Solomon had not dared to use it about himself. "Yes, quite." Then The Prince whirled back around to look at us. "You flatterer! I have no use for flatterers! I can look in a mirror and flatter myself all day if I want to. But when I bring another person into my confidence, I need honesty." He was seething with anger, though not loudly enough to alert the guards. He then calmed down just slightly and said, "Let's begin again."

"We will be honest with you," Gomer interjected.

"Yes, please," said The Prince. "We artists, though we love praise, we love honesty better. Now tell me. What should I do to weaken my father's power?"

Gomer's placid expression had not once broken. "Why, you don't need to do anything at all. His own folly will make him collapse."

"Brilliant!" exclaimed The Prince. He looked at me and said, "Where did you find her? She's smarter than you are. You're lucky to have her." Then he looked at Gomer. "And what, exactly, are his weaknesses?"

Gomer did not take her eyes from his. "He has at least two weaknesses, and where there are two there are probably others. First. He loves flatterers, even though he says he does not. Second. He spends all of his time fornicating. Even with his wives. To use a woman as a mere source of sexual satisfaction is fornication, even if you are married to her."

The Prince thought about this, then said, "We are not here to talk about women. But you are correct on both counts. At first my father's excessive concupiscence struck me as weakness, then as genius."

"No one from outside his family dares to strike him, because there are very few men outside of his family," I volunteered.

"Maybe you aren't so stupid after all," The Prince told me. "You're right. At least that's the way it used to be. Now he's back to mere concupiscence. So, this wise woman…" He indicated Gomer. "This wise woman, who has transcended slavery and gotten for herself a nice position in The King's household, and whose intelligence even a stupid scribbler of poems such as yourself has not been able to obscure, says that my father will cause his own downfall. This is true. It could hardly be otherwise. But do you see a problem here?"

"Well," I said, chuckling at my own diminishment next to Gomer, "your father will collapse, all right, but, as you said earlier, it might take an awfully long time."

"I very much doubt that General J would be willing to wait for my father's collapse. I want more power and more women, and I want them now. When I am older, I may actually desire fewer. You can imagine that I get the leftovers from the banquet of women, whichever ones my father rejects. So, what I need to do is to hasten my father's inevitable downfall.

"Now, consider how I might do this. I could be a roaring lion and stalk right up to my father and demand more women and more power. We say the lion is The King of beasts. Perhaps I should act in the same way."

"No," said Gomer quietly.

Rather than take the least offense, The Prince approached Gomer and said, "Elaborate on that."

"Well," said Gomer, "that's not, in fact, how lions act. Even the head male lion, I suspect, does not simply grab whatever he wants. He needs at least some cooperation from the other male lions. He acts as if he is The King of the beasts, but sometimes he looks the other way when another male finds satisfaction with some of his largesse."

"You talk as if you have seen this," The Prince told her.

"I suspect she has," I said. "She spends a lot of time out in the hills—unlike me, who has spent most of his time in gardens—and she is as watchful as a heron."

"Once again, Qoheleth, you are lucky to have this woman as your comrade. I sense that there is something else she would like to say."

"Just this," said Gomer. "It occurs to me that the lion is not the only brave and effectual beast in the hills. There is also the fox. Perhaps a lion, were he with us now and could speak as a man, would recommend direct action. But a fox would recommend stealth."

"Stealth has worked pretty well for me," I said.

"It has indeed," said The Prince. "Perhaps I can learn from both the lion and the fox." He turned to me. "Now, Qoheleth, you have written a lot about love. Do you think love plays any role in the political decisions of a prince?"

"I think that if you treat other people with respect, even with the love of friendship, they will remain loyal to you," I said. But when I looked into the eyes of The Prince I knew that what I said seemed supremely stupid to him. When I looked into Gomer's eyes, I saw the same thing.

"Maybe you aren't so smart after all," The Prince said to me. "But I'll take what I've got. You are an influential scribe, and at least you aren't totally stupid. And you write well. Just don't go trying to make decisions for me. You see," he sat back down to explain something to me that he considered very elementary. "Which is it better for a prince to be—to be loved, or to be feared? To listen to you, my love-smitten friend, it is better to be loved."

"It is best to be both loved and feared," said Gomer. "They both have their advantages."

"Once again, you are correct, Gomer. Good name, Gomer. It describes you." The name *Gomer,* for those of you who may someday be reading my words in translation from the original Hebrew, means *satiation.* It is a common name for prostitutes, actually. "But suppose that one cannot have it both ways," continued The Prince. "Which would you choose—love or fear?"

"It depends," I said. "For me, love is the clear choice. But I am not a prince and will never be one and, quite honestly, have no desire to be one. But for you, perhaps, it is better to be feared than to be loved."

"Well spoken by a poet and scribe," said The Prince.

"You may sometimes be like a lion and sometimes like a fox, but many other powerful men are like jackals, fighting with one another over garbage. You will be able to stay above all of this, be neutral in their little fights, while pursuing your own interest." I thought, for a moment, that I had dispensed wisdom. Once again, the other two were not impressed.

"I cannot remain neutral on any point of contention," said The Prince. "Whichever side wins will think I was just holding back to see who would win, and whichever side loses will resent me for not helping them. Neutrality alienates both the victor and the loser. Every man must either be pampered or eliminated. I can neither be neutral nor tolerate one who is. You must be willing to do what I ask, and if you do, I will pamper you."

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"You are not of much use for anything other than writing documents," said The Prince, rising and acting as if he shook off the dust of his feet toward me. "But," he said, whirling back toward me yet again in what must have been a rehearsed dance, "I can use your help in writing things to demean Jeroboam. I'll bet you can make your pen poisonous, as if the ink came from a deadly plant."

Gomer and I looked at one another. Could he have heard about even our search for poisonous plants?

"So start thinking up some stories about Jeroboam," said The Prince. "Just make stuff up. About how he is actually the son of a whore, whom the gentlewoman who claims to be his mother stole—or, better yet, bought!—yes, that would work—from a whorehouse to hide her own barrenness. Maybe he has some hidden little mark on his body that his real mother, the whore, can recognize. Ooh, this is getting good! I think you are up to writing this story. And later I will have you write all of my propaganda."

"What's in it for me?" I asked.

The Prince smiled broadly. "I was wondering when you would come to that. Well, it's quite simple, isn't it? I can arrange everything. I have a lot of royal guards who are loyal to me. I have enough guards loyal to me that you will have no trouble, no trouble at all, getting together with that black woman you lust after so much. You won't even need to sneak into a garden. I can get you a whole suite of rooms in my little palace."

I could hardly breathe, and nearly fainted. I could see, however, that Gomer looked totally crushed.

Chapter 20

The Prince seemed to be as good as his word, at least for the moment. I received a whispered message from one of his couriers a few days later telling me that, the very next night, I could meet Henna in a sumptuous suite in The Prince's mansion.

Gomer could barely speak to me when I told her I would be occupied the next night. She did not hear the message but read it on my face as surely as if she had received a written transcript of it. She did not smile at me and rebuffed any contact I made with her. But late in the afternoon of the night she knew I was supposed to meet Henna, she came into the room where I sat writing.

"Hey, Gomer," I said, trying to divert her attention from the coming hours by speaking to her about my excitement with my new project of writing propaganda for The Prince. "This story is coming along pretty well. I started with The Prince's idea about the whorehouse baby, and then I put in some elements from your story about Absalom. I modeled Jeroboam after Amnon. I really appreciate you telling me that story. You're a treasure, Gomer."

"I've put water in the bathtub for you," Gomer said with quiet intensity.

"Thanks, Gomer. You didn't need to do that. You're not my slave, you know."

"Just go and get into the bathtub," she said, reaching for me. I started to embrace her but she rebuffed me just as she had been doing. She gave me a little shove into the bathing room. I did not resist when she slipped my robe off of me. It was a hot day in late spring and I wore nothing else while working alone in my room. She motioned me to the marble tub. I sat in the water. She tied up the sleeves of her blouse.

"This is really fine soap," I said, when she started rubbing the lather onto my back and under my arms and around my neck with a rough cloth. "Where did you get it?"

"It is the finest soap," she said. "Made from filtered olive oil."

"What is the scent?" I asked, still trying to make her smile.

"Turn around," she said, and when I did, she vigorously rubbed my chest with the soap that I found each moment more pleasing and more perplexing. "The scent is saffron," she said.

"So you did find some lilies!" I said. "You made this soap yourself!"

"Stand up," she said, and she thoroughly cleaned the disgusting parts of my body. She touched me with a firm hand but with the unsmiling efficiency of a cook preparing a baked lamb. "Now you can sit back down," she said, as she started washing my legs.

"Did you make this soap yourself?" I asked. "Saffron! I might be the only man in Jerusalem—including The King—who gets to enjoy such a luxury."

Gomer held my feet worshipfully as she washed them, gently rubbing between each toe, and still without smiling or speaking more than necessary. I stood up outside the tub and she dried me with a towel.

"Now, go lie on your bed," she ordered me. "Face down." When I did this, I heard her say, "Don't look up." The unguent was cool when she poured it on my back. It had the strong scent of cloves. She rubbed it into my back, my buttocks, and my legs. She even placed a little of it behind my ears. Then she began massaging all of my muscles with a strength I did not know a small woman, even Gomer, could have. "Now turn over," she grunted. She had to repeat it, for I was almost in a trance of comfort. She massaged the clove oil onto my arms and chest and legs. We had been intimate many times, but she had never massaged me like this. I remained totally at rest.

She put the piece of soap into a little reed basket and put the stopper in the bottle of clove oil. The bottle had a name written on it, as if she had bought it rather than making it. I suddenly realized that she must have spent a fair amount of her money to buy this oil for me, and perhaps the soap also. Her back to me, she started to leave.

"Gomer, please stay, my friend," I said. "You have done a beautiful thing for me. How can I ever thank you?"

"It is nothing," Gomer answered, her back still turned. "It is my pleasure to serve you, and it always has been. Henna loves cloves, and she loves you with cloves. Every night that you get to visit her, I will prepare you for her. And when you return, you will find cakes of dates and elah nuts waiting for you."

"Gomer, quit acting like this," I said. "You are not my slave. Say it. Just say it. Say, *Elah, I am not your slave.*" She was silent. I raised my voice a little more. "Say it! You know perfectly well that The Prince esteemed your mind even more than mine. And to have you stoop to be my servant, this is incommensurate with what The Prince wants. Just say it!"

"Master," she said, "when it comes to my mind and my wisdom, I await the command of The Prince. But when it comes to The Prince's gift to you, your visit to Henna, I am your slave."

"Don't call me master!" I said. "I have a name! I am Elah! Just say, *Elah, I am not your slave. I am your companion.* Say it."

She walked quietly from the room. I lay back on the bed and concentrated on my breath, on the sweet air made sweeter by the oil, and on the sheer joy of being alive. In due time, I told myself, in due time I can win back Gomer's companionship. For now, I contemplated a different kind of joy that awaited me.

*

The Prince had even sent a messenger to make sure I visited the chamber where, he assured me, Henna would be waiting. But when we arrived, Henna was not in the room. A single torch lit the room. I sat on the most wonderful cushion I have ever seen to await Henna's arrival.

Instead it was Eli who barged into the room after pushing aside the messenger, who still waited outside.

"You'd better get yourself out of here, little buddy," he told me.

The incongruity of seeing Eli in the chamber where I expected to meet Henna left me totally discombobulated. “What is this all about?” was all I could say.

“You come with me, Elah,” said Eli. “And whoever is behind that curtain over there had better get out of here right now. Yes, you. Out. Get out. Henna isn’t going to be coming here. There’s nothing for you to do here. So get out.”

A small man slipped out from behind the curtains, just as Eli had said, and climbed out of the window.

“I’ll explain it all in a moment,” said Eli, as he grabbed my hand. As he turned, I could feel that he had a sword inside his cloak. The messenger had vanished. Eli grabbed the torch from its sconce and led me through the city. My new shoes, kept clean when I approached The Prince’s mansion by good roads, now got dirty in the grime of side streets.

“You found him!” whispered Gomer in elation when we entered my room. Gomer gave Eli a quick hug, then grabbed my hand and drew me to my cushion. She sat at my feet, burying her face in her sleeves and quietly weeping.

“I have a feeling that you have just saved my life,” I said to Eli. “But I don’t know what just happened. I think you need to explain it to me. Let me guess. That man who was in the chamber had a sword, and he was going to kill me. That must be it.”

“He might have,” said Eli. “Or not. Your only purpose was to serve as bait.”

“Bait?” I squeaked.

Gomer started crying more loudly, I imagine, from hearing my naïveté.

Eli said, “You were bait. That man was there to murder Henna. There were other men waiting outside to bear her dead body away. Once they did that, you would have been irrelevant. They might have killed you, since you were a witness. But their principal objective was to kill Henna.”

“Why would they…I suppose The Prince hired them…why would The Prince want…”

“Do I have to explain everything to you?” said Eli. “You know perfectly well that The Prince plans on being The King’s heir. And you know perfectly well how much The King loves Henna. If Henna gets pregnant…”

“But,” I said, “Henna’s child would have to grow up, which would take a long time…”

“The King is not too old yet,” said Eli. “Plenty of time. And The King himself was one of the youngest children of David. In good family tradition, The King’s older children, such as The Prince, might easily get passed over when it comes time for the succession.”

Gomer had stopped crying but still kept her face buried.

I sat bolt upright. “Wait. Where *was* Henna? Suppose the assassins found her! We should have looked for her…”

“They didn’t,” said Eli. “She didn’t leave The King’s palace.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “How did you know to come and rescue me?”

“Gomer and I keep our ears open for every bit of gossip. So we knew exactly what was happening. And now for the information that you are going to hear about by tomorrow morning, latest, anyway, so I might as well tell you.”

I silently awaited Eli's story.

"They all arrived this evening," said Eli. "There must have been five hundred of them. Soldiers, servants bearing gifts, ranks of women. They walked right up to the Siloam Gate. The guards opened the gate and let them march right in. It came as a complete surprise to everybody except to The King and a few trusted advisors, who had been receiving messages about the arrival of the five hundred. It is safe to say that The Prince was taken completely by surprise."

"Who arrived? Five hundred people from where?"

"From the Land of Sunburns, south of Nubia, my friend. The land of Kush, as we call it. It seems that this Henna is their princess or something, who had been abducted. Apparently Henna had no idea of her own identity as their princess. When they heard that the woman we call Henna was in Jerusalem, and was with The King, they sent a delegation. They are expecting The King to marry her and, as a result, to form an alliance between Kush and the Kingdom of Israel. The Prince's worst nightmares may come true, assuming there is issue from the marriage. Not much he can do about it except to throw a fit. Everybody among my sources of information has heard about how much The Prince hated Henna for being black. He talked about how dirty she was, a human stain that nothing could remove, a stain that tinctured her very soul, a stain that he said was the Mark of Cain. And there's not much The Prince can do for you. He gambled and lost. Of course, The King doesn't know what The Prince was planning to do, so The Prince's punishment will simply be obscurity.

"Nobody cares about Rehoboam anymore," continued Eli. "All the talk in town is about The King and his new black wife. There is going to be a big wedding, little buddy. And I have it on good authority that The King is going to ask you to write the poetry and the love songs.

"So you can forget about Henna," Eli concluded. "I will leave you alone here with Gomer. I think you know what to do next." Gomer looked up at Eli as he left.

Gomer was still sitting on the floor when I knelt before her. "I'll say it, Gomer. I'll say it. Gomer, please marry me."

Chapter 21

Gomer, as usual, had to get up early to help with breakfast preparations. When I went down to the dining area for breakfast, everybody ignored me, and I saw Gomer nowhere. I sat at the table. Then suddenly Gomer burst into the room and ran toward me. She jumped into my lap. Everyone turned toward us and started pounding the table and the floor and pots and pans and started cheering. Gomer had told them about our engagement. Eli walked in and brought a wooden staff that he had carved to look a little bit like a scepter, and Rebekah brought a small cape and clasped it around my neck with a brooch. It was purple, dyed in Phoenicia, and must have come from The King's palace, which is where it would soon return.

