

Weaving the Word

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For Xander, at last, and for Heather Forth

Worthy exemplars

In your patience possess ye your souls.

Luke 21:19

Part I: Breaking Ground

Chapter 1: Out of the Garden

Imma realized that she was dying the spring that Miryam was eight and I was almost seven.

At first she greeted the nausea, cramping, and creeping fatigue as a gift, the herald of a third pregnancy to crown the nearly twenty years of faith and sacrifice God had required of my parents before He sent them my sister and, a year and a half later, me. Within weeks, however, she and Abba realized that whatever was happening to her body had nothing to do with life. So, like the prudent housewife she was, she put her family's affairs in order as best she could and set herself to endure.

Imma was older than the other mothers. Nearly forty, she was old even for a *safta*, a grandmother, but you'd never have guessed it to look at her. Her skin hadn't yet turned to leather and she was one of the only adults in Nazareth who still had all her teeth. She moved with the ease and grace of a woman half her age as she did the things immas do: ground flour, baked bread, scrubbed clothes and hung them out to dry, swept and patched and sewed, swatted our bottoms and caressed our cheeks. She sang as she

worked, and she smelled of sun and rain. I thought her the most beautiful and perfect woman in the world.

So as her light grayed over and began to fade, I was confused and angry. “Why doesn’t she stop it?” I asked Miryam one day after Imma went into the house to rest for the third time that morning.

“Why doesn’t who stop what? Look, Salome, I think that’s the beginning of a fruit on the pomegranate tree.”

We had been waiting for this for *weeks*. The first fruit belongs to God. As soon as it comes you have to hurry and tie a reed around it so you won’t forget which one is His. Last year I’d been too little, but maybe this year...

“Can I be the one to put on the reed?” I begged. “Can I? Please?”

I held my breath while she deliberated.

“I will be so gentle,” I promised. “Like a butterfly—I won’t bruise it at all, I promise!”

“Do you have a reed?” she asked.

I could feel happiness cracking over my head and pulsing down through my toes. “I can get one!” I shouted, and turned and raced out of our courtyard toward the marshy place by the spring.

“Wait for me!” she called.

I paid no attention. Some dogs had seen me running and were jumping and barking, and I had to watch where I was going so that I didn’t bump into them or cut my bare feet on the stony path.

She caught up with me where the path got smoother and colder in the shady place near the spring. “Be careful of the mud,” she fussed. “Imma will be cross if she has to wash your clothes again so soon after Passover.”

“You’re not my mother,” I said automatically, then skidded to a halt, my heart in my throat.

Someone was already there. A shepherd crouched by the spring, half hidden among the reeds. His head came up and my heart slipped back to where it belonged. It was only our cousin Cleopas.

Cleo was a gentle, merry boy of about sixteen, the second son of our father's twin brother Jacob. Sadly, Uncle Jacob had been born with a demon who sucked all the strength from his body. Despite his hunched and withered frame, however, my uncle had had a quick wit and a generous soul, and the whole village had mourned his passing the previous summer.

"Cleo!" I said, my voice louder than I meant it to be. I tried to think of a bit of news worthy of such an explosive greeting. "We've come for a reed!"

"Shalom," he said. His voice was as mild and welcoming as always, but he neither stood nor turned toward us. I looked again and saw streaks of leaf green and sulfur—the colors of stress, pain, and uncertainty—shimmering around the edges of his muddy sheepskin cloak.

I hesitated, glancing toward Miryam for help.

"Oh, Cleo, how awful," she said. "Will it be all right?"

His cloak bobbed once and bleated. "I don't know." With a sigh, Cleo pulled a bloody bundle of wool from under his arm. "I was hoping you hadn't seen it," he said, darting a worried look toward me.

For the second time in as many minutes, my heart jerked to a stop and then shuddered back to life. Only then did my brain realize what my body already had—that the object he held in his big, clumsy hands was alive. It was a lamb—only a few hours old, by the look of it—its right rear leg so badly mauled that it looked like a joint of meat tacked to the rest of the body by a red and streaming thread.

I gulped down the hot spit that filled the back of my throat and sat down hard in the mud.

The lamb shuddered. Its eyes were glazing over.

"The leg can't be saved, can it?" Miryam asked.

Cleo shook his head. His face, usually so open and responsive under his dark curls, was as cold and stiff as marble.

“Maybe we should cut it off,” she suggested.

Cleo and I gaped at her.

“To make the wound easier to bind and treat,” she explained.

Cleo reached for the knife he carried thrust in his girdle. “Yes. Of course. I should have thought of that myself.”

“Wait,” she said, putting out a hand to stop him.

I was shocked. It was one thing for Miryam to boss me, but another entirely for her to boss an older boy, even if he *was* our relative. But if Cleo was offended, he didn’t show it.

“If only I knew where to find some marigolds for a poultice,” Miryam said.

I waited to see what would happen next. But neither Miryam nor Cleo moved. I replayed her words, trying to work out what we were waiting for, when I realized I knew the answer.

“Old Huldah has marigolds!” I said.

Miryam and Cleo exchanged a look I couldn’t decipher.

“I don’t know,” Cleo said. “It’s an awfully important job. Are you sure you can do it all by yourself?”

Me? Go all by myself?

“Yes, of course I can. I’m no baby,” I said. My eyes slid to Miryam’s face, but she seemed to accept what I had said as truth. “I can go right now! I’ll be back before you know it.” I shifted back on forth on my feet for a little, in case Miryam changed her mind.

She just said, “Thank you, Salome. That would be a big help. Don’t forget to ask permission before you take them.”

Off I went, wishing she hadn’t added that part about asking permission. Imma was always reminding us that Huldah was one of the Lord’s *‘anawim*, His favored ones

whose poverty had turned their hearts entirely toward Him and His goodness. She had to remind us of these things because most of the *'anawim* we brought dinner or a bit of weaving to were old or sick or poor, with rheumy eyes and skin hanging from their bones and cottages that smelled of animals and rot. But the lamb needed me, so even though Imma wasn't there to remind me to see Huldah with my heart instead of my eyes, I reminded myself and knocked on her door all by myself. Fortunately she was awake and dressed and said that the marigolds were wild and outside her gate and we could help ourselves whenever we wanted them. She showed me how to make a basket of my skirt, which I already knew but it was nice of her to help, and before you knew it I was half-running and half-walking back to the spring, determined not to lose a single petal of the golden flowers heaped in my skirt.