*

Nearly everyone in Jerusalem turned out in the streets surrounding The King's palace to see the African contingent emerge from the palace, where all of them except the leaders had slept in the garden. Gomer and I got distracted by one thing and another, and arrived only about an hour before the Africans were supposed to come out and march around the palace as The King's guard heralded them with trumpets. There were so many people that we could see nothing. We could not even get close to the street.

"I'm going in," I said to Gomer. "You with me?"

"Where you go, I shall go, as Ruth said to Naomi, I think," she answered.

I held Gomer tightly as we pressed our way through the crowds. I tried to not think about the bodies and hands that brushed against Gomer's back as I held her chest against mine and we walked like a clumsy, just-born or just-created four-legged creature from an Eden of Delight.

"There, just ahead," I said, but of course Gomer was too short to see and had to simply trust me as I guided her, using her back as a breastplate in this mêlée. She felt the lowest tree branch as I pushed her against it. "Let's climb," I said. It was a sycamore fig. Though spring was well advanced, the buds were only now opening, and there were few leaves to obstruct our view. I was not large enough to break any of the branches, and Gomer, of course, was as light as a bird.

The parade passed right below us. I could have pissed on The King's head trumpeter, just as I would have been a highly visible target to The King's archers had I done so. The African soldiers, naked to the waist, all had very strong shoulders and arms. Each bore a large spear with a sharp tip made of ivory. Servants carried open trunks of fine fabrics and gold and crystals, as well as ivory jewels. And huge amounts of spices, enough to make the fortunes of a dozen Arab traders. The dignitaries—Kings? Chieftains?—rode on palanquins. There were about a hundred women, also naked to the waist, and with loincloths only in front. All were finely formed, particularly their large breasts.

"I heard that The King's advisors told him the African women should wear robes," I told Gomer. "But The King said that the Africans should wear whatever they wanted to wear and not wear whatever they didn't want to wear; they are our guests." Gomer pressed the back of her head against my chest and could tell that my heart was beating rapidly. "Forgive me for looking at the women, my fine and fair one. They are pretty amazing." All of the men and women looked like Henna, with the large lips and broad noses. "Forgive me for lusting after the women."

Gomer laughed. "We will be married soon enough."

"I wonder if we will be able to hear The King's announcement," I said.

"What he is going to say," Gomer told me, "is that this tribe is very special. I just heard this by the grapevine. They are the Lemba tribe."

"Yes," I said. "I remember Henna telling me."

"They claim that they are descendants of Aaron, the high priest of Moses," continued Gomer.

"Now this, Henna did not tell me. It is clearly ridiculous," I said.

"Not so fast," said Gomer. "They are the descendants of one of the priestly lines. Apparently back in history there was some dispute among the Israelite priests, and some of them left Jerusalem. They sailed south and ended up with an African tribe. They married some of the women, and formed their own tribe, the Lemba."

"That's some story," I said.

"They have evidence," said Gomer. "They have the Torah scrolls that the priests brought with them to Africa. They can't read them anymore, and the parchment has started to decompose in the heat and humidity way down south, but they are clearly telling the truth. The leader of the priests who founded their tribe might very well have been named Aaron, even if it wasn't the original Aaron."

The King appeared on the front parapet of his palace and looked out over nearly the entire population of the city.

My hearing was not as good as Gomer's, and she told me that The King announced that The King's favorite concubine was about to become The King's favorite wife, and that the wedding would be in four days. Four days! That's not very long to prepare. But The King says four days, so four days it is.

When Henna appeared beside The King on the parapet, I could barely tell who she was. She wore a bright robe, scarlet and gold, but based on the reflections of the morning sunlight I think it was really gold. Her face was just a tiny dot in my vision. But that tiny dot started drawing all of my love into it. Gomer knew what was happening, and pressed herself against me, nearly falling off of the branch to do so.

*

When Gomer and I got back to the Regiment building, The King's messenger was already waiting for me. The King wanted to speak to me as soon as he returned.

A couple of hours later, guards led me through the streets, now much less crowded, and inside The King's palace. All the other guards, and the servants and minor officials, looked at me bemusedly. My guards kept me walking rapidly. And without any preliminary or explanation, they whisked me into the King's antechamber. Not his throne room; that was for official functions, and to meet with people whom he had to intimidate. But he sat in a small wooden chair and watched me approach. I instantly fell to my knees before him.

"Get up, get up," The King said to me. "You act like a slave. Remember that time out in the desert when you were making up poems about the little white flowers? You knelt before me then, and I told you to get up. You were just a servant then. Now you are one of my most renowned scribes. You will shortly be the assistant to the Head Scribe himself and have an office right here in this building. And in the new palace, once it is built."

The guards pulled me to my feet and guided me to a chair. I sat on an equal level with The King. He was shuffling through some papers. My heart froze. The King was looking at my love poems.

"I took the liberty of securing these poems," The King said. "Since you are my employee, all of your writings are mine. These love poems…"

The King looked at someone behind me. "Well, greetings, Elkanah. I will just be a moment. I am talking with my new scribe. If you can wait…"

A voice behind me, sanctimonious and trained for preaching, said, "Your Majesty, exalted King, it is precisely this scribe that I wish to discuss with you."

"The man behind you is Elkanah, the High Priest," The King explained to me. "I take it, Elkanah, that you have read these love poems?"

"I have, Exalted King," said the voice.

"And?"

"They are, shall I say, sexually explicit, Your Majesty. They discuss things that are best kept in the privacy of the bedroom. What will God think if you keep on your staff a man who writes such things…" I looked back at him. His beard was pointed and gray, and drab robes covered his slight form. I turned back to look at The King.

The King slapped the papers down on his knee. "Elkanah, you have read them. How can you say this about them? Yes, they are, as you say, sexually explicit. Like here…" He looked through the papers. "Here. *You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its clusters.* Or here. *Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies.* This is masterful writing! This is a brilliant expression of human love! Who, do you think, created sex? God, of course. All of the birds and the beasts have sex. It permeates the good Earth. That will be all, Elkanah.

"Now, Elah." The King smiled. I did not look back as, I assumed, Elkanah departed. "I had no idea of this side of your character. I had you pegged as a wildflower-lover who was uncomfortable with romance. I was wrong, apparently. Why, this is so good that I am going to incorporate it into my own corpus of writings."

I wasn't quite sure what I had heard. I had never heard the word corpus, but that wasn't the problem. Was he saying that he was going to claim my poems as his own? Oh, that's right, I am his scribe.

"And, by the way," said The King, "I want to read some of this poetry at my wedding ceremony. It appears as though some of the verses are for the man, and some for the woman. Why, that is perfect! I'm quite certain that Henna will be glad to read these lines that you have written and that shall forevermore be associated with me.

"But," continued The King, "I will have to change a few things. As a matter of fact, I already have. Right here near the beginning, I have inserted, *The King has brought me into his chambers.* And this part. *My nard gave forth its fragrance.* That is pretty powerful stuff. But I need to make it perfectly clear who the lover is. So I added, just before it, *While The King was on his couch.* And I added a whole section, although I wonder if I can write half so well as you. Here: *What is that coming up from the wilderness like a column of smoke? Behold, it is the palanquin of Solomon! About it are sixty mighty men of the mighty men of Israel, all girt with swords and expert in war…King Solomon made himself a palanquin from the wood of Lebanon,* etc. etc.

"And then, you didn't have much to say about the man. I suppose that is understandable that you would focus your writings mostly upon the woman. But here, listen to this. *My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, the fairest of ten thousand. His head is the finest gold, his locks are wavy, black as a raven.* Yes, that's so, isn't it. Perfect description of me. *His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns set upon bases of gold. His pillar is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars.* Hmm. Maybe Elkanah is right. I don't want to push it too far. *His appearance is like Lebanon.* That will do. I'll keep the spicy parts for when Henna and I are alone in our chamber.

"Ah, dear Elah, you have given me a masterpiece. I just want you to write a little more. Or not. What you have already written is enough. But if you feel like writing more, please do so.

"You are obviously radiant with passion," The King continued. "And so, I have an offer to make. Pick out a wife. Go ahead. I will have my guards take you around to the households with eligible daughters. I have enough women. Henna is enough all by herself, for that matter. But just let me know whom your heart desires, and I'll see what I can do. Well, say something. You are the luckiest man in Jerusalem, except for me. Say something!"

How could I tell him that I suddenly had second thoughts about my engagement to Gomer, about which no one had yet told him? Gomer had pretty much consumed me in her powerful love. I should like to have had a chance to check out other women. Of course, how could I ever know if any of these other women could be the kind of lover of my soul that Gomer

had been to me? It would have been fun to have been fêted by prominent families and introduced to famous beauties, even if, in the end, I would have chosen Gomer anyway.

"My engagement has been recently announced, Your Majesty," I said.

The King smiled. "Well, who is the blessed woman?"

"Her name is Gomer. She is the artisan of bread for Regiment 25."

"Regiment 25…" The King tried to remember which one it was. An advisor approached him and whispered to him. "Oh, yes!" said The King. "The Regiment of the Ocean Angels. The one that Henna was originally assigned to! So, you are going to marry a baker?" The advisor whispered something more to The King. "Oh, her! You can imagine, my dear Elah, that I have a lot of good bakers in my employ. But I have actually heard about this one! We might in due course have a place for her in the Palace! That is, if she continues to work, which she is not as a wife obligated to do. But we artists love our work even if we are not required to do it. For her, the word *artisan* is no mere title. I imagine she will want to keep up her creative work. Wait. There is something else I seem to remember about the Regiment of the Ocean Angels…" The advisor whispered to him for a third time. "Eli the Assistant Steward. Yes. Well, don't be surprised if he ends up working in my Palace also!"

Chapter 22

I had no desire to attend The King's wedding. Nobody would notice my absence anyway. I was the scribe who wrote up the wedding contract, and even left the spaces for Henna's signature and for The King's seal. The King had briefly considered inviting me to officiate the signing, but Elkanah the Priest demanded the privilege. I could only imagine what Henna must feel like while she was reading the words she had written for me while pretending that they were the words that The King had written for her.

I stayed in my chamber, lying on my cushions. Gomer stayed with me and fed me raisins and dates and, of course, wild elah nuts. And wine. Lots of wine. Somewhere she had gotten hold of some honey wine. Not much, but just enough for her to take into her mouth and then spit into mine. She poured some of the honey wine into her navel and let me slurp from it, perhaps at the very moment when The King was reading my poem about wine in Henna's navel. She placed dates on her breasts and let me nibble. She let me feed among the lilies.

Nobody guarded the Regiment building, for everyone else except Gomer and myself, as far as we knew, had gone to the wedding. We ran naked through the garden, stepping into the fountain and splashing the water all over each other.

I noticed some small flowers growing in the flower bed near the fountain. Six petals! "I wonder what kind of lily this is," I said. I was surprised by the look of terror in Gomer's face. When she saw me looking at her, she forced a smile. "I know I am supposed to be the flower expert here, but something tells me that you probably know what it is…" She just kept smiling with all her teeth. "In fact, something tells me that you planted this here."

"Why would I do that?" Gomer asked, with her glazed-pottery smile.

A light went on in my head. "This…this is the death lily! Why, there is quite a lot of it around here. Most of the flowers have shriveled and the seed pods are starting to form, but the leaves are all clearly the same. This garden is full of death lilies!"

Gomer was speechless. She crouched beside me and curled her arm around my shoulders.

"Well, there is one way I could find out if they are death lilies," I said, and reached for one.

"No, don't do that," Gomer said with quiet intensity.

"So, they are," I said. "Don't worry, Gomer, my bride-to-be. I have no use for them now."

I walked to the west wall and looked over it into the sun. I could not see any details, but I knew that what I was seeing, on the slopes of Jerusalem below me, was the wedding. I could not see the ceremonial platform itself, but I knew where it was. A golden radiance seemed to arise from it. For just a moment, thoughts of Henna consumed me again. But I reached over and to draw Gomer's hips next to mine.

Chapter 23

Life was pretty good for me and Gomer in the succeeding days. We had set our wedding date. The King had requisitioned for us a nice house not far from the palace. Technically, until the wedding, Gomer kept her old room at the Regiment, but everybody knew she had already moved in with me. And I now worked at the palace.

Life was pretty good for Eli too. He was now the Head Steward and was on the engagement circuit. The king had promised him what he had promised me, to have any woman whom he wanted. While the very wealthiest families were not interested in him, there were plenty of second-rank families with eligible daughters. Each morning, when I met Eli in the Palace hall, he told me about the women he met, the families, and the feasts. In some cases, the woman was just fine, to his way of thinking, but the families were obviously problematic. In other cases, everything seemed just fine, and he put them on his short list. But none of the women, he said, seemed to be the kind of person he could really befriend. Of course, wives weren't supposed to be friends. It was clear that he, just a little bit, envied Gomer and myself.

My most important scribal duty was to write the contracts between The King and the Lemba tribe. I understood that the coming of the Lemba had been totally unanticipated, but The King turned it into a great opportunity, mostly because they provided spices, oils, and ivory at a much lower cost than the Arab traders. Even the Sumerians were now getting most of their jewels and spices through us. One of the Lemba was able to write excellent Hebrew, and the contracts that this scribe wrote came to me. I consulted with The King—it became an almost daily and a completely ordinary thing for me—and wrote our contracts. I never saw the Lemba interpreter, who worked in a separate room at the palace. But his handwriting was every bit as beautiful as Henna's had been—Henna who now lounged about in The King's palace enjoying a life of leisure.

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And I traveled. Sometimes Gomer accompanied me, sometimes not. I wrote and delivered edicts from The King to cities and towns all the way from the northern borders of the territory of Dan—which was still a dangerous frontier, with hostile Canaanite villages still within sight—to the border of the Negev south of Beersheba. And I wrote the reports based on what the local officials told me. Most of them could write, but I could write better, and they appreciated the fact that I could make them sound intelligent in their reports to The King. I also summarized the criminal and court records. The King did not want all the details, just a summary of crime rates and such like. He trusted me to look for any suspicious patterns of activity, any clusters of crime, that might pose a threat to the prosperous peace of his kingdom. I had assistants who actually kept up with the census, and tabulated production of crops and livestock. I looked only

at their summaries. Eli calculated all orders for The King's household and his regiments, and all the levies. We knew each other back when.

I used these journeys as an opportunity to hear and write down stories. Some of the stories were accounts of crime and cruelty that I encountered during the course of my record-keeping. You look at the brick walls of a quiet village and you cannot imagine what kinds of horrors sometimes occur inside of them. I especially mourned for the women who were helpless against husbands more cruel than foreign tyrants. But I also collected stories from the past that people told me. After the second or third time I visited a town, the people knew that I was interested in their stories—from the wild frontier days right after the Exodus and the Conquest—and they came to me. They were sometimes really wild stories, nothing whatsoever like what you would expect to hear about the Chosen People of God.

In those few weeks, I was filled with a torrent of power. The words of the stories formed in my mind as quickly as I could move my pen. I was totally consumed with the act of writing, usually starting in late afternoon after a short day at work, and continuing all evening. Gomer watched me in amazement and disturbed me as little as possible until, each time I finished a story, I collapsed into a satisfied stupor. Gomer then fed and bathed me.

*

The stories were from the days of the Judges. All the surrounding Canaanite cities had kings, who were both civil and military leaders. But the Israelites did not have kings. Instead, we had civilian leaders called judges, and separate military leaders. Their spheres of authority overlapped, with some judges taking military action. In these chaotic early days, there was no clear process by which the judges were selected. Each judge claimed the authority of God to be the leader of the people. They did not need to present any particularly good evidence for this, but just had to convince enough people that God had chosen them. It was not clear, from the stories I heard, if there might have been several judges at the same time.

Some of the stories I preserved from oral tradition were about heroes. One of these stories, which I originally learned from Gomer, was about Ehud, the man who assassinated fat king Eglon while he sat on his shit throne. But there were other hero stories too.

One was about a hero named Barack. He was tall and dark and quiet, but when he acted, you knew he meant business. He successfully led armies against Canaanite kings. But as in any hero story, he met with initial defeat, and he needed help from others. The most amazing thing about this story—and which made it one of my personal favorites—is that Barack's success depended entirely on the help of two women.

The prophetess Deborah held court beneath a large palm tree out in the desert. Plaintiffs and defendants came from far and wide for her to judge their cases. She was brilliant and decisive, and when she announced her judgment, no one could look in her dark eyes and have any doubts about her wisdom. And then one day she called Barack to see her. She ordered him to

take an army against Sisera, a leader of the Canaanites. Now get this. What was Barack's response?

You expect me to go fight those powerful Canaanites?

Yes, of course. You can do it. God told me to tell you. You got a problem with that?

I will do it, but under one condition.

And what might that be?

I'll lead the army if you, Deborah, go with me.

Let me get this straight, Barack. You want me to go with your army to fight Sisera?

Yes.

You scared or something?

No. But I'd just feel a lot better if you were with me.

Very well. But God wants me to tell you that, because you require my presence, God is going to take the glory away from you and give it to a woman.

And it came to pass that when Barack's men met Sisera's men, the Israelites won the battle and slaughtered the entire Canaanite army. But Sisera fled on foot. Barack tried to chase him down. But Sisera hid in the tent of a woman named Jael. Jael told him he would be safe in the tent, and Sisera believed her. (It was at this point that I took a bit of literary license and inserted some romantic details. Jael did all kinds of things to get Sisera to totally and vulnerably relax in her presence. I also took the literary license to make Jael an astonishingly beautiful woman.) Then when Sisera fell asleep, Jael drove a tent stake through his skull, pinning it to the ground. The woman Jael, not the military leader Barack, thus became the hero.

And then there was the hero story about a boy named Gideon. Gideon did not have a very promising start. He was threshing grain so that he could hide it, and himself, from the Canaanites, rather than to fight against them. When somebody who claimed to be an angel of God came along and told Gideon to lead an army against the Canaanites, Gideon said no. And he explained why. He said he was the little kid of an obscure family, and, besides, God had not in fact given victory to the Israelites. He said some of the same things about God that I had written in my Qoheleth writings, about how victory does not go to the strong nor riches to the wise, but time and chance happen to them all.

Gideon's family and the people in his village had an altar to Baal, the Canaanite god, perhaps hoping to appease the Canaanites. But the angel convinced Gideon to destroy the altar to Baal. The villagers were very upset.

Who did this? Who destroyed the altar?

Why, it was Gideon, Joash's little boy, that's who.

What have you got to say for yourself, boy?

Well, said Gideon, *if Baal doesn't like what I did, let Baal do something about it.*

Listen, kid. Maybe Baal won't, but the Canaanites will. You got us into big trouble, kid.

But Gideon was able to gather up a small army against the Canaanites. And what do you think he did then? He decided his army was *not small enough.* He kept sending soldiers home until he had only about three hundred. But they were three hundred of the best.

Then Gideon had his soldiers approach the enemy camp at night. This was unusual, because armies usually faced off during the day. There was even a story that I heard—a story so stupid that I didn't even write it down—that the general who led the original Israelite conquest of the land of Canaan, Joshua, had asked God to extend the length of the day so that his army could finish up the battle before sunset. And God did it! You can see why I did not write this one down.

But Gideon's little army not only attacked at night, but used the darkness to their advantage. He told his army to shout, hold up torches, and loudly break pottery into pieces. The Canaanite army, frightened into thinking that Gideon's army was much larger than it actually was, started fleeing. Gideon's army pursued them. As the Canaanites were fleeing, the soldiers from Israelite cities all around chased after them as well. This was how Gideon became a great leader.

Oh, and one other thing. There were some people of Succoth, from whom Gideon had requested assistance, a request they scorned. So on his way back from chasing the Canaanites, Gideon showed the people of Succoth exactly how bad of a choice they had made. He tortured their leaders.

Later, Gideon had a lot of wives, and had over seventy sons, and undoubtedly lots of daughters as well. This was probably just a legend, since I knew that The King did not have seventy sons, even though he had a nearly unlimited number of sex partners.

Now, Gideon was a hero, but was he a good man, or a bad man? I just wrote down the story, and left it to my readers to decide.

Some of the heroes about whom I wrote were not military leaders. One was a storyteller. The Israelites at Shechem chose Abimelech as their leader. Abimelech was a son of Gideon, but he had killed many of his brothers and half-brothers in order to have a clear shot at being the new leader. But he missed one—he failed to kill his kid brother Jotham. As the people of Shechem were assembled to make Abimelech their leader, little Jotham stood on a hill and addressed the people. And he did not give them a political speech. Instead he told them a story.

Here was Jotham's story. The trees of the forest wanted to choose a leader. So they first chose the olive tree. But the olive tree turned them down, saying that he was way too busy selling his oil to take time to be king. So they asked the fig tree. The fig tree also turned them down, saying that he was way too busy selling his fruits to take time to be king. Then they asked the grapevine, who, predictably, said he was way too busy selling wine—"to cheer the hearts of gods and men," a wonderful phrase—to be their leader. So the trees of the forest chose the thorn bush to be their leader. A fire got started in the dry branches of the thorn bush, and burned the whole forest. It was clear that the thorn bush was Abimelech.

The people were amused at Jotham's little story, and ignored him. They went ahead and followed Abimelech. Abimelech led his army against the Canaanites, and seemed to be on a path of victory, until from behind the walls of one enemy city a woman threw a rock and hit Abimelech on the head. As Abimelech was dying, he asked his next in command to kill him, lest the rumor get started that he had been killed by a rock—a rock thrown by a woman. So, in the

end, Abimelech proved to be no better a leader of Israel than the thorn bush had been of the trees of the forest.

Barack, Deborah, Gideon, and Jotham were pretty good heroes. Other stories that I heard, however, painted darker portraits of heroes. One great judge was named Jephthah. In return for a military victory, Jephthah promised to sacrifice to God the first thing he saw when he got back home. As he was returning home triumphantly, his little daughter ran out to greet him. Bound by his stupid vow, Jephthah had to sacrifice her on an altar to God. I really hated this story, but I wrote it down.

The most troublesome hero I heard about was Samson. I picked up bits and pieces of the story from several cities around the kingdom of Israel. All of the stories agreed that he was a kind of superman, if I may invent such a term. No enemy could capture him, no weapon could harm him, no accident could befall him. If someone bound him with ropes, he would burst them as if they were cobwebs.

Everyone recognized Samson as the supreme judge of Israel. But he had a weakness for women. And I don't mean good women like Henna and Gomer. He fell first for a Philistine woman whose family tricked him into revealing the answer to a riddle. He left her and she married the best man from the wedding. Then Samson fell for a Canaanite prostitute named Delilah who got him to reveal the secret of his power: it was his long hair. Samson would tell a woman anything if she lathered her sexuality upon him long enough. Delilah cut Samson's hair while he slept and called in her friends, who bound him with ropes. He expected to simply snap the ropes and walk away, as he had done before, but he found that he was as weak as any other man. The Canaanites blinded Samson's eyes and chained him to a pillar of the pagan temple in Gaza.

This seemed, to me, a sorry ending, so I made up a more dramatic one. Actually it was Gomer who gave me the idea, after I told her the story.

"What if," Gomer said, "the entire weight of the temple was held up by just two pillars."

"But that's not possible, is it, Gomer?"

"Who cares, Elah? It's a story. So then Samson regains his strength…"

"How does that happen, Gomer?"

"Who cares, Elah? He just does. Maybe God gave Samson his strength back. Maybe a tall, beautiful, and voluptuous woman named Gomer sneaked in some herbs that made him powerful…"

"Very well, Gomer, I get the point. And then Samson becomes strong enough to pull down the pillars and the whole temple collapses, killing everybody. What a climactic ending! That's brilliant, Gomer."

"Why are you getting up?" Gomer asked me.

"I have to write this down right now or I will forget it," I answered. "But, Gomer, would even Samson be strong enough to shift the weight of an entire temple?"

"Oh, Elah, he doesn't have to do that. That's the whole point! He just needs to shift the pillars a little bit. You see, the temple, like everything in our lives, has a point of vulnerability,

and all you have to do is to find that weak spot, and a temple, or a man, or a nation, comes tumbling down."

I therefore concluded that the point of these stories, should I ever write them into a single book, is that every hero has a weakness, usually associated with a vein of selfishness. And so long as the people of Israel, or any other people, select only leaders who aggrandize themselves, then they will in return have only leaders who cannot protect them and cannot lead them into prosperity. And it is the same thing over and over and over. Cities rise, cities fall. Heroes shine and then descend into the earth, forgotten. What has been done is what will be done. Round and round goes the wind. The seas are never full. Oh, the weariness of it all.

One of the stories that I collected on my travels seemed to have no point whatsoever. Even Gomer couldn't help me think of a way of making this story anything other than a grim tale. It was a story about a man who stayed at a host's house during his travels. During the night, a crowd of men gathered and demanded that the host cast the traveler out so that they could molest him. It sounded like the story of Lot in Sodom all over again, as related in the first book of the Torah. But this story took a different turn. The traveler cast out his concubine. The crowd of men raped her all night and left her dead at the doorstep. And it came to pass that, when they awoke in the morning, the host and the traveler found the concubine's dead body. What happened next is so random and disgusting that I could not have made it up. Maybe it really happened, since you can't make something this disgusting up. The traveler cut the concubine's body into twelve pieces, wrapped them in cloth, and sent them to each of the tribes of Israel.

I would have considered the story of the concubine's dead body to be the product of an insane man's mind, only I heard it twice. From this story I concluded not that humans are as evil as the beasts of the field, whether dead lions or living dogs; I concluded instead that humans are uniquely evil and entangled in a shroud of unspeakable and senseless cruelty. The beasts are too innocent—or, perhaps, stupid—to think of doing such evil things. This idea was so depressing that I did not include it in my Qoheleth writings. But it was clear to me that all good things done under the sun, and all evil things, eventually end up decomposing in the soil, to be forgotten. I thought about tearing up my parchment on which I wrote the story about rape and dismemberment. But I realized that it was as much the story of our past as was the glorious tales of Moses as recorded in the Torah.

*

But then one day I found that my parchments with the stories on them were missing. This could only mean one thing: The King had them. At first, I feared that, at last, I had written something too disgusting even for him. But I need not have worried. One day, when I was talking with The King, he said, "By the way, my friend, I read your stories. The ones about the days of the Judges."

"Yes, Your Majesty," I said, not meeting his eyes.

"These stories are brilliant," said The King. "I especially like the one about the olive tree, the fig tree, the grape vine, and the thorn bush. In this story we see the trees and herbs of the field telling us stories straight, as it were, from the heart of God. Not unlike the little story you were inventing when we first met. Do you remember? It was about the defiant beauty of the white flower out in the desert."

"Of course, I remember it, Your Majesty."

"Did you invent all the stories yourself?"

"No, Your Majesty. I invented none of them. I have gathered them from people all over your kingdom. I'm not deranged enough to have invented things like that myself. Deranged things such as the story about the woman getting cut up into twelve pieces."

"Well said, Elah, or perhaps I can call you by your literary name, Qoheleth. I admit I was beginning to wonder what goes on in that mind of yours. Well. What, exactly, is the point of the stories you have collected?"

I answered to the best of my ability which, as shown in the text above, was not very good. Men are evil, even the heroes, and then they die. But The King, I should not have been surprised to discover, had figured out a way to organize them into a book that actually had a point to it.

"I have taken the liberty to rewrite the stories," The King said. "The solution to the problem is quite simple. The people of Israel needed a king, like me, to give them vision and purpose. To unify them. So the recurring theme I wrote into your book is, *In those days there was no king in Israel, and every man did what was right in his own eyes.*"

I smiled for two reasons. One of them The King did not know. It was that a king was no more qualified to distinguish right from wrong than anyone else. The other reason was the one I told him about. "Brilliant, Your Majesty. Why didn't I think of it? To me, these were disconnected little stories, but you have managed to make sense out of the story. You have turned it from a collection of stories into a unified book."

"Well, it's not surprising, is it?" asked The King. "I am the wisest man who ever lived or perhaps who ever will live. But I have to thank you for saving these stories from the obscurity into which they would undoubtedly have fallen. How fitting, and how blessed by God, it is that Israel now has a King and that we can now all do what is right in The King's eyes."

*

One day a rich man wanted to give a banquet. He had heard about Gomer's elah pastries, and had requested that she be one of the caterers. He offered her more money than she had ever received. Gomer was the one who started the practice of designing pastries to look like animal faces, especially lions and foxes, and human faces as well. Almond sliver teeth, dark raisin eyes, dried apricot earlobes, vestments of fresh mint leaves. And when he heard all of this, Chief Steward Eli used this as evidence that Gomer deserved a raise. Which she promptly got. And she no longer had to work in the kitchen. She designed meals, while new servants cooked them and

cleaned up the mess. And she had a little office of her own in the Palace. I was successful in my work and in my creativity, and engaged to a woman who was also successful in her work and her creativity. This was the best of times for us. I occasionally thought of Henna. But her image faded, if only a little, from my mind, and I told myself that I was living exactly the life she would have wanted for me.

Returning from the banquet, Gomer told me that a young man with a golden voice had read my love poetry, attributing it to The King. She had heard, furthermore, that many copies of it were floating around Jerusalem, and perhaps beyond. I was resigned to the fact that my masterpiece—one of them—was no longer mine, and posterity would not know anything about me. But, I told her, what do I care about posterity? What has posterity ever done for me?

That was when I came up with the idea for my prank. It was the first prank I had ever pulled in my serious life. Imagine, the author of the depressing lines about the weary Earth, pulling a prank! But I just could not resist bringing a little humility into the image of the man, the mere man, The King who fancied himself even more wise than powerful.

It started when Gomer and I had just finished eating at my house. A servant, on loan from the Regiment, bowed deferentially to us, something Gomer still had some difficulty getting used to. The servant took the last dishes, and left us with wine. We were as alone as anyone could be in a house with a servant.

"*Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away,"* I said, beginning to recite my own song.

"I don't think it is such a good idea for you to recite this right now," Gomer said.

"The flowers appear on the earth, the time of birdsong has come; the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land…" I continued.

"Elah, don't. It will just remind you of that woman."

"For lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone…"

"Elah, didn't you hear me? Stop it!"

"…and pools of mud spread across the land."

Gomer froze and looked at me. "What did you say?" she asked.

I continued, "*Your hair looks like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead, and smells like one too."*

"Elah?" Gomer asked, smiling.

"*Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, dripping and glistening with spittle, and falling all over one another.*"

"Write that down," said Gomer. "Now."

While I scrambled for pen, ink, and paper, I continued. "*My two breasts are like the twins of a gazelle that feed among the lilies, and they are trying to get out of here as fast as they can.*" I was writing along the side of a small sheet of paper that Gomer had used as a shopping list, "*My nard gave forth its fragrance, and you found it irresistible, and came bounding. You started lapping up the wine out of the bowl of my navel like a lovesick dog."*

"That's good," said Gomer.

"What is this that I see in the distance? The dust and smoke are rising from the approaching army of Solomon! You can smell them from a half day's journey away!"

Gomer did not wait for me to finish writing this part down when she began. "*As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,*" she said, "*so is my beloved among young men. His arms are crooked, like old gnarled apple trees, and his legs are shaggy with bark."* She waited for me to write this down, then continued. *"Feed me with the sweetness of his fruit, for I am about to vomit with love."*

I wrote this down as fast as I could. Then I added, *"Your lips drool honey, and the fragrance of your clothes tells me that you have been outdoors for a long, long time."*

Gomer added, forcing herself to keep from laughing, *"The pearls of sweat glisten upon your upper lip, jewels among the little hairs."*

I continued writing. *"You are a stately palm tree, and your breasts are like clusters of dates. I will scamper like a rat up the tree and nibble on the dates."*

Gomer started digging among my papers, looking for my copy of the love poem. Although The King had taken my originals, I had found a copy of his revised version and made my own draft of it. When she found it, Gomer started to read, and to revise.