By the time I arrived with my offering, the lamb didn't look as scary. Its mangled leg had disappeared and the wound left in its place looked like a wound was supposed to look, without any sickening trace of shattered bone or pulsing vessels or anything else that should remain decently covered.

Miryam took the marigolds and squashed them together into a poultice, which she bound tightly to the lamb with some reeds she or Cleo had laid ready. Fortunately, the lamb didn't seem to mind, or even notice. When she was done, she rinsed her hands in the spring and settled back on her heels.

The three of us stared at the lamb. It lay on the path, eyes closed, chest barely moving. "He doesn't look very good, does he?" Miryam said, her forehead puckering the way Abba's did when he came home from his selling trips and had to make all his lists match up.

"We've done what we can," Cleo said. "The rest is up to the Lord."

Miryam considered what he had said, and nodded. Her gaze moved to me, and stopped. "Oh, Salome," she said, exasperated. "Just look at your dress!"

Cleo burst out laughing. "Oh, Miryam," he teased. "Just look at yours!"

She looked down and what she saw made her mouth into a little pink O of dismay.

“Don’t worry,” he said, still laughing. “It’s mostly mud, and a lot of it will brush away once you dry off.” He bounded to his feet, all knees and angles like one of his gawky lambs, tossing his head to clear his long hair out of his eyes. It fell away from the side of his face, uncovering the place where his right ear should have been, but wasn’t. Something squirmed in my stomach. The little fold of flesh looked like a baby mouse, pink and wriggly. Nothing had happened to his ear. He’d just come that way.

He saw me noticing but said nothing, just shook his head again so that his hair fell back into place. He’d always worn his hair long, and it occurred to me for the first time that he might have done it to cover his shame.

“Look,” he said, sounding like his usually friendly, open self. “I should get back to the herd. Why don’t you two come with me? I’ve got some bread and cheese and dates that we can eat while we wait for the mud to dry and I’m sure your mother could use the rest.”

Miryam stiffened.

“Not from you,” he said hastily. “Just from worrying about getting a meal.” He bent down and took the lamb in his arms.

“I guess that would be all right,” Miryam said. She stood up, smoothing her skirts like one of the big girls. “Did you get a reed, Salome?”

I had forgotten, but I didn’t admit it. “There’s one right here,” I said, scooping up one of the reeds they had cut for the lamb.

This time Cleo asked the question I had been waiting for. “What do you need a reed for?”

Miryam nodded that I should be the one to answer. “It’s my turn to tie up the first fruit on the pomegranate tree,” I admitted as modestly as I could.

“You must be very clever to be trusted with such an important responsibility,” he said.

“I can dance, too,” I informed him. “See?” I executed a beautiful twirl that unfortunately caught him across the shins.

He staggered and nearly dropped the lamb.

“Tell you what, Salome. Why don’t you wait to show me until I can accompany you on my pipe.”

“You have a pipe?” I said, with a happy little skip.

“I’m a shepherd,” he said, grinning down at us. “It’s my *job* to have a pipe.”

So we sat in the sun on a hill overlooking the city and ate and sang and danced. The sun beat down on us, filling us up with warmth and light. After a long time, I got tired and climbed into Miryam’s lap. It wasn’t as big or soft as Imma’s, but it would do. She told me that if I sat still, she’d weave a crown of citron flowers into my hair. Her fingers were strong, like Imma’s, the sun was warm on my bare feet, and bees hummed in the branches above our heads. I half-drowsed, my body relaxed and open. A warm haze of peace settled on me, soaking deeper and deeper until it pulsed in my bones, until the bees and the waxy white flowers and the fragrance and the thin music of Cleo’s pipe and the warmth and scent of the sheep and the pull of my sister’s hands and the beat of my heart joined together into a living net of light and life.

The power of that light thrummed through my body. Almost I could hear the song that bound us together, almost I could inhabit the minds and desires that I knew now were joined with mine, when Miryam ruined everything.

“I wish I knew if the lamb would live or not,” she said.

I didn’t want to hear her. I wanted to stay suspended in that living net of life.

But she kept talking. “I don’t want to hope for it unless it might come true.”

Cautiously, I opened an eye. The shimmer was still there. Relieved, I opened my other eye and took a good hard look at the lamb. His mother had found him, and the two were curled together on a flat stone a little apart from the others. He nestled against his mother’s belly the way I had been nestled against Miryam, the line of his back white fire against the deep blue of the sky.

I closed my eyes and burrowed into Miryam’s lap. “He will,” I told her.

“You don’t know that,” Miryam said, her words vibrating against my back.

“Yes I do,” I said, and yawned. “The sulfur’s gone orange and the green has gotten lighter.”

“What are you talking about?” Miryam asked.

“You know,” I said, squirming as I tried to find my way back to that happy living place. “The air.”

But Miryam wouldn't let me. She picked me up and turned me around so she could see my face. “What air?” she wanted to know.

The parts of my skin she had kept warm felt cold. “The color in the air,” I said again, irritated by her obtuseness. “You know. Like the gray thing growing in Imma's belly I asked you about before.”

The music stopped.

“What gray thing?” she asked.

I had never noticed how much my sister looked like Imma. She had my father's thick dark hair, but the wide mouth, heart-shaped face, and big blue eyes were my mother's. Usually Miryam's skin was smoother, rounder, and pinker than Imma's, but today it seemed to have shrunk a little, and for the first time I saw the bone structure underneath that would give her face the same elegant line as Mother's.

“The gray cloud. Right here.” I pointed in front of her belly. “The one I asked you about before, with the pomegranates. About why she didn't make it go away.”

“Imma's in a cloud?” she asked. She sounded bewildered.

“Not all of her,” I said, trying to make her feel better. “A lot of her is still green.”

“Green?”

“And some gold,” I said. “*You* know.”