"Upon my bed by night, the fragrant garden bed, I sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. I called his name—I whispered, then I spoke, then I shouted—through the lattice. There was no answer. I told myself, I will arise now and seek him. I will go about the streets and squares of the city. So I wrapped my mantle about my body, stuffing my corpulence inside, and went around shouting, Where are you, you stupid ox? You're supposed to be home by now. If I find you in a wine shop or whorehouse or someplace, you're going to get it! You'll be sorry and I don't mean maybe! And then I heard your feet upon the threshold. You thought you were going to sneak in without me noticing it! Wait till I get hold of you!" I was writing as fast as I could.

Gomer and I abandoned ourselves to laughter. When we finally calmed down, I finished the poem. "*For, behold, the pillar of The King is rising. Behold how it rises like the morning sun, very slowly. But before it rises very far, behold, it is time for its midmorning nap! Then it begins to rise again, but behold, it is time for its mid-afternoon nap!*

"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, let love snore as long as it pleases."

And this was how the alternate version of Solomon's Song started to spread around Jerusalem. I left a couple of copies of it lying around the scriptorium. That's all it took.

One day The King was very unhappy. He showed me a copy of a copy of a copy of the alternate version of what he had told everyone was his song. "If I knew who wrote that, Elah, I'd have his miserable little balls pulled out and dried like shriveled raisins."

I stifled a smile. Balls like shriveled raisins? I wish Gomer and I had thought of that one.

"Well, doesn't it bother you?" he demanded of me. "The man who had this document on his person is now in prison awaiting my disposition of him."

I suddenly realized that my little prank had become dangerous. Thinking quickly, I said, "Your Majesty, please consider that whoever wrote that might just have meant it as a harmless joke. It is only popular—and beloved—songs that inspire such doggerel."

"You really think so, Elah?"

"Why, yes, Your Majesty. It was surely meant as a good-natured jest."

"He's scheduled to have his head struck from his shoulders within the hour."

"Oh, Your Majesty, please forgive him. Your reputation will be enhanced more by forgiving him than by executing him." My heart beat wildly.

"Yes, it appears so," The King said. He mumbled something to his chief servant, who carried a message off somewhere. Then he continued talking to me. "Nonetheless, it is an embarrassment to me because the original poem was specifically intended for my marriage to Henna. I fear that this little joke may have offended the Lemba." Most of the Lemba delegation had turned back toward home, but they still had a network of couriers to connect them to the kingdom of Israel. "Elah, please write a message to the Lemba translator, explaining that the alternate version of the poem was not authorized by me and was intended by someone as a harmless joke."

"I will do this right away, Your Majesty," I said.

After The King gave me a few more routine instructions for my day's work, the servant came back and whispered in The King's ear. The King smiled and prepared to dismiss me.

"Your Majesty," I asked. "May I ask what happened to the man who had the poem?"

The King smiled. "I pulled my own prank," he said. "I ordered him to be made into a eunuch."

*

I sent a message to the Lemba interpreter, explaining that, if any of them should happen to hear about an alternate version of the love poem between The King and Henna, to not be offended by it, and to know that the offender had been punished in a commensurate fashion.

I immediately received a response from the inner room where the Lemba translator worked. "It is with much appreciation that I acknowledge your explanation. Be assured that I am the only one among our people who knows about this and I will not tell anyone else. I saw a copy of it. It was as well-written as the original. To be offended at it would be supreme babyness."

I froze in my seat and could hardly breathe. The only other person I had heard use the word *babyness* was the only person who, I just now understood, could possibly serve in the capacity of translator between Hebrew and Lemba, and the only person who would have had to remain behind when most of the Lemba had returned to their homeland. The person with whom I had exchanged dozens of contracts and letters, all in ignorance of her identity.

I spent most of an hour writing my response with a trembling hand. I sealed it with wax and my own signet ring. But first I sent a brief note to her: *Are you here right at this moment? I have a message for you, but do not want it to lie unattended on your desk.*

The immediate response that I received was a single word. *Yes.*

I then sent the message. It was a careful balancing act between passion and fear. The message read, *I am he who wrote the original poem, and you are she who originally heard it. The space of but a few cubits separates us, but you might as well be as distant as the isles of the oceans. But know that nothing that inspired the poem has changed.*

The immediate response was, *The cleansing fire must consume our messages. Please forget about me.*

In desperation, I touched Henna's message to the candle, dropped it to the floor, and stamped it out with my sandal.

Chapter 24

Please forget about me.

Naturally after receiving Henna's brief message, I was plunged into shock, which continued all day. Gomer knew something was wrong, but I just told her that I had been working hard and was tired. Whether she suspected that I had begun thinking again of Henna, or was merely tired, Gomer's response would have been the same: she massaged my weary shoulders and fed love to my weary heart, expecting no passion in response. I was, after all, counting the days until our wedding. Gomer was counting the hours.

The next day, I despised the thought of going to my office, there to correspond about contractual details with the person to whom I could say nothing personal. I found myself totally unable to concentrate on my work. So I wrote another note to Henna: *Are you here at this very moment?*

The response instantly arrived. *Yes. It is no use. I cannot forget about you.*

My heart was racing again. I breathed deeply to calm myself in preparation for a long and careful wait. I wanted to keep her note but knew there was no way I could do so. There was an inner pocket in which I could hide it during the day, but at night, when I was unclad with Gomer, the note would be left unguarded. So I burned it. Then I wrote a note and sent it. *Each moment I yearn for you. We must find a way to meet.*

Henna's note came to me. *Watch. Our time will come.* The handwriting looked just a little different, but I assumed it was because the note was written in haste and secrecy.

Before I had time to either think of what to write to her, or to figure out what I needed to do, I received a summons from The King. I was in shock, nearly certain that he had discovered my correspondence with his favorite wife. When our eyes first met, I could detect hostility, and I was certain of my fate. But I was resigned to immediate death or to prolonged torture. I felt immense peace.

Then The King smiled. It was a forced smile. "Elah, I have a job for you to do."

At least briefly flooded with relief, I answered, "I accept it, whatever it is, Your Majesty."

"Wait until you hear this," The King said. "It's a dangerous mission. There's trouble over in the province of Gad. I want you to go and investigate. Your report to me should be complete—including recommendations of how to handle the situation. You need to leave as quickly as possible."

"What sort of trouble, Your Majesty?"

"Mostly grumblings of revolt."

"Why, Your Majesty?"

"That's what I want to know."

"I'll stop by home for some things, and to say farewell to Gomer," I said, "and be on the road within the hour. I assume I have an escort of soldiers."

"You'll need it," The King said. "The followers of Jeroboam have been rather active in that region."

I had little time to talk with Gomer, but there was enough time for her to ask me, "Are you sure you're telling me everything that is going on?"

"I've told you everything I know," I said, assuming she meant about my upcoming journey. And about Henna? What was there to know? That we were fantasizing about a tryst that can never occur?

Gomer got right to the point. "Somebody has been digging up death lilies in the palace garden."

"Are you sure?"

"I put them there, so I should know. You wouldn't be doing it, would you?"

This really took me by surprise. "Why would I do that?"

"Never mind," said Gomer, casting her eyes down and smiling. "It's just that you were thinking about, you know, using them at one time. I had hoped that all such thoughts had vanished from your mind."

"Oh, they have," I said, kissing her passionately.

"Yes, of course, my love," she said, smiling modestly up at me. "Then, do you have any idea who might have done it?"

"You seem to know more about court intrigue than I do," I told her. "You always have. Remember? I'm always the last one to find out anything. Talk to Eli about it."

"I already have," she said.

*

The horses were good and well rested, and we made rapid progress, downhill eastward, past Musicians' Rock and the places out in the desert that Gomer and I had come to know well. We crossed the Jordan River at a shallow ford just north of its confluence with the Dead Sea. Once we were on the desert road going north, between the river and Mt. Gilead, we traveled even faster. By nightfall the soldiers and I were in the province of Gad. I stayed in the governor's house. But once I left the city of Succoth, I was in land over which the governor had little control. It was a poor land, good only for grazing sheep—of which I saw few. A few rude hovels were scattered around the hillsides.

A small group of mounted men awaited me, and rode over to meet me. They wore old and filthy clothes.

"You speak for The King?" asked one of them. One look at my silk robe and they knew what the answer had to be.

"I am The King's scribe," I said. "The King wants me to report whatever it is you have to tell me."

"Well," said the man. "Look for yourself. What does this look like to you?"

"It is not exactly a land flowing with milk and honey," I said, using the words from the Torah. "Suitable just for sheep. But not bad for all that. It looks like the kind of land that Lot rejected but Abram chose." I referred to a famous story from the first book of the Torah. Abram, who became Abraham the heroic patriarch of the Israelites, chose the rocky, hilly land, while his morally depraved brother-in-law Lot chose the well-watered plains. "This land looks good enough for Abram, even though it is pretty rocky."

"That can't be helped," said another man. "The Tribe of Judah got the rich mountain country suitable for olives, figs, grapes, and elah nuts, and the gentle hill slopes for raising wheat. Our land is poor and rocky. But that's not what we are complaining about. We could make a living well enough from sheep and goats. But what else do you see?"

I looked to the road ahead of me. "The road from the south, as far as Succoth, is in good repair. But this road seems to be in really bad shape. But, it's not like you have to send your commodities to market. You raise, and use, your own sheep and goats."

"We do a little commerce," said the first man. I could not see his face underneath his head cover. "These roads are nearly worthless. And if all we need is a land that is good enough to keep us barely alive, the way you made it sound, then why does The King demand so much from us? Why doesn't he just leave us alone and let us survive?"

"I will make note of your criticisms," I said. "But I do not think The King would listen to me if I suggested that he lower your taxes or your conscription of workers."

"From the rich provinces," said a third man, "the taxes and conscription might be a contribution. But for us, it is a sacrifice. Some older people have starved when their sons got sent to Jerusalem to work on The King's palace."

"And all of his other public works," said the first man. "All of them in Jerusalem. Great parks and even, I have heard, choirs and celebrations. I have heard that The King has made alliances with Egypt and even with distant lands to the south. That's great, but all the benefits of these alliances stay in Jerusalem, while we help to pay for them. And I need hardly mention that we are helping to pay for The King's whores."

"We've heard that The King's whorehouses are a pretty big operation," said the second man. "You wouldn't happen to know about that?"

"I was sent here to listen to you and to report back to The King. I carry no message from him and am not authorized to make any comments of my own."

"Well, in Jerusalem you can have all the whorehouses you want, if you pay for them yourselves. Out here, we just want roads that are good enough for a wagon to go on."

"Or for an army to travel on," said the strong voice of a man who had stayed in the back of the group. He now approached me. "This province is defenseless against the depredations of the Canaanites from the east. We started off with just enough sheep and goats to keep us alive. Then the Canaanites come and take whatever they want. And our people starve."

"I see your point," I conceded. "I see a lot of deferred maintenance issues here. If The King would authorize some road improvements, Gad would be a wealthier province, which might be a good investment for the central government to make."

"It's not just an investment," said the strong voice. "We are people. We are your fellow Israelites. Our tribe, like all the others, was in Joshua's army and helped to establish the Kingdom of God. It is your responsibility in the eyes of God to treat us as equals."

"At first," said the second man, "the Canaanites were aggressors. Now, increasingly, they are our trading partners. After all, they are right here, while our Israelite brethren are far away down bad roads. And now that the Canaanites have become our trading partners, we are becoming their allies in other ways as well. I think The King ought to know that if there is trouble out here in the land of Gad, he would not just have to deal with the members of our tribe, but with the Canaanite neighbors."

"Are you threatening The King?" I asked.

The strong voice settled the matter. "It is only natural for people to cooperate with their neighbors. The Canaanites are our neighbors. The King is not. You can tell The King we said this."

"Might I happen to be speaking with Jeroboam?" I asked.

"Don't you wish?" said the strong voice. "Have you met The Prince? He's a pretty sorry piece of humanity, isn't he? Jeroboam doesn't have to be a very great man to be better than The Prince. You might just keep that in mind. It's better to deal with problems—whether roads, or relationships—sooner rather than later. The longer you wait, the bigger the cost is going to be."

*

Once back in Succoth, I wrote up a report that was as positive as I could make it. Gad, the land of opportunity, asks only a reasonable investment in order to make itself the shining jewel of the Kingdom, etc., etc. But then I added a brutally honest paragraph. I said that absent such investments and relief from taxation and conscription, there would be an insurrection that The King could not afford. Eli had mentioned to me that The King's resources were a little bit strained, and that some of the palace construction plans had been canceled. While I could not let The King know that I had inside knowledge of his finances, I felt I had to say at least this much.

As my party headed back south along the desert road, carrying my report, I imagined talking with Henna.

Oh, Henna, how I wish that we could simply lie together in your father's garden and enjoy the flowers and the fruits and the fragrant earth.

But this is not possible, Elah, my love. Somebody has to maintain the garden, and the city, and the army, and the fields. We cannot lie in a garden of delight and let other people take care of the world for us.

We are not lying around and being lazy, Henna. You are the representative of your people, and I of mine. We are working to make the relationships inside the Kingdom, and between the Kingdom and your people, as good as possible. We do valuable and important work, Henna. All that I ask is that The King satisfy himself with just one less wife. He would hardly notice, but it would make all the difference in the world to me.

Oh, he would notice, Elah. He would notice. He wants me to bear his child.

Well, then, bear his child. But you will still love me.

Elah, please forget about me. You are engaged to a wonderful woman. Everybody thinks of you as the cutest couple in the whole city. A lot of people wish they were in as pleasant a situation as you and Gomer. And, admit it to yourself, Elah. You love her.

Not the way I love you, Henna.

Perhaps not. There are many forms of love. The compulsive love that you and I feel for one another, the wild love, is not the only kind. You and Gomer have a wise kind of love. Please forget about me and concentrate your love on her. I know you love her. Think about those wonderful times you have spent out in the hills…

How did you know about that, Henna?

I am the Henna of your imagination. That's how I know everything that you know. The real Henna, the one who is married to The King, and whom you have utterly no chance of ever seeing again…you know very little about her. So please forget about me. Oh, what am I saying? You cannot forget about me, nor I about you. But this is all we can do, my love, my sweet Elah. This landscape of the imagination is the only place we will ever meet. And as time goes on, we will not meet even here.

Chapter 25

I delivered my report to The King, and returned to work in my office. I could not concentrate on my work. Finally, I wrote a note to Henna. *I have returned,* I said. *I had to conduct business for The King. During my absence I could think of little else besides you.*

After a little delay, a note came back to me. *I wondered where you had gone,* it said. The handwriting was a little off, but I assumed again that this was because it was written in haste and secrecy. And then the note said, *I wonder if it might ever be possible for us to meet again.*

I immediately wrote back. *How? When? Where? I'll be there.*

A few moments later, two guards entered my office. "The King requires your presence right now," one of them said, and they led me to the throne room. Besides the usual courtiers, a minor scribe such as I had once been stood with The King, and several other guards. I could easily guess what had happened, but was almost numb to my fate.

The King was clearly disturbed. "Elah," he said. "I would like you to meet the scribe with whom you have been corresponding." The young scribe, with close-cropped dark hair and a prim smile, bowed just slightly. "He works with the translator for the Lemba people, whose acquaintance it appears you have already made."

The scribe held up the notes I had sent to Henna. A guard entered, holding the note I had received from, I thought, Henna, and which I had in my anxiety forgotten to burn.

The King smiled grimly. "It is perfectly clear what has happened here. I will not make you submit to the indignity of interrogation. There is only one course of action that is customary in situations such as these."

I could not look up from the floor. The scratched and pitted marble of the old palace, soon to be replaced by the new one, reflected the random red dance of a torch. "Please, get it over quickly," I said.

"Oh, now, where would be the wisdom in *that?*" I could hear The King's smile.

"I have sinned before you and before God," I said. "Please get this over quickly. I do not wish Gomer to experience any more pain than necessary. And please do not expose her to public humiliation for my private evil. I ask nothing for myself, but only to spare Gomer."

"I said, Elah," continued The King, "that only one course of action is *customary.* I did not say it was *wise.* I am, as you yourself have frequently admitted, the wisest man who has ever lived and probably ever will. Unless I produce a wise son from the womb of Henna. A wise king must ask, what course of action would God prescribe in these circumstances?"

"Well," I said, seeing no danger in speaking freely to The King, since my fate was now sealed, "God will not tell us what he wants us to do, so you are going to have to make the decision. So, what difference does it make?"

"You may be correct that God will not *tell* us. But perhaps he may *show* us." I could imagine The King sweeping his arm grandly around the room.

"I don't understand, Your Majesty," I said.

"It's very simple, Elah. We are going to let God decide your fate." Then he spoke to the guards. "I will dictate to my scribe my instructions for what to do with Elah." I looked up and saw that the young scribe smiled and moved closer to The King. "Not you," The King said. He looked at me and handed me an ornate pen made from the feather of an ostrich. "Elah will write down the instructions for his own fate."

I sat at a table to the side of the throne room and used the ostrich pen to write The King's words upon the finest parchment I had ever seen, with a reddish black ink to which clove oil had been added, not enough to make it run, but just enough to give it an intoxicating scent. And I wrote as the King dictated.

The guards are instructed to conduct Elah the Scribe to Musicians' Rock, and there to tear his clothes from him and to bind him to a strong tree. There he will remain without food and water. There the guards will make sure he does not escape. The wind, the rain, and the sun will strike him, and the beasts of the night will visit him. There he will waste away. Unless, that is, God feeds him. If God so chooses, the birds will bring him food to eat, as they did for Elijah. If God so chooses, the rain will fall into his mouth. If God so chooses, he will protect him from all harm and all discomfort. If after one month Elah the Scribe remains alive, I The King will consider that God has chosen to spare him for the evil that he has done, and I will welcome him back into my household to perform whatever tasks of which he may still be capable.

The young scribe took the parchment from me and held it up to dry, then handed it to The King for his seal. I smiled grimly at the thought that my death would at least be beautiful, out in the solitude of the elah trees.

The King went out into the hallway and was standing there when the guards led me, my arms clasped in their strong hands, out of the palace. Henna was standing beside The King. Guards held her in place. It had been so long since I had actually seen her face. But her expression was the most heartbroken that I had ever seen on any human. I looked into her eyes, expressionless. I did not need to say anything, for I was demonstrating before her eyes the ultimate sacrifice.

The guards did not let me turn my head back when I heard Henna say, "Elah, remember me!"

Nor when The King said to Henna, "My beloved Henna! Where he is going, Elah will have plenty of time to think about you."

PART FOUR

Chapter 26

At dusk, the guards bound me to the trunk of the strongest oak tree. They had to crouch, and I to sit, for the large branches were close to the ground. I could see the Kidron road below me with all its traffic. The guards placed a small bag of food, and a skin of water, on a rock very close to me but which, of course, I could not reach.

"We'll be back to retrieve your body," said the head guard. "The King will not allow the indignity of you not being buried."

"Don't expect a funeral," said another guard.

"Shut up!" said the first. "Soldiers don't get funerals; why should this man? At least he, unlike most people, deserves his fate."

And that pretty much summed it up. When they left me alone, and night began to fall, I thought about how justice was, at last, being served. I had, in fact, taken intimate liberties with The King's concubine, and then started making plans with her for more such intimacies even after she became The King's wife. I felt at peace. I knew that, after long suffering, I would descend into the earth and my dust would become part of the eternal cycling of nature. So many people suffered worse than I and undeservedly.

Or perhaps after short suffering. I heard movements in the leaf litter and branches. It was probably one of the guards. Or it might have been the lion that Gomer and I had seen that morning not so long ago. Gomer, whom I had disregarded in favor of Henna, even though Gomer sacrificed herself for me on many occasions. Gomer, all of whose sacrifices for me had been rewarded only by the shame I have now brought upon her.

Yes, come. You are a lion, and you are just looking for food so that you can live another day, and feed your babies, so that they can grow up and take your place when your dust mingles with that of the Earth. I am simply food for you. You do not know that I have a mind full of wisdom while the dumb sheep in the pastures below do not; all of us, man and sheep, or the hyraxes of the cliffs, are just food. You are no more to be reviled for killing me than a man is reviled for killing a sheep or a cow. Yes, indeed, as The King said, I will have plenty of time to think about Henna, but now that I do, I cannot imagine her in my mind. All I can think about is you, the lion stalking in the dark, perfectly sinless in your habitat. Please kill me quickly. You do not know that I am bound helplessly to a tree, so you will grab my neck and rip open my veins so that by the time you begin tearing at my flesh I will no longer be able to feel, or to know, anything.

But the sounds were not those of a lion. They were those of one of the guards. I saw his shoes walking near the edge of my field of vision. What is he doing? Why is he approaching? He is touching the ropes that bind me to the trunk. He is surely checking to see if they are still strong. He cannot know that I have not somehow loosed them. He cannot know that I will make no struggle. But what is this? He appears to be loosening the knots. Surely it is so that he can

retie them. But no, he has not retied them. I am now free and able to stand. Branches hid his face in the fading dusk.

"Well?" the guard asked. "Get up."

I scrambled to my feet, walked over to a rock, and looked at the scene below me, the entire Kidron road leading up into the hills of Jerusalem.

"Don't think about going anywhere," said the guard.

"Where could I go?" I asked. "I have lost everything in the world. Now, please explain what is going on."

"King Jeroboam has need of you," said the guard. "You can write, and you know just about as much as anyone does about what goes on inside The King's court."

Suddenly before my eyes a whole new world of adventure opened itself to me, one I had never thought about before. For just a moment I felt some guilt at betraying The King whom I had sworn to protect, The King who was protecting Henna and Gomer, whose lives would also be jeopardized if Jeroboam succeeded in his plans to overturn the current régime. But this feeling quickly passed for, to them—to all of them, not just to The King—I was already dead.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"In The King's guards," said the guard, "I am simply a soldier. But to Jeroboam, I am an important associate. As soon as I heard what was happening to you, and that—God be praised!—I would be the one to guard you, I arranged for all of the other guards to be those loyal to Jeroboam. We are going to take you to him right away."

"I'm ready," I said.

"Now all we have to do is to leave a body here so that we can report to The King that you have died, and they can come for your remains," explained the guard.

"Well," I said, "that's easy enough. You remember the story of Joseph and his brothers? The brothers used the bones and blood of a goat to convince old Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a lion."

"The King's men would not be fooled by such a trick," the guard said.

"Then, what are you going to do?" I asked.

"You'll see," said the guard. "Meanwhile, sit down and eat with me."

As we ate barley loaves, I heard footsteps approaching up the dirt path. Some more guards, dressed just like the first, were dragging with them a young man tied in ropes, just as I had been. In fact, his clothes were very similar to mine, only much simpler. In fact, he looked a lot like me. I looked at a man who could well have been my reflection in a brass mirror.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"This is a Jebusite captive," the guard answered. "Isn't it amazing? He does look just like you. Now, Elah, remove your signet ring."

"I suppose it is of no further use to me," I said. "But why?"

When I handed my ring to the guard, he jammed it onto the young man's finger. The fit was perfect.

"My dear compatriot Elah," said the guard. "This young man is now you. He will be tied to the tree. And he will just happen to die. And at the end of one month, his remains will be retrieved by The King's palace guards. From this moment, he is Elah, and you are…what should we name you? You are now Gideon. Yes, that will do. Gideon. I've heard that name somewhere. It will work."

"You mean," I said, suddenly agitated, "that you are going to kill this innocent man?"

"According to a certain poet who until recently worked for The King, we are all the same as beasts. There is no such thing as an innocent man. We all have the human stain of sin."

"I deserve to die out here," I said.

"And he does not. This is irrelevant," said the guard, becoming a little impatient. "We have need of him, as your surrogate. And we have need of you in our struggle against that fat-headed creeping thing who calls himself The King while he drinks deeply of the wine and eats of the fat of the land, snatching food and wealth and maidens from the hands of the people who work so hard and have nothing to show for it and why am I taking the time to explain all this to you since you already know it? Casualties happen in war. This is war. This young man is one kind of casualty, and you are another. Your previous life is gone, Gideon. Say it. Say, *my name is Gideon*."

"My name is Gideon."

"Good. Very good. This young man will lose his life. You will lose your identity. And our cause, the cause of justice for the people, will go forward. And maybe, just maybe, we can create something new in the world. That poet from The King's court, who was about to die, wrote that there is no justice in life. But perhaps, under King Jeroboam, there will be justice for the people after all. A few casualties along the way, but in the end, justice."

I said to the young man, "I am sorry for what is happening to you and would prevent it if I could."

"We won't make you watch him die," said the guard, whose assistant led me down the trail toward a waiting horse.

Chapter 27

It is amazing how different the same place can look when you gaze upon it with a new identity. The followers of Jeroboam had shaved my head, trimming away the dark curls through which both Henna and Gomer had run their fingers so lovingly. I wore the rough robe of a poor merchant. Mt. Gilead rose to my right, the Jordan River ran with summer slowness to my left. I saw the same little towns and pastures that I had seen when I was representing The King. When we got to Succoth, I caught a brief glimpse of the governor of the province. I wondered if, perhaps, he recognized me, but he probably could not even see my face, for the sunlight dazzled him and a cloth hid my face from the brightness. Jeroboam's men led me into a little house made of cracked bricks, where I saw the man with the strong voice that I had met not many days previously.

This time he removed the cloth from his head. His hair was long and dark, and his head was large, as were his lips and smile. A little stringy beard hung from his ruddy face.

When I removed my cloth, revealing my white shaved head, I said, "So it *was* you that I met that day."

"Indeed," said the strong voice.

"And your headquarters is this little house right in the middle of the governor's city?"

"The middle of a city is the perfect place to hide," he said. "It would be rather noticeable if a little house in the hills had a bunch of men converging on it. Besides, we do not meet in the same place twice in a row. Not even in the same city. Not even in the same province. You realize that ten of the tribes are sympathetic to our cause."

"Oh, I am aware, I am definitely aware," I said.

"What else are you definitely aware of?" asked Jeroboam.

"More than you might imagine," I said. "I'll tell you anything you want to know. Just ask."

"We would like to get started tomorrow," said one of Jeroboam's assistants. "You are undoubtedly familiar with many of The King's scribes and messengers."

"Yes," I said.

"Well, when you recognize one of them, just let us know, so we can intercept him and get whatever information he may be carrying," said the assistant.

"We won't reveal your identity," said Jeroboam. "They think you are dead, and we want to keep it that way. If we need to interrogate one of them, we will consult you through an intermediary. Also, it is very gratifying to us that we have the cooperation of someone from The King's inner court who has no chance of ever going back. Your life is totally in our hands and we need offer you no reward in return."

"You're right about that," I said. "Elah is dead. I am now Gideon from whatever city I decide to be from, son of whoever I decide to invent."

"And we are going to put you to work writing things for us."

"We have to be careful," I said. "The King might recognize my writing."

"Just don't write any of that love poetry—you must know that we have read all of it—and you should be safe," said Jeroboam. "We need offer you no reward whatsoever. But we plan to do so."

"What could you offer me?" I said. "I have no life apart from what you are creating for me. I am dead to everything that went before."

"Not quite," said Jeroboam. "There is a certain woman whom you will never be able to forget as long as you live."

"Are you trying to torture me?" I whined. "Please don't mention her."

"We can get her for you," said Jeroboam.

"Haven't I heard that before," I said. "That's what Rehoboam said."

"That little snot? He can't do anything. He thinks he is so politically wise. But he knows nothing of how to be a Prince. He claims that he can form alliances with some men and eliminate others. He says that men must either be pampered or eliminated. But with whom can he form alliances? He never leaves Jerusalem! I, Jeroboam, am the one who knows important people all over the Kingdom. And, of course, you did also, back when you were Elah. The Prince thinks he can win men over to be his allies, but everybody knows he is a greasy, weaselly little man. Nobody likes him. He can't pamper anybody. He can't eliminate anybody either. He is impotent in more ways than one, I have it on good authority. That's why he demeans his own women rather than loving them, why his own women hate him, and why he has no allies. That little bastard cannot do anything for you now, of course, but he couldn't before either. However, I can deliver the goods."

"When? How?" I asked impatiently.

"Calm down, Gideon," said the General. "Not yet. We *could* conduct her from Jerusalem out into the country where we could arrange for her to meet you. Any time we wanted to. But this would be very difficult, and frankly you're not worth it to us. But we'll keep our eyes open, and an opportunity might come along. If she's ever outside of Jerusalem, we might have a shot at her. We might be able to set you up with her someplace where no one will know who she is."

"That would be difficult," I said. "Henna is black."

"Oh, *her.* I thought you meant the little woman you were engaged to. But you mean the Black Queen. That would be a challenge. No way could we hide the two of you. But we might be able to arrange a meeting, if she gets out of Jerusalem. Yes, that would be a real challenge. But if we pulled that one off, it would be a real blow to The King's ego, and it would greatly enhance our image among the people in the provinces. It would almost be worth it just to see the look on The King's face when his favorite wife disappears even for a day or two. For now, you're not worth it to us. But we'll keep an eye open. Now, it's party time."

I looked around and saw that several women had brought in trays of food. Not elegant food, certainly none of the pastries that Gomer was famous for designing. Just bowls of kefir, nuts, mutton, mint dip, and lots of flatbread. The women were obviously whores, with bangles on

their wrists and rings in their noses. Most of them clustered around General Jeroboam, feeding and caressing him, but a couple of them came over to me.

"You're the poet, aren't you," said one.

"The one who actually wrote all of The King's poetry," said the other.

"I can write some for you, too," I said, as one of the whores slipped bread with olives and pine nuts on it into my mouth. I hadn't even finished chewing when she began to kiss my lips. I could tell that she had recently bathed but that, out here in the provinces, they certainly had little access to perfumes. The olive oil with which she had rubbed her skin was not quite as fine as that used in Jerusalem.

"Me first," said the first whore.

"Then me," said the second, brushing herself against me. The second whore was younger and more voluptuous, but clearly there was a hierarchy among the women, one which I was perfectly willing to respect. My new life was an empty cloud of opportunity that, for anything I cared to the contrary, the general and his men and his women could fill. "We do not know where you will be tomorrow, so you have to please both of us tonight."

When I had eaten my fill—every bite of which was slipped into my mouth by the whores—they led me into a room where there was a bathtub, and they washed me. The soap was very crude, quite unlike Gomer's saffron soap. In my previous and sheltered life, I had never encountered camels except as draft beasts, but the fat in this soap smelled like what I thought camel fat must smell like. But it felt good to have the grime of my journey dispersed away. I then began my poetry for the first whore. I read the poems to them.

Come with me, my love, to lands far away underneath the sky that is like the deep blue sea, where we can lie in one another's embraces. Your cheeks are like pomegranates and your breasts are like the humps of camels.

Then I began a poem for the second whore.

Come with me, my love, to lands far away across the deep sea that is blue like the sky, and we can lie in one another's embraces. Feed me with pomegranates that are red like cheeks. We will ride on camels whose humps are like your breasts.

My poetry was as bad as anything written by the Leviathans, but the whores, as drunk as I, did not care. Writing poetry like this every night? I could keep this up forever, especially if they keep feeding me pastries of elah and honey.

Chapter 28

Nor was my work for Jeroboam very difficult. The first day, I just wrote propaganda against The King. I didn't keep a copy of it but as I recall it was something about how The King fancied himself a great lover and gathered women from all over the Kingdom, but that once they found themselves in his chamber it was all they could do to keep from laughing, for his pillar was like a mushroom that withers. And that to make up for this, he just keeps gathering more women. What the women really want, since The King cannot possibly satisfy them in bed, is the wealth and privilege for their families. All I had to do was to write what I had actually seen. But it was not very difficult to transition into the realm of fantasy. I created an image of The King as a whining little degenerate, who had not a single insightful thought that was not suggested to him by his faithful Chief Scribe, whom he left to die on the mountain for reasons I did not specify. I even invented stories about horrible smells that came from The King's nether regions which, for aught I knew to the contrary, were true. I even made up stories, which might have been true, about his wives rubbing clove oil all over themselves and him to hide the stench of his touch.