She shook her head, the same little line of concern Imma sometimes had etched between her eyebrows. “No, I don't. You see colors in the air around her?”

“Not colors, really,” I said. It confused me, the way Miryam looked old then young then old again. I looked around for help, but Cleo just shrugged.

“*You* know. The—I don't know. The shimmer of light that tells you if people are mad or telling the truth or...” My words trailed away. I could see now that she really didn't understand this thing that was so obvious I had never imagined it needed telling.

I was embarrassed for her, as I had been for Old Huldah when she'd admitted to Imma that she could no longer taste her food. "That's all right," I said, just the way Imma had. "You have other gifts." I patted her hand consolingly.

"Salome," she said, and stopped, like she didn't know what to say.

Miryam *always* knew what to say.

"It's not just me," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Salome, no one sees air color."

It was as if she had told me that other people don't really eat.

"Of course they do," I said. I turned to Cleo. "Tell her, Cleo."

But he was shaking his head. "I don't think they do," he said. "I don't, anyway, and I've never heard anyone describe anything like that before."

There was a cold hollow place in my middle. "You probably just aren't paying attention," I said. "You have to kind of concentrate." But then I looked at the familiar blue and green light that shone around my sister, and I knew.

"I'm telling you the truth," she insisted.

"I know," I whispered. "Your colors show me."

We stared at each other.

"Am I *magic*?" I breathed. I'd always known I was special. But finding out how was not as fun as I thought it would be. The cold place in my middle began to tremble.

"Don't be silly," Miryam said. "You're no sorcerer."

A sorcerer! The Torah said that sorcerers didn't deserve to live. I burst into tears. "Imma!" I cried. "I want my Imma!"

"*Hush*, Salome," Miryam said.

But I didn't want to hush. I was scared and cold and alone. Cleo said something and touched my arm, but I shrugged him off and ran as fast as I could for home, not

caring about the sharp rocks, not caring about the barking dogs, just wanting to get back to the place where everything was safe and whole.

I burst through the gate of our courtyard, wailing like a rooster, Miryam in hot pursuit.

“What’s all this?” came the voice I had been waiting for.

“*Imma,*” I yelled, and threw myself at her.

She put up a hand to protect her stomach and shrank away—a tiny instinctive motion that she tried not to show. I froze.

“Imma?” I said uncertainly.

There was a thin film of perspiration on her skin. Her cheeks were sunken, with bright fever spots of pink, and her eyes were glazed over, like there was a film between her and me. The hand that wasn’t protecting the thing that was hurting her reached up and patted vaguely at her disordered hair. She looked sick and old.

“Salome,” she croaked, and licked her dry lips. Then, making an obvious effort, she shook the frightening vagueness from her and became my mother again. “What’s happened?” she asked. “Are you girls all right?”

“We’re fine,” Miryam said too loudly. “We’re both absolutely fine, aren’t we, Salome?” She looked at me, her eyes too old for her child’s face.

I nodded. “Just fine,” I tried to say, but my breath ran out before it finished making the words.

Imma looked back and forth between us, sensing something was wrong. She took a step, swayed, thought better of it, and, using her thin hands to help maintain her balance, carefully propped herself against the stones of the oven. “Come sit here with me, my lambs,” she said. “I think it’s time we had a talk.”

I only remember splinters of the next weeks. My mind, cut loose from its moorings, bobbed and sputtered like a guttering flame. There was the excitement of telling our friends that Miryam and I were going to go live with our glamorous Aunt Elisheva and Uncle Zakharya at the temple in Jerusalem. There was the private worry about who would watch out for Imma while my father made his annual journey trading

the wool and linen that were our family business. And the stark horror when I realized no one would need to.

The smell of my mother's failing body. The dulling of her eyes and the cooling of her hands and feet. The thinning of her skin until her juices seeped through. The harsh sound of her breathing as she labored to tell us that we were her first fruits. The even harsher silence that followed.

Worst of all was the hollow echo of the round stone door rocking into its place between us at her tomb. I had known she was going to die. But it was one thing to know it in my mind, and another to feel it echo through my bones and my body.

A week later, I felt it echo again when my father closed the door of our house and the three of us set our faces for Jerusalem.

We weren't alone. It seemed as if all the world was going up to Herod's temple for the Offering of the First Fruits. There were wagons and donkeys and crates of doves for sacrifice and children running and shrieking and women gossiping. But none of it could penetrate the strange cushion of grief that held the three of us apart from the ordinary world. We didn't speak. The skin holding us together was too fragile to bear the vibration of sound. Abba's mouth moved noiselessly and his eyes dribbled tears, like an old man at prayer. The road seemed to pitch and plunge beneath my bewildered feet until Miryam thrust her arm in mine. I clung to her, oddly comforted by the quiver that occasionally shuddered through her narrow frame. Bearing each other up, my sister and I staggered toward Jerusalem.

Chapter 2: Up to Jerusalem

By mid-morning of the first day, the back of Miryam's hand was a swollen, angry red. But that wasn't enough to keep her from pinching it over and over again, while the skin shredded and the blood bloomed bright as the trumpets of pomegranate flowers, because she knew, she just *knew*, that this had to be a nightmare, and it was time and past to wake herself up.

The whole world seemed to be on its way to Jerusalem, and every slap of a sandal, every creak of a cart, every clop of a hoof beat the same words: *Imma's dead, Imma's dead, Imma's dead*. There was nowhere to go to escape. They pounded through every cell and crevice of her being with the relentless rhythm of her heart: *Imma's dead, Imma's dead*.

She wanted to run away. She would give anything to be able to pluck that horror away—*Imma's dead, Imma's dead*—but when Gomer, the little neighbor boy, careened into her she was so furious to be shaken out of the shell of her grief that it was all she could do not to seize him and shake his round, healthy little body until his teeth fell out for not knowing, for not understanding that everything had changed, everything was different. Imma was gone, and her disappearance had turned Abba into a vague and terrifyingly frail old man.