But by the second day I was riding on a horse, with General J's assistants, watching the highways and byways for people whom I might recognize as messengers or scouts or spies for The King. All I would have to do is to indicate that I thought I recognized so-and-so, and they would send some men over to check him out. Half the time I was wrong. But half the time I was right, and that half provided some precious information to Jeroboam, who was delighted with the success that I was providing for him. From one day to another we went from one province to another. And every night when we stopped, there were new women for me.

But I also spent a fair amount of time listening to stories of local families whose daughters had been taken from them for The King. Apparently, this was a criminal activity that had been going on totally without my knowledge. Many of the winsome daughters of rich families were not actually from those families but from poor families who had little choice but to give up their daughters as payment for debt or usury. I thought back to the girl that Eli and I had seen bathing in the garden of a rich family. Her body did not look like that of a poor and malnourished girl; but perhaps she had been fattened up and softened up for a couple of weeks before The King's visit. She was a country girl; no wonder she looked like a cow. I documented these stories and wrote them with appropriate wrath, to be circulated among the increasingly hostile Israelites. We even journeyed on the road to Lebanon, over by the Great Sea, and I listened to the stories of the people there, including from the young woman—I was sure of it!—who had spat upon me back when I was a minor member of The King's retinue. The same dramatic face, hardened a little in the intervening years, and the same gap in the teeth. She seemed to have no trouble with her daughter, now grown into a very young woman, ministering to my physical needs. Somehow the fact that I was not associated with The King made all the difference. I poured myself into my work, a warrior of words during the day, a helpless plaything of rural whores at night.

Chapter 29

And then it came to pass that, one day the next spring, I met up again with General J, who thanked me again for all the help I had given him. Help? I hardly noticed the effort on my part. His crusade had become mine. I really believed that The King's household was evil, except for the poor women who had been drawn into it through no volition of their own. I was happy to write the stories of oppression.

Except one. It was the story of a Hittite slave who had killed her master and run away to hide. She lived in continual fear of discovery, because she had a scar marking her as the property of a certain family. I knew the rest of the story but I did not mention it to the people who told me about the woman I knew as Gomer.

"She was a very small woman," I said.

"How did you know?" asked the man who had told me the story.

"I've heard this story before," I said. "And her scar was on her back."

*

My main job was to identify The King's spies, at least the ones I had met. All I had to do was to identify one of them, and then I could trace the others by watching whom they associated with. Then all we had to do was to capture them, which we succeeded in doing about half the time. Of the ones we captured, about half of them joined us, especially when we told them we would try to contact their families. We seldom carried through on our promises, but once in a while we did, and word got around, which disproportionately enhanced the number of spies who joined our side. We did not actually trust them, however. We kept moving them around and they never knew who or where very many of Jeroboam's men were. About half of these men defected back to The King. The half who refused to cooperate with us we kept in secret locations, since we had no dungeons. About half of these later joined us, and about half of these then defected back to The King…It seemed as if every man was equally likely to join us or to oppose us, and at any moment they were equally likely to change their minds or not. The human spirit is as floating and fickle as the winds that blow round and round the Earth.

But Jeroboam's men also trained me for battle. This was a completely new experience. Swords, by the way, are quite heavy. It is hard to not drop them, especially when you are swinging them. Spears are worse. But I kept working on it, and I could watch my arms grow stronger week by week. They had me practice climbing walls and trees, which made both my arms and my legs grow stronger. Our military training was quite different from that of The King's army. We were as likely to sneak up behind an army as to face off with it. The one occasion when we had a skirmish with The King's army, I was there. My training was not completed, but I got to help out a little. Our men shot arrows from hiding places in the trees, and when The King's men ran into the forests looking for us we were ready for them. We even dug

holes in the ground along the trails and placed vertical stakes in them to impale the soldiers when they fell in. I helped put in the stakes. It was a cruel business that a man has to do under the sun. And I knew these stakes would kill some soldiers who had been conscripted and who admired The King no more than I did now, and less than I had back when I was in his employ. Once The King's army was gone, we removed the stakes and filled the pits back in with rocks and dirt so that no civilians would fall into them.

My arms grew stronger and my legs grew more nimble. My horsemanship improved. The whores watched me and started praising my strength. You know what their praise is worth. But as I looked at myself, I started to believe that I was becoming a strong and handsome warrior. I kept my head shaved, but grew a strong dark beard. I doubt that either Henna or Gomer would have recognized me from a distance.

*

About a month later, General Jeroboam called me to meet him. This time we were in Chisloth-Tabor, a small town in the province of Issachar.

"We have liberated another member of The King's household. I think you know her." The General was sitting on some fine cushions. He motioned me to sit on some equally fine cushions.

"Who is it?" I asked, my heart pounding as I sat down.

"It's the little woman who bakes bread."

"Gomer!" I spoke the name like a sweet pastry. I could actually taste the sweetness in my mouth, the richness of her plenitude, compact inside a small body. "How did you do it? And why? I thought you said I wasn't important enough…"

"You're not," said the General, not smiling. "She knows nothing about you. She assumes you are dead. But we had to rescue her before she got executed."

"Ex…executed?" I asked. I felt an intense hatred for The King, whose condemnation of me was justified but who could not possibly have had a good reason to bring any harm upon Gomer. I also realized that there would have been no point in staying in The King's service. He would have condemned me for some reason sometime, as he had apparently condemned Gomer. I suddenly realized that my bad fortune might have been the only way for me to survive. And, Gomer was safe! "But, you rescued her!"

"We did."

"Oh, how wonderful! May whatever God there might be bless you! May the riches of the Earth be upon you, may the radiance of the morning sun enlighten you, may…"

"Enough poetry. We rescued her because, like you, she knows a lot."

"Right," I conceded. "Well, for whatever reason, that wonderful woman is safe."

"Well," said Jeroboam, "not entirely. We still have to hide her. The King's men are looking for her. She doesn't have a corpse tied to a tree to double for her, don't you know. But for the moment she is safe."

"Oh, I am so happy…"

"Aren't you going to ask about the circumstances? If not, I have other work to do."

"Oh, absolutely, General Jeroboam, I mean Your Majesty, I mean whatever you want me to call you…"

"You won't call me anything," the General said, shifting his muscled bulk on his cushions. "If you let any such blandishment fall from your lips and the wrong person hears it, I am in danger. My ego enjoys praise as much as the next man's, but blandishments might get me captured. To be safe, just don't call me anything. Now, the story.

"One of The King's wives got pregnant, hard as that may be to believe, based on the writings of a certain unnamed poet. And not long after that, this wife became very ill and died. Then another of The King's wives got pregnant. And not long after that, she became ill. She did not die, but lost the baby. At this point, even somebody as dense as The King figured that one of his enemies was poisoning the wives who became pregnant. So he instructed the kitchen staff in the Palace to taste the food before any of his wives ate. He, of course, already had his own food-taster."

"It was only the wives," I said, "and only the pregnant wives. This must have something to do with the royal succession. There is only one person it could be. The Prince. That greasy bastard."

Then the General said, "And then somebody tried to poison Henna."

"Tried…tried to? And didn't succeed?"

The General smiled. "No. Henna is unharmed, still inside the Palace. But the food taster got very ill. Just one of the food tasters. The King had assigned a food taster to each of the different foods prepared for the Black Queen. It was just one of the dishes that had herbs in it. The King determined that there were only two people who could have known about poisonous herbs: you and Gomer. You were dead. That left Gomer."

"It must have been the death lily," I said. "It must have been The Prince who did it. Gomer would never have tried to poison Henna, even if she were still a viable competitor for the affections of a man she believed was dead. But how could The Prince have known about the death lily? Perhaps…" I concentrated. "Perhaps he overheard me and Gomer talking about it. He must have been the one who was digging it up."

"The King would hardly accuse his own son, even if there were evidence for it."

"Gomer had no motive."

"Gomer was the only person who had enough knowledge to do this. And Rehoboam wants to kill every woman who might give birth to another prince," I said.

Jeroboam shifted again. "You haven't even convinced *me.* At any rate, it doesn't matter. The King's men threw her in the dungeon. I suppose I shouldn't tell you this, but why not. They committed various indignities upon her."

I stood up. "If…when!...you become king, I request permission to personally torture and kill those men."

Jeroboam smiled. “A reasonable request,” he said. “There are, as you can imagine, a lot of steps between now and then. Meanwhile, she was engaged to you. Would you like to be reunited with her?”

“It would be my greatest pleasure. Gomer was so good to me.”

“We got her as far as Ramah, which isn’t far from Jerusalem. The King’s men are patrolling the highways all around there, so we can’t move her yet. But by great good fortune, I have need of you in Tirzah, which is in the general direction of Jerusalem.”

“I’m ready,” I said, standing up like a warrior.

“Spoken like a pampered man from The King’s household,” said the General. “Actually, you’re not ready. You will be disguised as a merchant.”

“What will I be selling?”

“Dried fruits.”

“I know a lot about fruits.”

“But not about being a merchant. You need some training. Fortunately, we have a fruit merchant who can train you. And along with him came a shipment of fruit, including apricots from up in Damascus, and a camel. And, perhaps most important, The King’s paperwork that identifies him for tax purposes.” The General handed me a parchment.

I recognized my own handwriting.

*

The next day I had become Jeshanah bar-Jeshanah from Ephron in the land of the Benjaminites. I was bringing a load of dates and apricots from Damascus to sell in Tirzah. I had never been to Tirzah before so I knew no one and nobody knew me. My job this time was even easier than usual. I just sold fruit, at prices the real merchant had told me to charge, or a little less, or a little more. Meanwhile I watched for spies. I only had to find one, identify him, and let my compatriots follow him to find others.

I had a lot of time to pass, so I made up stories about where the fruit had come from. *Now, this bag of dates is from a special grove that is watered by a spring that never runs dry. It is a pool that, once in a while, at unpredictable times, the Spirit of the Lord stirs up, and anyone who so much as steps in the pool is healed of all of their diseases. It only stands to reason, does it not, that the dates from these trees might have just a little healing power. I eat them, and look at me! Look at that arm, young lady! Where have you seen an arm like that? That is a soldier’s arm! Yet, I am a merchant. How could a merchant have a soldier’s arm? It must be the dates from the legendary pool. Only the Hivites and myself know where it is.*

And again. *Now, these apricots are no ordinary apricots, as if there are any ordinary apricots. The soil is rich in the hills outside Damascus. You know that the trees on which they grow are strong, because they have no windthrows. I assure you that this is unusual. When the rains come and the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land, as that poet from Jerusalem once said, I wonder what ever happened to him, the flowers open on the apricot trees. In the summer,*

the trees are loaded with fruits, more fruits than most trees can bear, so when the wind blows at least half of the fruits fall off of your typical apricot tree. But not these! The man who cares for these trees would not part with their fruit for the regular price, which is why I must ask a bit more for them. Here, let me slice off just a little bit for you to taste. Now tell me that this is not the best apricot you have ever tasted. It is? What, you have never tasted an apricot before? I am surprised that you would admit this to me. You must be an honest woman. For you, I will accept a smaller profit margin.

And again. *So you are telling me that The King has oppressed you, and that you desire but cannot afford my fruits. Well, let me tell you. I believe you. Yes, I do. For I have seen all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed; they have no one to comfort them! Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness. God bless you and save you from the selfishness of The King. For you, I will sell this fruit for the same price that I paid for it. But please do not tell anyone else.* This last story I used only late on the last day that we planned to be in Tirzah. Tirzah, the jewel. And the city was a little cleaner and the buildings and gardens a little nicer than any I had seen in any other city outside of Jerusalem itself.

*

Then I heard that Gomer had finally been able to escape from Ramah. Well, after a manner of speaking. She was smuggled out of Ramah in a box. Some of The King's officials stopped the wagon that carried the box and insisted on looking inside the box. Gomer, I am sure, was ready to scratch their eyes out if they opened the box. But this is what we have money for. One of The King's shallow proverbs talked about how evil men loved a bribe. I wonder if he knew how many of these men worked for him. The box with Gomer in it made it to Shiloh. Gomer, released from her box, was now safe and hidden. This is where, my compatriots told me, I would be able to meet her.

I set out on horseback to go to Shiloh. Three of Jeroboam's men accompanied me. We did not take the main road, or any road. We did not go anywhere near Shechem. We barely visited the outskirts of Janoah and Arumah. We wound our way on little trails, through meadows, and down rocky slopes of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. They had nothing like the beauty of Lebanon, and the season for wildflowers was past. It had been over a year since I had gone out into the desert with Gomer, the Gomer I would soon see again. I remembered when we lay together on the damp soil of The King's garden, sharing mouthfuls of herbs that turned out to not be death lily. Maybe there is a God, after all! How much better—and more useful to my fellow Israelites—my life has been than if I had ended it at that time! Of course, for most everyone else, the weight of oppression and bad luck still hangs. But I could not help but rejoice in my own life as our horses found their way between little trees and shrubs.

We stopped near a big rock and a pool of water to drink and let the horses refresh themselves. My three companions felt pretty good too. We saw goatherds and shepherds and flocks, but few other humans.

"Word's getting around," said one of the men.

"About what?" I asked.

"About lots of things," said the second man. "First of all, about Gomer's escape. That was a major blow to The King's ego. And the legends are even better than the truth. Legend has it that she could make herself so small that she could slip between the bars of her dungeon cell and hide in the reeds of the marshes without bending any of them. I have it on good authority that The King is hopping mad. He has even forbidden the use of elah nuts in pastries in any of the kitchens of his palaces or whorehouses, so associated is Gomer with those elah pastries. So you can only guess that a lot of people, even those formerly enthusiastic supporters of The King, and who remain outwardly his allies, have parties in which their cooks make pastries that are caricatures of The King, complete with a little date to represent his pillar. And they use as many elah nuts as they can get their hands on. Don't expect to find any on the ground hereabouts; I'll bet the wild nuts have all been gathered up, and the orchards are sold out. She's a heroine, no doubt about it. Too bad that The King's guards are authorized to strike her head from her shoulders the moment any of them finds her, and that a substantial bounty has been offered for it. This has gone beyond the poisoning affair. This is a disaster for The King in terms of his image. Even those marriage alliances he has made aren't as useful as they once were."

"And there's more," said the first man. The third man just sat silently and smiled. "That doggerel you've been writing about The King—it's spreading around Israel. It has inspired a whole new art form. People have even started singing some of your poetry! And they have added a refrain: *The King is nothing but a hound dog,* they sing, over and over, between the stanzas of your poetry. Of course, it's all in secret, only when everybody knows everyone else at the party. Even the most demure wives dance around and swivel their hips as if they were Arabian whores. *The King is nothing but a hound dog!* They clap their hands above their heads. The men sway and clap. *The King is nothing but a hound dog!"* The man laughed until he almost fell off of the little unstable rock where he sat. For security, I did not know the names of any of the men.

"We've heard," said the third man, hiding down in a crevice, "not only about Gomer and the death lilies, but that you once asked her to find some for you. For *you.* Well, the time for that has passed, I suppose. But in case you ever wonder about poisons and such like. Forget about those stupid death lilies you can only find in the springtime. What you really need is this tree here." He pointed with his chin toward a large bush that was growing amidst the rocks. It had a thick mass of long dark green leaves. It was blooming. The flowers were bright pink, and the five petals were uneven yet still symmetrical, a beautiful pattern that I could imagine might be used on fine embroidered cloth or on the bases and caps of pillars in The King's magnificent—and as yet unbegun—Palace and Temple. "Every part of this little tree is filled with poison. The leaves. The stems. The roots. The flowers. All year long there is some part of this bush that can be used to kill a man. I will simply mention that this plant is available to the followers of General J in

case we ever need to use them. I'm not saying if we ever have. Just thought you'd like to know about it."