He was stumping along beside her, leaning heavily on the almond wood staff with the quartered bronze circle that he used to show him the way home. He told them that every time he left for one of his trips. Showed them how to squint along it to find the sun and the stars that would light his way back to them. Miryam wanted to ask him if his compass could show him the way to her and Salome in their new home in Jerusalem, which was ridiculous, because of course it could. The real question was whether he still wanted it to. Abba's eyes were so vacant and unfocused above his hollow cheeks furred with silver that he might have been anywhere and she might have been anyone. He didn't try to hide or even wipe away the tears sliding along the deep vertical furrows that seemed to have been carved in his face overnight.

"Papa?"

No answer.

“Abba?” she tried again.

He turned his head slowly, his eyes taking a moment to focus. “Miryam.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, child, just fine.”

With a catch in her throat, she realized that she was to him what Gomer had been to her—an unwelcome interruption. But there was no one else to take care of him now so she struggled on. “I noticed you haven’t eaten...”

“I’m not hungry,” he said so abruptly that it stung. He must have seen it in her face, because he made an obvious effort. “Where’s Salome?”

“With Nuala and Gomer.”

He gave her a ghost of a smile. “Of course. Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she lied. “I’m fine.”

“Good,” he said, his eyes slipping back to wherever he had been. “Why don’t you run along and find some of your friends?”

The rebuff struck her like a blow. A wave of heat rose from her chest, and she had to concentrate to blink back shameful tears. Worse still was that she actually began to look for the comfort of her mother’s figure before she remembered.

She pulled her shawl over her hair so it worked like a headcovering and glanced around, looking for a private place. But everywhere she looked, eyes and mouths flashed in the sun like knives. Except for her father’s, whose were closed and remote. So she stayed where she was, stumping forward like he did, closing herself off from everything but the movement of her feet and legs and the suck and release of her breath.

She was in charge of the things her body did. She was in charge of her breathing. Breathing let you decide how much of the outside world you were ready to bring inside. And when you were done, it was happy to go, no matter what you had done with it, or

how you had changed it. It was like a song, an endless and beautiful duet you sang with the world. In and out, in and out.

That was what had told her that her mother really would die. When the song of her breath began to break. Miryam remembered sitting by Imma's pallet, her pounding heart counting out the beats of silence between her mother's gasps back into life. Once the effort had been enough to rouse Imma from wherever she had been. She opened her eyes, and for a moment the haze of pain cleared and the light of love shone bright and strong "My beautiful girl," she said, and held out a trembling hand.

Miryam took the hand, caressing the brittle web of bones with a gentle thumb, trying to memorize the shape of the gifts it had lavished upon her. But it was cold, so she tucked it back under the covers before slipping her arm beneath her mother's shoulders. As gently as she could, she raised her mother far enough to manage a sip of water. There was no warmth in the trembling body, so after she'd resettled her among the bedclothes, Miryam dipped a cloth into one of the jars of hot water her father kept bringing into the sick room, wrung it out, and gently began to clean her mother's face and neck.

Imma's eyes never moved from Miryam's face. "Do you know," Imma began, and coughed. Miryam started to offer her more water, but Imma shook her head. "There's something I want to say." She paused to pull more air into her lungs and when she blew it out again, it had become her voice, and the voice was saying, "how happy you've made us?"

The words her mother formed from the breath of her life, shining with truth and polished by love, embedded themselves in the marrow of Miryam's being and began to stir. When she did not object, they shot forth like threads of light, crossing and recrossing, shaping themselves to the contours of her spirit until they had formed a garment of love and protection and peace, a final endowment from the mother who had brought her into a world made lovely by her mother's own presence. It was too much. Shaken by in turns by joy, grief, bitterness, and gratitude, Miryam lay her head down next to her dying mother and sobbed and sobbed.

When her sobs had subsided to hiccups, Miryam blew her nose on the cloth she still clutched in one hand, then quickly burrowed back into the bedclothes, hoping they

would block the stench of her mother's illness. They didn't. But underneath the sickness, she caught whiffs of the sun and rain Imma always carried with her. A moment later, Imma's fingers felt their way into her hair.

"When I am gone," Imma said, and breathed. "Things will be sad and different. But you will still be you." She breathed. "And after a while you will see how to make room for this new life." She breathed. "And how to be happy again."

Miryam shook her head.

"Yes," Imma insisted, and Miryam could hear the smile in her voice. "Yes, you will. And then something else hard will come." She breathed. "But you will make room for that, too, and when you have you will be bigger."

"I don't want to get bigger," Miryam told the sheets. "It hurts to get bigger."

Her mother's hand paused, then started stroking again. "Yes, it does, my lamb. But only for a while." She breathed. "Only until you find the way to greet that hard thing and bring it inside you. Then it always turns to joy."

Miryam had not wanted to hear that. She had not wanted to hear that she needed to see and know and be with the horror of her mother's illness, that she had to greet it instead of flee from it.

She had felt Imma's cold fingers tugging gently at her chin, and had reluctantly lifted her head to meet her mother's eyes. "It was you who taught me that," Imma said. "All those years waiting for you, so that when you came, the pain could be turned to joy too big for me to hold." Imma had started crying, Imma, who never cried. "My cup runneth over."

Now Miryam's cup was running over too, and on a public road. *Imma, make it stop*, she pleaded in the deepest part of herself.

Why should I do that?

Miryam gasped and stopped walking. She looked around, but there was nothing. Nothing. Just the dusty road, the noisy children, the creak of the wagons and the soft murmur of women's voices. Had she imagined it?

"Miryam." It was a male voice this time. And a real one.

She whirled around. Her cousin Cleo stood there, tall and handsome and frosted with dust. There'd been a death in his family, too. His brother Yusuf's wife, Hafzbah, had died in childbirth, leaving four small boys and an infant daughter for Yusuf to care for. So after Passover, Cleo was going on to Bethlehem to help Yusuf move his family back to Nazareth. Then Cleo was going to marry Hafzbah's sister Naomi so that the two of them could live with Yusuf and take care of the children.

Miryam knew that she should express her condolences to Cleo for his brother's loss, and say something nice about Cleo's willingness to assume the burdens of both a wife and Yusuf's little children even though he was only sixteen. Let alone thank him again for his help with the lamb. But she had no space for anyone else right now. "I'm fine," she said. "Just fine," turned her back, and went on her way.