"Thanks," I said. I walked down to the largest of the shrubs and looked closely at it so I could remember it.

*

We approached Tappuah. The hills had a few vineyards on them, and there was even an elah orchard. They were close enough to Shiloh for it to be a profitable market. The first grapes were getting ripe, and wagons hauled them to the winepresses. This was always an excuse for celebration. Why not? Everything should be an excuse for a celebration in the few days that man and woman spend under the sun. My three companions and I gathered with the crowd around one of the winepresses as a young woman danced barefooted to squish the grapes. The new wine dribbled out into ravenous barrels. We paid a few coins for some of it. The hem of the young woman's dress was dripping with a purple that could otherwise be found only on expensive Phoenician fabric. She was strikingly beautiful, as were the women who danced in other winepresses. It occurred to me that pressing the grapes was something of a status symbol. The women who threshed the grain had probably been ground into the dust of poverty, and their chance at beauty had been destroyed. I saw some of them standing around selling flatbread.

A man came up to us. I did not recognize him but one of my companions did. He had a message for us and we went aside to hear it.

"Don't bother going to Shiloh," he said.

My heart fell. The only thing I could think at that moment was that Gomer had been caught. My companions asked for more information.

"There was another attempted poisoning at The King's palace," he said. He was not paying very much attention to us as he watched the dancing women. "But Gomer was not there. That proved that she could not have been guilty of the previous poisonings. Aware that her disappearance was an embarrassment to him, The King issued a proclamation, which was read in the major cities including Shiloh, that he offered amnesty to the woman Gomer who had been one of his chief culinary artisans. He invited her to return to the palace not only with full privileges but even with compensation for the inconvenience she had experienced."

"Inconvenience is no word for it," said one of my companions.

"It's a trick," I said. "If she turns herself in—or if someone turns her in and receives a bounty for her—The King will simply act as if he had said nothing of the sort, and throw her back in the dungeon. Even if he knows she is innocent. Or, if she goes back, The Prince might eliminate her. The palace is a madhouse. She had best stay out here with us."

"I would assume that she will turn herself in and stop having to fear for her life," said the messenger.

"That would be a really bad idea," another of my companions said. "She knows about us, and they will torture her to give them the information."

"Not necessarily," I said. "That woman is pretty shrewd. She can manipulate people. I should know. I admire that. She could give them information that was just barely incorrect, just enough to be useless to The King's men, and claim that her recollection was imperfect. But," I said, "I do not want her to return. I want her to be with me. We leave for Shiloh right now."

"We will be riding in darkness," said the third of my companions.

"No, our poet friend here is right," said the first of my companions. "We need to stop her. We cannot risk having her reveal any information inadvertently. Sorry, friend, we aren't doing it for you."

"I fear you may be too late," said the messenger.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Not really," he said. "But she was talking like she was going back to The King."

"But, didn't she want to rejoin me?" I asked.

"We didn't tell her about you," said the messenger. "Too risky. We can't have anyone know where you are."

"I'm going," I said. "You with me?"

The men rose right after I did and we got our horses.

But it was too late. When we got to Shiloh, we heard that The King's retinue—without The King, of course—had left at sunrise, taking Gomer with them.

"How could she do this?" I asked in disbelief. "How could she trust them like that?"

"She watched from the shadows during the announcement. She said that she thought she could trust the man who made the announcement, even if she didn't trust The King," said Jeroboam's chief man in Shiloh.

"Who was the man?" I asked.

"It was the Chief Steward."

Chapter 30

And that was when Jeroboam told me about the anniversary trip. The King was planning a vacation up in the mountains of Lebanon with his favorite wife, the beautiful black woman, one year after their wedding.

"This is perfect, utterly perfect," said Jeroboam. "Our horsemen can swoop down on them…"

"Not so fast," I said, my heart racing. "The King travels with a rather large retinue."

"…when they are on one of the mountain paths, and we will whisk away the Black Beauty before they know what has hit them. And whatever happens next, we will have inflicted an embarrassment upon The King greater than any military defeat he might have had, if there had ever been any wars."

"Can you be absolutely certain of the safety of the Black Queen?"

"Of course not, Gideon. There is always a risk that something might go wrong. There is no absolute certainty of anything in this world, except that, according to *a certain poet,* the wind goes round and round the earth and that what has been done is what will be done and that nothing will be remembered. But we will make every attempt to keep her safe. Relax, Gideon! We know those mountain paths ten times better than anybody in The King's household. We can pull this off, and leave them in the dust. Our interests precisely coincide! You and what's-her-name get reunited, and The King gets his ego degraded, and I get the admiration and support of all the northern provinces."

When I finally convinced myself that this was really going to happen, I turned away each evening from the feasts and the whores. I ate just enough food to satisfy my appetite, then girded up my loins and my feet and went running, to enhance the strength I had developed during my military training with Jeroboam's men. I ran along the little pathways in the fields and hills of the provinces. Each day I grew stronger. I wanted to meet Henna with an athletic embrace and to carry her away. I imagined that she might have gained a little weight from The King's fine fare, especially if she had resigned herself to a lifetime of The King's dullness. We could not take the risk of telling her what we were planning. We would have to make sure that she knew nothing, nothing at all, about our plans until, after being abducted, she saw me standing on a high mountain cliff and running down to greet her. I imagined and re-imagined this scene every day and every night.

We had conflicting and uncertain reports about when The King's retinue would begin its trip out of Jerusalem. But we had everything packed and ready, and all of my work was in the northern province of Dan so that when I received word that The King's celebratory party had left the gates of Jerusalem, I would be ready to intercept them on the road into Lebanon.

Then one day I received the message: *Get to Lebanon!* I had told my comrades how to find the exact spot where The King had camped previously and where he would presumably camp again. I carried a spear that I did not know how to use and a sword that I did. This time I

traveled alone and in haste. In each little town, the people looked at me in wonder, never asking who I was.

When I reached Lebanon, I found some of my comrades—all of whom I had traveled with previously—waiting for me. We were well ahead of The King's slow and stately retinue. We pitched our tents in a little ravine downhill from where the cedars had been. We did all of our cooking before nightfall so that The King's scouts would be unable to see us from any great distance. But the nights were clear and the moon was gibbous as I told them the stories, all of the stories, of Henna. I do not believe I exaggerated the stories. They were skeptical that the lines of my now famous poetry about the walled garden actually described a real place. Even the man from Jerusalem had never actually seen this walled garden. The wondrous plants, Henna's colorful robe, the scent of the Earth, the scent of cloves, the sandals flying over the gate, the winter moonlight, the dangerous liaisons that Gomer arranged, for which she risked her blessed life. And I told them the story that was not contained in any of the poetry that they had heard, about Gomer's sweet camaraderie, a love surpassing the carnal. My companions knew the rest of the story, about the large party of representatives from the Lemba tribe, about the marriage, about my downfall and my escape. But I did project backward upon my stories a confidence that I did not have when I experienced the events. I made it sound as if our meeting was something that had been foreordained for me and for Henna.

At last The King's party started its heavy and glittering progress up the mountain path. I sat on my horse and looked down where I had once beheld vast fields of poppies and saw The King's parade of glory. I had to admit that it was a pretty magnificent sight, though not as beautiful as the gleaming waters of the Great Sea. The soldiers in the parade were numerous, and there was no way that any of Jeroboam's little bands of raiders who had joined us could attack them, that is, until they were spread out on the mountain paths, and perhaps not even then. A brilliant red sunset over the sea filled the sky with the blood of my heart that beat only for Henna, always for Henna, and the blood of any person, even me, who must fall to the Earth during the upcoming Battle of Love. The crimson glory dripped from a thick canopy of clouds that covered the whole countryside.

The rain began the next morning. At first it inspired me. The weather had been dry, and when the rain dampened the dust and brown grass, a strong sweet scent arose and filled the whole countryside. We galloped on ahead to the place where The King had camped before, back when he first decided to cut down the giant cedars to use for building the Temple and, of course, his own palace.

I was astonished at what I saw. The comrades who were with me could not possibly know how great had been the transformation of the landscape. The laborers from Sidon had felled nearly every cedar tree. What was left was a pitted landscape of devastation, mostly barren, with mud that had hardened and was now turning back into mud. The great river that The King had wanted to name after himself was now a little trickle. But as the rain continued under the gray clouds, a brown froth started to churn in the river bed that had once carried a foam of whiteness. I climbed everywhere. Large scratchy weeds grew around the stumps and left stickers

in my clothing. I looked in vain for any of the flowers I had seen on our visit the previous year. I saw leaves of the lily that might have been the one Solomon wanted to name after himself, but I could not tell for sure.

Then my companions and I saw some of The King's scouts approaching from down the hill. We scampered away as quickly as possible to hide down the slope toward the river. Before we got very far, however, we encountered some armed men surrounding a tall Nubian woman, all of them on horses.

The men had their bows and arrows ready as I, without thinking, rode toward them.

"Tamar!" I called. "It's me! Elah!"

The men kept their arrows pointed at me.

One of my companions galloped ahead of me. "We come in peace! We are not part of the retinue of Solomon. We are followers of Jeroboam!"

The men lowered their bows but did not remove the arrows from the strings.

"Tamar! I am glad to see you! I thought you had died!"

The woman's haughty expression turned to wonder. "Nobody has called me Tamar in a long time. Not since…you are one of The King's men!"

"Not anymore," I said. "I left that sorry bunch behind, just like you."

"I am sorry but I do not remember you," said the woman as we approached her little band.

"Oh," I laughed, "I was not very memorable at the time. I served you at table. Do you remember? Never mind. I served you and the Leviathans. I gotta say, that day you tore off your clothes and ran downhill and—and jumped in the river!—you were utterly magnificent. That was the bravest thing I have ever seen anyone do!"

The woman smiled as I approached within normal speaking distance of her. She had spent a lot of time outdoors and her skin was covered with little wrinkles, but she was still magnificently beautiful and her hair curled like all the snakes of the underworld.

"I still do not remember you," she said.

"I am so glad that you did not die when you jumped in the river."

"I didn't jump in the river. I jumped down onto a little ledge, and then climbed down out of sight. And these men rescued me."

"We too are followers of General Jeroboam," said one of the men.

"Well!" I exclaimed. "Maybe there is a God in Heaven after all. You aren't going to believe what is happening right now. The King and his retinue are headed up the hill, right now!"

"Why?"

"He is on vacation. It's an anniversary trip."

"Why would he come here on vacation?"

"He must remember how beautiful it was the first time he was here, before all the trees were cut down on his orders. But now it is just a landscape of dust and, very soon, of mud." I looked into her face as pearls of rain dripped from her wild locks. "For such a smart man, The King can be really stupid sometimes."

"Which wife is he celebrating?" asked the woman, whose new name she had not divulged.

"Henna," I answered. "A stunningly beautiful black woman from south of Nubia. Even more beautiful—please forgive me—than you are."

"She must have joined the Regiments after I left. South of Nubia? Which tribe is she from?"

"The Lemba tribe."

"Ah, yes, I know them! So, what was your name?"

"My name is now Gideon."

"So, Gideon," said the woman. "The workers did not cut down quite all of the trees."

Chapter 31

Early the next morning I saw some men climbing on foot toward our hidden camp. Their feet left large holes in the mud behind them. Some of my compatriots met them, also on foot. Then the men climbed back down the hill, and our guards returned to our camp.

"We told the guards from The King's camp—they work for us—that we were here to rescue Henna. And that you were here to personally supervise the rescue. That'll bring her! They said they would send a messenger with specific instructions."

About an hour later I climbed slowly down to the rendezvous point. The stumps of the cedars that I climbed over were very large. The rain had briefly stopped falling, but the path was slippery with mud. I saw a man's figure walking up the trail from The King's camp, his face hidden under cloth, as was mine. He was nearly within easy conversational distance before he stopped and saw me. We were both absolutely still, not sure whether to trust one another.

"Is that you, little buddy?" the man said.

I stood up and started to run toward Eli, slipping once in the mud. I called his name. We grasped arms when we got close.

"I'm officially checking for any dangers that might be lurking hereabouts," Eli said. "I know it seems strange that the Chief Steward, rather than a guard, would be doing this, but they all trust me. Maybe they won't after today, though."

"My old friend," I whispered to him as we stood close to one another, hidden from The King's camp, "I know what a risk you are taking, and I am grateful for it. It means more than my life to me."

"Wish I had time to talk, Elah…"

"Gideon," I corrected him.

Eli thought for a moment, then said, "That's a good one. Wish I had time to talk, Gideon, but I have a message to deliver, as you know." He stopped and swallowed back his emotions. "Goodbye, buddy. I know you are going to have to do this, and I know it will be the end of you. But love is as strong as death, and many waters cannot quench it."

I grabbed his shoulders. "You mean it? You've found a way for me to rescue her?"

"I just carry the message. She has written the last love poem, and wants it added to the rest of them after, you know, after it doesn't matter anymore. This one I will not burn."

"You don't know it will be the last one," I said.

He just looked at me sadly, then handed me the note. It said simply, *The scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon. Our couch is green. The beams of our house are cedar, and the rafters are pine.* I handed it back to Eli since only he would be sure to keep it safely.

"She said you would know where to meet her."

There was only one place that this could be. It was the only bit of forest that had been left untouched on the mountainside. That is where she must plan to go.

"When?" I asked.

"She's leaving as soon as I get back and tell her that I found you. The King is still making his daily preparations, you know, and the waitstaff and guards are all preparing for breakfast. It's got to be now, buddy, or never."

"Thanks for everything, Eli. You are the best man I know."

We parted. It would not take him very long to get back to camp.

I looked over at the little patch of forest. How could Henna get to it without being seen? I kept looking at it. Then I noticed that it could be approached from a little gully off to the side, not readily visible to The King's camp. Eli would probably tell her about it. This must be the way she would go. I stepped quietly toward the gully, each step more rapid than the last. It was too muddy for horses. But I could lead her to the rocky ridge, where my companions waited. They had packed up camp and were ready for a mad dash back to the land of the Arameans, where Henna and I would hide.

Just before I entered the gully, I saw her. I saw Henna clambering impatiently toward the lower reaches of the gully. She was not in her colorful, and conspicuous, robe. She wore a gray frock that might have been made from a peasant's bed sheet. I stepped into the gully's upper reaches. Immediately my feet sank into the mud. And I could barely walk, step by gloppy step. At last I was at the little patch of trees. The trees were as large as any that had been felled, but, left naked on the mountainside, they looked spindly and pathetic.

Henna did not come. After a couple of moments, I knew I had to climb down toward the camp to look for her. I saw her. She had slipped in the mud and was stuck. I scrambled to her. We grasped one another and breathed in one another's faces. I tried to extricate her from the mud, but could not.

"I must get you over that hill. It is about two hundred paces away," I spoke into the wind.

"I cannot move, Elah. I have slipped far into the mud, which is very sticky."

"It is only two hundred paces."

"In thus mud, two hundred paces could take all day for me," she said.

"I will help you, Henna."

"You seem to be stuck also."

"Well, if the guards find us, and chase us, they will be stuck also, Henna." I felt Henna relax.

"We must not struggle, my love," she told me. "If we hurry too much, we will only immerse ourselves even more in this mud."

"Oh, Henna, you are sheer poetry," I said into her ear as I kissed it. "To think of words such as *immerse* at a time like this! This can happen only if poetry is what you breathe."

She slipped her body out of the shift and stood on it, as if it were the flimsiest of little boats on the great ocean of mud. The fabric kept her feet from slipping back into the mud. Spatters of rain hung from her nipples and each curl of her hair and mixed in the runnels of her tears. She had indeed gained a little weight, but I would soon take her out on horseback into the countryside and make her as trim and strong as myself.

I turned my back and she hopped up onto my shoulders. Now, now was the moment for which I had built my body. Of course we sank into the mud, but my muscles were taut and, despite the weight on my shoulders, I could lift one leg cleanly out of its hole and take a step, then lift the other leg and take another step. Henna's breath touched first one of my ears and then the other.

"Just over the top of that ridge, my comrades have horses waiting for us. There is one for you, Henna, and then we shall be free in the hills. And from there, where shall we go?" I kept speaking to help me ignore the burning pain that was even now filling my legs. "Where shall we go? Perhaps we shall at last see the Great Sea."

"I looked for it as our caravan climbed the hill, my love," she answered. "But the clouds hid it. I still have never seen it."

"The Phoenicians will take us down to Egypt," I said. "Then we shall row up the Nile as far as we can, into Nubia. And from there, perhaps back to your homeland."

"No, my Elah, not there." she sobbed. "Remember the alliance? My tribe will send me right back to Jerusalem. Or not. Maybe they won't. But we can't get there. How many steps have you taken? Six? Oh, seven. How many more?"

"Wait, I feel some solid ground down here. I think we may be getting out of this mud at last."

"I have left everything behind, my Elah. Every last bit of clothing, or of food, or of jewelry. Even your beautiful writings for me."

"I have copies of my writings in my pouch up with the horses and men. And we have fabric—not so fine and soft as that of The King—with which we can make you a new robe. Not a complex one—I felt another rock!—but similar to the one that you wore the blessed day that I met you. Twelve steps. I'm sure of it. We've come twelve steps. And you know what else I have up in that pouch? I have some of the finest soap and I have clove oil. Yes, we struggle now through the mud and the chaos but a time of beauty awaits us, Henna. Sixteen steps."

"How does that tree remain standing in all of this mud, Elah?"

"Its roots are deep. But perhaps not deep enough. I fear that all of this mud will pile up against it and cause even it to fall to the Earth. Twenty steps. The mud is shallower. Henna, we are going to make it! The mud is deeper in this gully than anywhere else! Why did you decide to meet me here?"

"It is the only place that is not just a pile of rocks and mud. Of course, it is also the first place that the guards will think to look for me. Oh, why did I not think of that? I fear that we acted from impulse, Elah."

"We did what we could, Henna. Thirty steps! The lion acts from impulse. The dog acts from impulse. Even the fox must sometimes act from impulse. We are beasts just as they are."

Right then we heard the sound behind us. I knew a guard, or two, or many, were pursuing us. But I could not look back.

"They will kill us, Henna."

"No, they won't, Elah. The King wants my body untouched by any injury."

"Unless he knows you will escape. He is the kind of man who would destroy what he cannot have."

"I do not think that he believes himself capable of failure, capable of losing me. He thinks the trees—well, not those; there aren't any left—and the rocks and the mud will obey him and hold onto us for his guards to pick up and bring back to him."

"Fifty steps, Henna! Or maybe forty. I don't know."

The sloshy steps were getting closer.

"Oh, Elah, my love. What if these are the last words I get to speak to you? Your love has made my life worthwhile."

"Henna, I feel I am about to faint. I could die now, happy to have touched you once more. But you want me to live. That is what you told me. The comforting mud invites me to fall into it and rest. But I must live."

I felt strong hands upon me. Suddenly Henna's weight fell from my shoulders and plunged into the mud. My clothes were heavy with mud. The strong hands wrestled with me and I could not resist them. They ripped my clothes from me. I had left my spear behind, and had lost my sword somewhere. What difference would it make? I continued to struggle. A hand grabbed my thigh and touched a muscle, causing it to throb in pain, just as the wrestling angel did to the patriarch Jacob as described in the first book of the Torah, a struggle for which Jacob was renamed Isra-el, he struggles with God. I knew that I would limp for the rest of my life, whether it was moments or years. I nearly fainted as the hands threw me over a shoulder. I tried to keep my eyes open as I was carried down the gully toward The King's camp. Through the stinging mud I could barely see Henna's form being carried on the shoulders of two guards.

The guards deposited the exhausted forms of both Henna and myself on a little bit of gravel road.

"We checked over the ridge," said one. "Nothing there."

So if I had reached the top of the ridge, my companions would not have been there to save me. The rescue of Henna was important to Jeroboam, and it was also important that I not fall into The King's hands to be tortured for information. But there at last comes a time when one, especially wise men like Jeroboam and his followers, have to admit defeat.

A foot kicked me. A hand slapped Henna.

"Stand up. Both of you!"

When at last I could open my eyes again, I saw The King's guards knotting a noose around Henna's neck. I felt them binding my own neck as well. Then they bound our hands behind our bodies. Henna and I stood tall. Powerful torrents of rain washed all the mud from our bodies. The guards faced us toward the tents and pushed us. No one saw us being led like tethered animals, unless they peeked through the folds of the tents.

The guards took us directly to The King's tent. Torch light glinted in every drop of water on our bodies as we stood at the entrance to the tent and the fabric closed behind us. It was a big tent and several wives and concubines stood off to the side, looking at us in amazement. They stared at us because they had never seen such a display of love, reckless love, defiant love.

The King sat on his mattress reading some papers. They were mine. Behind him was Elkanah the priest. One guard made me stand straight by jabbing me in the back with the handle of his sword. Another guard made Henna kneel beside me. We both faced The King.

For several minutes, The King did not look up from the papers, which he shuffled and appeared to read at random. Then he spoke to the priest. “Thank you for bringing this to me, Elkanah. This is most interesting.”

“Interesting is not the word for it, Your Majesty, O Exalted One,” said the priest. “It is heresy. In it, the writer says that men are no different from animals. They just die, and that is the end of it. He indicates that there is no point in trying to serve The King or to attend to the duties of the Torah. In addition, he is critical of you, O King, for he says there is injustice in the land. For instance, the part where…”

The King slapped down the papers and stood. “Elkanah. Are you such a priest that you have no recognition of what is beautiful and true? This piece…this piece…this is one of the finest expressions of wisdom I have ever seen. So, you think it is heretical. WELL, DEAL WITH IT.” The priest was so surprised that he looked like he lost the contents of his guts, as if he had been the one to be dragged in from the rain. The King continued. “The common people will never hear about it anyway. They will still come to the Temple and offer their money and everything will go along just fine for you and the other priests. This piece of writing is not dangerous. It is…sublime. All I have to add is a part here and there…Here, near the beginning, I can add, *I, Qoheleth, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.* Then I can add a part about how rich I am, about all my vineyards and gardens and parks, all my concubines and slaves, etc., etc. I can even put in a line about the strange human-like animals I brought up from south of Nubia. And then? I can add it to the corpus of my works.

“And once again,” The King continued, “a certain Elah has produced a masterpiece. And so, what should we do with him? He who was captured while carrying my wife on his back to…to where? To freedom? To sin? To a little ridge just as empty as all the others? I know what is customary to do to him. But is it wise? Ah, but first. What shall we do with Henna?” My guard loosened his grip just a little, allowing me to turn my head. The King stood and walked over to Henna and touched her shoulder. She did not move. He signaled the guard, who forced her to stand. She would not look at him. He drew his face close to her. “My beautiful wife…”

Without looking at The King, Henna spat in his face and said, “I will never love you. I will only love Elah.”

The king stood immobile for a few moments, then wiped his face. He looked back at the priest. “Elkanah, you say that she must be put to death for fleeing from my chamber to have a tryst with this man. But, look at her, will you! I told you to look at her. LOOK AT HER. She is beautiful. She is utterly desirable. She is God’s finest creation. And you want me to kill her?”

“It is not a matter of what we desire, Your Majesty…”

“I said, open those rheumy eyes of yours and look at her! Yes, her fate is up to us. The law allows me to kill her, but does not require me to do so.”

“Please forgive me, Your Majesty, but I am afraid that it does.”

"The law was written before there was a King. And I say she lives. When these proceedings are finished, please deliver her to the eunuchs and have her bathed and then rubbed with cinnamon—wait, that's not it; cloves, that's it—and made ready for me. Given the difficulty of her attitude, it might be good to have a guard stationed outside when she is brought to me. Of course, she can always insist on dying. I will respect her wishes, if she still feels that way a week or two hence. But I think she will choose life. As that splendid piece of writing that you so kindly delivered to me says, Eleazar, *He who has joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.* I wish I'd thought of that. Well, now I have. She will choose to be a living dog, I am sure." He walked up to Henna and said, "Arf, arf."

She spat in his face again. The guards grabbed their swords, ready to attack her, but The King said, "Leave her alone. I probably deserved that.

"Relax, Henna," continued The King, once again wiping his face. "In time you will make a fine wife. And when Hiram comes to visit, after the palace is complete, I will show him this finest specimen in my collection of wives and concubines. I know you women," The King said, drawing his lips close to Henna's ear. "In time," he said to her, "you will delight in the pleasures of being rich. And whatever I may not be, I *am* rich.

"And now, back to a certain party named Elah. Well, Elkanah. You probably think I should kill him."

That is when I shouted, "I will always love Henna. I am ready to die for her."

The King smiled into my face. I could smell the nutmeg on his breath. "Yes, she is a fetching thing, isn't she? I understand your feelings. I love her myself. I am glad to have my opinion supported by a competent authority. So, you wrote that love poem for Henna? How convenient. It served quite nicely at our wedding. Now let's consider your mode of death." He turned his back, his fingers joined behind, and he acted deep in thought. He suddenly turned around. "Boiling oil? How about that?"

"Your Majesty," Elkanah began.

"I know, I know, the law says stoning. Moses was not very creative, was he. Stoning for this, stoning for that. Let's consider the possibility of boiling him in oil, shall we? I won't make Henna watch. Of course, I need to find out if we have enough oil. Bring my Chief Steward!"

A couple of minutes later, a guard brought Eli in. Gomer was clinging to him. Both of them were in tears.

"Eli, do we have enough oil that we can boil this man in it?"

"No, Your Majesty, I mean, yes, Your Majesty, but not here." He could barely speak through his tears. Gomer hid her eyes from me.

"I would like to get this over with right now," said The King. "Wait, I know the very thing. Henna, you want him to live. Elkanah, you want him to die. Well, I'll cut him in half, and give half to each of you." The King looked around. Nobody laughed. Then The King continued. "Very well. I have another solution. I leave the choice to Elah whether he chooses this solution or death. I am sure that he, too, will choose to be a living dog. Both halves of him.

"But first, for you priests. I have to read something to you. From that manuscript that you wanted destroyed. Written by the man you want stoned." And The King read.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
A time to be born, a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
A time to kill…

The king thrust his chin into my face, then continued.

…and a time to heal.

The King smiled at me, then turned back to the priests.

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…

At this point, The King told the guard to make Henna and me turn to face one another. Our faces were only inches apart. He also ordered the small woman who baked fine bread to come. I heard a very slight rustle as Gomer let go of Eli. I could feel the warmth of Gomer's approach but I could not see her. I wished for the leaves of the poisonous tree from the pool in the hills. The King continued speaking.

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.

"Yes," continued The King. "You wrote that, Elah. Yes, Henna, he wrote that. And now, it is time to face up to its truth. Well, Elah, here is my offer. You can live, and keep writing for the rest of your long days. Writing poetry may not offer the intense pleasure that one receives from physical love, but you must admit it is a very satisfying activity. You love to write, admit it. And you can keep doing it. Moreover, you can see Henna. Every day. You can even touch her." He was now speaking directly into my face. "All we have to do is something that is very simple and almost painless. You'll hardly feel it, at least after the wine. What do you say. Say, Gomer.

That's your name? Gomer. What do you think he should do? And Henna, what do you wish Elah to do? Shall he choose to be a dead lion, or to be a living dog?"

Tears gathered in Henna's eyes and neither of the women who loved me spoke.

POSTSCRIPT

The fact that I am writing this in the first-person past tense makes it clear which choice I made. I was in prison for several weeks, during which time I wrote the above account. I am glad that I wrote it when I did, for now I cannot understand the intensity of emotion and the desperation that I felt for Henna. It is as if all strong passion has departed from my body. I seldom see Gomer. I saw her once and smiled. She began to cry and ran out of the room. She deserves the kind of love that my friend, who still calls me little buddy, can give her.

It's not that I have stopped loving Henna. I see Henna almost every day, and we still write poetry for one another. Oh, here is Henna now.

"I forget what beauty is like until I see you," I tell her, taking her hand and patting it.

"I have never been loved by anyone as I have been by you," she says.

"A queen's admiration gives meaning to my life," I tell her.

"A queen? Yes, I am, though it brings me little joy. My joy is still in your friendship," she says, grasping my hands tightly.

"Are you ready for your bath?" I ask. She nods, and leads me back to the marble tub. As always, I cleanse her body and oil her skin. I wanted to use clove oil once, but she angrily refused to let me. Every day, I drape her gowns back upon her and give her a hug. Today, however, she grabs my face and kisses me. Her face, which I had just dried with an exquisite towel, is wet like the sea.

"Why did you do that?" I say, pulling myself away. "And why are you crying? Is it for joy? Are you happy?"

"Yes," she says, but I am not sure that I believe her.

Author's Notes on *Among the Lilies*

King Solomon is supposed to have written the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. I decided to have these pieces written by a genius poet, who eventually becomes Solomon's Chief Scribe. I also had him write Psalm 104, the longest psalm. This novel contains extensive quotes from these works.

King Solomon, according to scripture, had three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines. A concubine is a sex partner with some rights but not the right of inheritance, as wives had. This is an unbelievable story, and it begs for humor. I wondered what it would be like to even keep track of that many sex partners. And that is how I thought of the idea of dividing them into regiments. Scripture is pretty clear that Solomon had a huge, expensive, and oppressive bureaucracy.

But maybe Solomon did have a lot of wives and concubines. Was it just because he was a sex addict? Probably not. He probably used marriages and sexual liaisons to forge political alliances. Solomon's Temple was the greatest building in Jerusalem, except for Solomon's Castle, as attested by scripture but not confirmed by archaeology (see *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts,* by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, Simon and Schuster, 2001). Solomon's building projects, in conjunction with King Hiram, probably did destroy the cedar forests of Lebanon, leaving it an eroding wilderness.

The two friends (Elah and Eli) ridiculed the Proverbs as being shallow and almost meaningless. Read them for yourself; they are. The whole Book of Proverbs could be summarized as "It's good to be good and it's bad to be bad."

Elah is the pistachio nut.

The priests really did dispute about trivial details of the law. This particularly irked Jesus, who denounced them for having little debates about tithing mint and dill and cumin while ignoring what was really important (Matthew 23: 23). I did not make up the part about the tefelin.

There were Nubian (Ethiopian) women in ancient Israel, but not necessarily sub-Saharan African women, so I pretended there was only one. The men of the Lemba tribe really have what is interpreted as Aaron's Y chromosome.

I modeled King Solomon after The King, that is, Elvis.

I modeled Prince Rehoboam, who really said that his little finger was stronger than his father's loins, after The Prince in Machiavelli.

I borrowed minor portions from classic works of literature:

Though we artists love praise: Henry VIII (another famous egotist) in *A Man for All Seasons*

Tit-willow, and boiling oil: from Gilbert and Sullivan, *The Mikado*

The hills are alive, and the girl and the goatherd: *The Sound of Music*

I had Elah and Gomer gather lots of the stories later incorporated into the Old Testament, especially the Books of Joshua and Judges, which really did have a hero named Barak (not Barack). Do not let your children read these books. What fundamentalists consider history was actually Jewish folklore. Some of it was so stupid (e.g., Joshua's long day) that even Elah didn't write it down.

When Solomon's sycophants said that even one of his garments was more beautiful than all of the wildflowers, this was the exact opposite of what Jesus said in Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, referring to a single wildflower, one of the "lilies of the field," said, *Even Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed as one of these*.

Solomon really did make an insufferably long coronation speech.

There really is a Solomon's seal flower and a kinglet bird.

All of the flowers that Elah and Gomer saw in the desert are real flowers from Israel, and I got them from online sources. The death lily (*Zigadenus venenosus*) and wild onion (*Allium textile*) really grow in the Badlands of South Dakota, where my students had to tell the difference between them one year on a camping trip in which we put just the onions into a stew.

The Island of copper is Cyprus.

But the main theme is sacrificial love, which Elah, Gomer, and Henna each made in their own ways.

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.