Imma? She fumbled. *Imma?*

Nothing.

Miryam found she was angry. *Do you want me to be sad?* she demanded. *What kind of a mother are you, anyway, to leave me all alone?*

You're not alone. Look around. God made this all for you, and now is the only time you have to live this day. Breathe it all in. Find its truth and hold on tight, and the rest will fall away.

That was all.

Dazed, Miryam looked around. She was on the road to Jerusalem. Doves cooed from the yellow bushes of mustard that swayed, taller than a man, to either side. The stones at her feet glittered like gold in the afternoon sun, stones put there to hold her up. A gust of breeze cooled the sweat that prickled on the back of her neck and under her arms and sweetened the air with the soft scent of marjoram and broom. The peace of the place pressed against her.

She fought it, grasping at the memory of her mother on her pallet. Instantly, the dull ache of grief thrummed as deeply as it ever had. Reassured that her pain was real and she come back to it when she needed to, Miryam softened her shoulders, breathed in the beauty of the day, and walked on.

“Miryam! *Miryam!*”

Miryam came back from wherever she had been with a jerk. Salome was calling for her. She scanned the crowd and found the little girl perched on a rock at the side of the road, her perfect little face smudged and crumpled, her hands, hair, whole body twisting in a desperate coil of fear.

“I’m here!” Miryam called, waving her arms.

Salome’s blank, tear-smearred face found her and came alive. She launched herself off the rock, temporarily obscured by the swarms of people before she emerged, shoving this way and that until she could finally throw herself into Miryam’s waiting arms. “I didn’t know where you *were*,” she sobbed. “I thought maybe you were *gone*.”

“Now where would I go?” Miryam asked, hugging her sister’s rigid, hot little body tightly against her own until it began to soften.

“I was so *scared*,” Salome wept. “You weren’t where you used to be.”

Miryam smoothed Salome’s windblown locks back from the little girl’s streaming face. “I would never leave you,” she said. “Not for anything. We’re a pair, you and I.”

Salome gave a tremendous sniff. “That’s right,” she said. “We’re a pair, and we’ll never forget it.”

“Not ever,” Miryam promised.

She took Salome’s hand, and together they walked on.

“Tell me about the temple,” Salome said sleepily as they trudged on toward Jerusalem in the gathering dusk of the fifth day. They should have been there hours ago, maybe even yesterday, but first a wagon had lost its wheel, then a road had been washed out, then Gomer had jumped off a rock that was too high and broken his collarbone. They were nearly there, everyone said so, but Miryam was hungry, her feet hurt, and her eyes were red and stinging from the wind and the dirt and maybe from the tears that kept surprising her. It took everything she had not to growl at Salome to go pester someone else, but she couldn’t help remembering how much it had hurt her

when Abba had done that to her, nor that Salome must be even more tired and sore than she was.

She sighed and tried to think. "I was only three," she said.

"And I was just learning to walk," Salome said, nestling so close that Miryam nearly tripped over her. "That's why we went. Because I was finally big enough so our whole family could go and thank the Lord for being four people instead ..." She broke off to give an enormous yawn, looking like a sleepy kitten with her pointy teeth and pink tongue. "instead of three."

"I really don't remember much," Miryam said. "I remember the way the donkey's shoulders dipped up and down in front of the saddle, like he had the hiccups. And I remember how excited I was when I could finally get down, and how many people there were, and that I was supposed to keep hold of Imma's hand." Her vision blurred, and this time she did trip over Salome, who had started leaning against her as they walked.

Miryam swallowed her irritation, trying to lose herself in that long ago time. "We had to wash ourselves before we went inside the temple gates, and the water was very cold, but it felt good. And I remember how free I felt once we were inside—it was huge, and I could run and use my legs and I felt like I might fly. But then a man with a gray beard dressed all in white stopped me, and said that the steps I was jumping off of were just for the priests."

Miryam stopped, as a thought struck her. "You know how I said that I couldn't remember anything about Elisheva or Zakharya? I think maybe that man was Zakharya."

Salome had taken advantage of the pause to prop herself against her sister. Her thumb was in her mouth while her other hand played with the loose hair at the nape of her neck, a habit she'd had from the time she was a tiny baby. "Wath he mean to you?" she asked around her thumb.

Miryam strained to remember. "I remember that I was embarrassed, but I don't think it was because of anything he said or the way he said it. I think it was mostly that I had been doing something wrong in God's house without even knowing it. I went

running to Imma and clung to her skirts, begging for her to pick me up, but then when she did, it wasn't her at all. I had gotten confused and gone to Elisheva instead."

"How thcary," Salome said, her lips barely moving around her thumb.

Miryam shrugged. "It was, but only for a minute." She was beginning to worry about what she would do with Salome, who had given up all pretense of walking and was leaning against her like a dead weight. Where was Abba? She twisted her head this way and that, straining for sight or sound of her father, but the crowd kept surging on, and it was becoming difficult to pick out faces in the blue fog of dusk.

A donkey jostled against them, and Miryam staggered and nearly fell. They could hardly stand here in the middle of the road waiting to be run down by the passing crowd. If only there were room for Salome in one of the wagons, but they were all stuffed to overflowing with babies, the elderly, and first fruit offerings for the temple.

She bit her lip. What to do? She couldn't carry Salome all the way to Jerusalem by herself.

A wagon creaked by them on the right, the wheel passing within inches of Salome's drooping head.

The first thing to do was to get them out of the road. Miryam peered around, and saw what looked like a flat ledge just ahead, where the road curved. Using the last of her strength, she half-dragged, half-carried Salome to the spot.

She lowered her sister as gently as she could to the stones, then stood catching her breath while her quivering muscles recovered. After a few moments, she raised her head—and had to catch her breath all over again.

They had done it. They were here. Jerusalem lay spread at their feet, the magnificent gold and marble expanse of Herod's temple glowing in the last golden rays of the day like...like what? Like nothing she had ever seen before. Like a dazzling jewel or maybe even a star from heaven, hovering lightly above the dark, heavy shapes of the ordinary world.

Without taking her eyes from the beautiful sight, Miryam shook her sister. "Wake up, Salome!" she urged. "It's the temple! We're here!"

Salome just grunted and turned away.

“Wake up!” Miryam said, almost frantic with mingled fatigue, frustration, worry, and awe. “You’ll miss it! It’ll be gone in a minute!”

“*There you are!*” It was Abba at last. The sight and sound and smell of him cut loose the flood of feelings that Miryam had braided tighter and tighter inside herself. She burst into tears and threw herself into his arms, as though she was no bigger than Salome.

“Where have you been?” she wept. “I looked and looked, and then Salome was so tired, and I didn’t know where to go, or what to do! *Where were you?*”

“I was here all the time,” Abba said, rubbing her back. “Shh, shh. Don’t cry, *talitha*, little lamb. I’ve been here the whole time, and I’ve been looking for you, too.”

Miryam went still. His words might seem true to him now, but they were not the whole truth, and to pretend they were would bend something between them. She wished desperately for Imma, and remembered: *This is the only time you have to live this day. Breathe it in. Find its truth and hold on tight, and the rest will fall away.*

So that is what she did. She took a big shuddering breath in, found the truth, and held on to it. “No, you weren’t,” she whispered against Abba’s shoulder. “Not in the beginning.”

It was Abba’s turn to go still, and he stayed that way for a long time. Then his big hand was cupping the back of her head, and she knew it would be all right. “I’m sorry if I didn’t start looking soon enough,” he said. “But I’m here now, and I won’t leave again until we’re both sure you’re all right. It will be a *berit* between us.”

Miryam felt the puff of air his mouth made when he said *berit*—his covenant, his promise, the pledge of protection from a lord to his servants. It tugged on her, a little motion that helped her notice the thought that came next. *That is the shape an abba’s mouth makes when he wants to say he loves you.*

“And this,” he said, fumbling with the hand that wasn’t holding her at something he’d tucked in his girdle, “will be our sign.”

“Because every *berit* has a sign,” she said. “So we won’t forget what it is for.”

Abba had found whatever it was he wanted. It spilled over his broad, dark hands, a curve of light laughing up at her in the dusk.

Her mother's silk girdle, woven new last winter, dyed brilliant yellow with the pomegranates from their very own trees.

"With this sign, I covenant that we are bound together with a knot that cannot be broken," Abba said. He looped it around her waist but it was so big that he had to wrap it around her three more times before he knotted it. He kissed her forehead, then drew back. She heard a sharp intake of breath. "Look, *Talitha!*"

She pushed back from his shoulder and followed his pointing finger to the heart of the shadow that was the temple, to the great altar at its heart, with the four fires of sacrifice marking the Festival of the First Fruits. As she watched, however, another fire leapt to life, and then another. She could not make sense of what her eyes were telling her—the fires seemed to be suspended in mid-air—and then more of them flickered into life and she could see. Four great golden menorahs as tall as twenty men stretched their arms skyward from the courtyard of the temple, four great trees of light. More lights blinked on below them, resolving themselves into lines of oil lamps set in every window and on every ledge until each line of the temple was flickering and alive.

"On this day, the Lord engraved His law with fire on the stone tables of Sinai," Abba said.

As Miryam gazed at the flickering lines of flame yearning up from the stones of the temple, a deep, fierce thrumming blazed to life inside her, answering a call she hadn't anticipated and didn't understand.

It frightened her. She hadn't known, hadn't suspected that she was capable of such power. Feeling battered and confused, she shrank back, wanting room to compose herself, to be sure of her footing.

The thrumming ceased, instantly and completely. Miryam hadn't meant to kill it. She'd just wanted to tame it a little. It had come on her so unexpectedly. She hadn't been prepared. She had been afraid that it would overwhelm her. She groped after whatever it was that the temple's blazing fires had ignited. But it was gone.

Her father sighed, his breath rippling across Miryam's damp hair. "Not far now," he said, and stooped to set her down.

Miryam's legs wobbled beneath her like grass in a pool. She would have fallen if her father's strong arm hadn't thrust out to save her. "Steady, *talitha*," he said, amused.

Pain shrieked from the soles of her feet up through her bones. Miryam realized, not really believing it, that she couldn't walk another step. She wanted to. She wanted to get close to that light and that fire, but her body wouldn't let her. She stumbled, tripped, and would have crashed into the sleeping huddle that was Salome if her legs hadn't given out and plopped her down onto a very sharp stone. The shame and surprise of her predicament sent tears sliding down her cheeks. "I can't," she said, trying to gulp back her tears and failing. "My legs won't work. I want them to, but they just won't."

"Oh, my little lamb," he said, and she felt his arms sweeping her up so that he was once more cradling her against him as if she were a little girl like Salome. "Shh, shh, it's all right. I should have taken better care of you. Just give me a minute to think of something."

They two of them stared down at Salome asleep in the dirt, then turned to search the crowd that pressed along the road behind them. "See anyone we know?" Abba asked.

Miryam strained her eyes, but the dusk smudged everything beyond recognition.

"I know this is a lot to ask," Abba said after a while. "But could you stay here with Salome while I find someone to help?"

She tried not to notice the darkness, the way it blurred and distorted the ordinary world into something strange and threatening. "Of course," she said, closing her mouth tightly when the words were done so nothing else could escape.

"Good girl," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I know," she said, with a ghost of a smile, as she patted the girdle knotted at her middle. "You gave me your *berit*."

"So I did," he said. He shrugged out of his cloak, which he had tied loosely behind him. "But for a transaction of this seriousness, I think it's probably best to leave a

second witness of my goodwill.” He helped her make a little nest in the curve of the ledge on the side facing the temple, settled Salome in beside her, patted her clumsily on the head, then turned and walked into the darkness.

There was no reason to worry. They were almost there, and Abba had made a *berit* with her. He would be back. She wasn’t forgotten. But the night was very black, and its smells and sounds were strange, so Miryam tightened her grip on Salome and fixed her eyes on the brightness of the temple.

That was one of the things people always talked about. The glittering light of the thousands of oil lamps the priests used to illuminate the temple on festal nights, making it a lamp to the feet of tired pilgrims. More lights twinkled on as she watched, more lamps hung from every coping and corner, every arcade and column, until the temple itself seemed to be dancing and swaying in the embrace of the living light.

Then the temple ripped itself from its foundations and surged towards her. Miryam rubbed at her eyes with her free hand. Had she fallen asleep? Was she dreaming? She pinched the back of her hand and it throbbed reassuringly. No, she was awake. What was happening?

Then she realized. The temple wasn’t moving. It was the light. Twin streams of light gathered in the forecourt of the temple, then surged out of the gates and began to flow towards her.

There was another light, bigger and closer, a torch popping and spitting in the night air stumping toward her with her father’s gait. She heard the whistle he used to greet them. She saw light running along the quartered bronze circle atop his heavy staff, the glitter of his teeth and eyes, and a dim shape trotting behind him that resolved into her cousin Cleo.

“You get the little one,” Abba said, as he picked up Miryam a little awkwardly because of the torch and his big heavy staff, “and I’ll get the big one. *Oof, talitha*, I think you must have been eating rocks for dinner!”

Miryam giggled, feeling a surge of excitement and energy as she let go of Salome and nestled into her father’s arms.

“Do you have Salome all right?” Abba asked.

Miryam rested her cheek on her father's shoulder so that she could watch Cleo try to pick up Salome behind them.

"*Salome is fine,*" Cleo grunted as he gathered up her dead weight. "*Salome is sleeping.*" He jiggled her around, getting a better hold on her. "*He giveth his beloved sleep,*" Cleo quoted from the book of Psalms. "Why am *I* not the Lord's beloved?"

"Because you aren't nearly as sweet as my daughters," Abba said, dropping a kiss on to Miryam's ear. He seemed as excited as she was. "Come on," he said. "Elisheva will be wondering what has happened to us."

They jounced down the trail, Abba slipping once or twice so that Miryam knew that he was tired, too. Then they reached the bottom of the Kidron Valley and began the last steep climb toward the city gates and the temple Mount. Abba breathed heavily, his shoulder damp and heaving beneath her cheek. She lifted her head to see how Cleo and Salome were doing, but the light of her father's torch didn't extend far enough for her to see anything except, sometimes, the front edge of Cleo's sandal as he hurried to keep up with them.

Then it was level again, and they were through the city gate. Miryam had expected Jerusalem to be sleeping so long after dark, but it was more awake than she was. The clink of crockery and the murmur of conversations echoed through the stone walls rising on either side, and she caught tantalizing whiffs of roasting meat and the exotic scent of unfamiliar perfumes and spices.

She glanced again toward Cleo and Salome, and now she could see the gleam of his teeth and eyes and the protective curve of his arms. Then his face emerged from the darkness, and she could make out the glint of Salome's golden hair, and one of her arms dangling loose. As her father came to a stop, Miryam twisted around to find the source of the growing light.

Girls in white with small oil lamps stood lighting the way to the temple. Miryam's chest seemed to both constrict and expand. She'd never seen anything so real yet otherworldly, so... holy.

A middle-aged couple, also dressed in priestly white, bustled toward them between the rows of light, making loud sounds of welcome. The woman opened her

arms and ran the last few steps. "Welcome! Welcome, my dears!" she said in a throaty, musical voice.

To Miryam's mingled relief and disappointment, Elisheva didn't look anything like Imma. People had always commented on her mother's sculptured features and fair coloring, saying she looked more Greek than Galilean. Elisheva, on the other hand, looked exactly like the well-bred Judean matron that she was. Her body was more rounded and graceful than her sister's, adorned with jewels at neck and wrists; her dark hair, arranged in a complicated style, was noticeably thicker and glossier; and when she pressed her downy cheek to Miryam's, she smelled of jasmine instead of rain. But she had the same steadiness, the same inner stillness that Miryam had loved in her mother.

A gray-haired priest reached for Abba's torch. "I'll take that," he said.

"Thank you, Zakharya," Abba said with a grunt of relief. He mopped his brow, then grinned at his brother-in-law. "Still as fit as ever, I see."

Miryam blinked. In point of fact, Uncle Zakharya was an untidy roly-poly of a man who bore no resemblance at all to the imposing temple guardian she had remembered for Salome.

Her uncle gave a shout of laughter then gestured at Abba's rumpled and travel-stained clothing. "And you, dear boy—as ever, a model of taste and sophistication."

Abba hitched Miryam to a more comfortable position and nodded toward the waiting line of young women. "Did you worry we would lose our way?"

"It was Zakharya's idea," Elisheva said, smoothing back a strand of Miryam's hair. "He was worried you might see this big pile of stone and be scared right all the way back to Nazareth!"

"I see now that I needn't have worried. Your girls look to be made of sterner stuff than that," Zakharya said. He leaned forward and dropped a kiss on Miryam's forehead, his cheek bristly. "They are lovely, Eliakim. The spitting image of your Hannah."

The noise had woken Salome, who sat up in Cleo's arms, looking dazed and frightened. "Miryam?" she whimpered.

"It's all right," Miryam soothed. "We're home."

Chapter 3: Waking Up

The sun was in my eyes.

I twisted my head, but the heat and brightness were there. I grumbled a little and kicked my feet in case Miryam was close by. But if she was, she was out of reach and not talking so after a while I sat up and opened my eyes.

I was in the biggest, most beautiful room I'd ever seen. A wooden floor as smooth as polished amber stretched out in front of me the length of a city street, puddled with gold where the sun poured over a hip-tall balustrade. It seemed to overlook a courtyard; I caught the scent of incense and roasting meat, and heard the murmur of hundreds--no, maybe thousands of voices. Above it the brightest, bluest, most alive sky I had ever seen hovered like a happy hug. Excitement thrilled up my spine. We had made it. We had gotten to the temple.

I looked around for Miryam, but except for me and my pallet, the room held only a line of upright looms, some big wooden chests, and two elaborately carved chairs. I wasn't worried. I was in the temple, after all. Nothing bad could happen to you in the *temple*. They were probably letting me sleep in after our hard journey. Someone would come for me eventually.

I shifted on my pallet as my body warned me that that person better come soon. I got up on my knees, looking around for some clue that might tell me where people went to relieve themselves. There was a curtained-off alcove that I thought might be used for that purpose, but when I pulled the curtain aside, it turned out to be a mikveh--a ritual bath--next to an odd stone bench built over a stone box. But no chamber pot.

The sound of the water trickling into the mikveh from a pipe (because only living water could wash you clean enough for the temple) made my predicament even more dire. I chewed my nails, wondering if I were brave enough to follow the covered wooden staircase down to the main level. One peek over the balustrade was enough to see that the courtyard held men, beasts, altars, and lavers, but no women or children. I twisted my legs beneath me, deciding I could wait a little longer after all.

A beam of sun struck some metal fitting on one of the looms and was reflected straight into my eyes. I blinked, rubbed at the dazzled spot, and, hoping to distract myself from other matters, limped forward to examine the line of looms more carefully. My muscles shrieked in protest and the soles of my feet were tender and swollen, but I ignored them. There was something not quite right about those looms, and I wanted to see what it was.

They were empty. That was the first thing. Each loom was strung with warp threads ending in the familiar bump of a small clay weight, hanging sparse and straight as an old woman's hair. But they were all, every one, forlorn of the weft threads that made the web. I felt my brow pucker like Abba's. Why on earth would anyone go to the trouble of preparing all those looms and then just leave them barren?

And that wasn't the only thing wrong with them. They were decorated. Which wasn't a bad thing, of course, especially in the temple where you'd expect things to be fancy. But why on earth was each loom festooned with bowers of branches and flowers instead of prettied up with a carving or a bit of gilding that had the good sense to stay where it was put instead of shedding twigs and leaves and who know what all into warp threads that always tangled no matter how careful you were? I gave a disapproving sniff. I would have thought anyone clever enough to be a temple maiden would have been able to figure that out for herself.

The agreeable glow of my indignation powered me as far as the staircase leading to the courtyard. When I saw that it, too, was garlanded, I remembered. Today was Shavuot, the day we celebrate God's gift of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Mt. Sinai had been so happy to be visited by the Lord that it had sprung into joyful bloom. So on Shavuot, we helped our houses do the same. Oh. Maybe the plants and things weren't drooping over the looms all the time. Maybe the temple maidens had put them there just for today. And maybe that's why all the looms were empty--because they didn't want the decorations to mar the special things they were weaving.

It was as if the whole room nodded *yes, you're right, Salome*. Then it did it again, and I realized why: someone with a very heavy tread had started up the stairs to the courtyard. There was a landing half way up where the stairs switched direction, so I couldn't see who it was. But I could hear them, because whoever it was was singing a

psalm in a quavery old person voice. *"My help is from the Lord,"* (puff! thump!) *"maker of heaven and earth,"* (puff! thump!)

My heart clutched at itself, and, suddenly shy, I spun around to hide my face from view.

"He does not let your foot stumble," (puff! thump!)

I listened as hard as I could, hoping to catch a hint of Miryam's familiar footsteps pattering beside the thuds of the Leviathan. But there was nothing--just one last thump outside the door behind me and a big whoosh of relief.

I stuck out my chin and waited as bravely as I could for whatever would happen next.

"Turn around, why don't you, so a body can get a good look at you?"

I clutched at the soft folds of my dress for courage, and obeyed the command.

A broad-hipped old woman with wild gray hair stood appraising me, arms akimbo. Could this crone possibly be Aunt Elisheva, my mother's adored older sister? I inspected her warily. Imma had told us that she was sending us to Elisheva because she knew her sister would teach us the two most important things: how to love the Lord, and how to work. There was no question that this woman knew how to work. You could tell that by her turned-up sleeves, the towel she wore over one shoulder, and her massive hands, which looked hard and gnarled as a knots of olive wood.

"So you're up at last, are ye? And none too soon," she said. She looked me over with the eyes of a housewife judging a joint of mutton. I looked at the floor, wishing she would stop.

Her soft leather slippers did nothing to hide the fact that her feet were as lumpy and mannish as her hands. She had tucked her tunic into her girdle, the easier to get around, and her ankles were the thick peasant kind.

My eyes stung. I had gotten it all wrong. I had thought that coming to the temple would make me special. Would make me glamorous. But I saw now that it wouldn't. My aunt was not a noblewoman who would introduce me to a world of beauty and

refinement. She was just a rough old housekeeper. The other girls must laugh at her. And now they would laugh at me. Why on earth had Imma sent us here?

I already knew the answer to that question. Imma sent us here to learn to love and serve the Lord. And if Imma thought Elisheva was the best person to teach us that, I could at least give her a chance. I scrubbed at my eyes, took a deep breath, and lifted my head to meet her gaze.

I blinked, startled. Underneath their bristling brows, her eyes were the guileless blue of an infant, open and trusting to the point of transparency. Some children had eyes like that, but most grown-ups made theirs private. Even Imma and Abba did most of the time. I was so surprised that, for the first time in months, I felt my own edges softening and opening to receive the shimmers of her light, a pure, shiny white that I associated with newborns and those, like old Huldah's grandson, Ishmael, whose minds never grew up.

The discomfort that I had been trying to overlook became urgent. "I'm glad to meet you, Aunt Elisheva, but I need you to show me where the latrines are right now."

She was very rude. She threw back her head and laughed, showing the places where her teeth used to be. But she noticed I was hopping, so she made herself stop and nodded toward the curtained-off alcove I'd already found. "In there. The stone box. I'll bring you some water." I went, feeling foolish I hadn't figured it out for myself. A moment later, a jug of water was shoved under the curtain. "Thank you," I said as I washed myself, but I don't think she heard me. She had started talking again.

"Elisheva! She called me Elisheva, and that I'm not, Lord. No, that I'm not, and You know it better than me."

If she wasn't my aunt, then who was she?

I stood up, wondering how I was supposed to get the chamber pot out from the box and where I was supposed to empty it. I peered into the hole and leapt back, surprised. It went on and on. I hadn't been able to hear properly before, what with the woman bustling about and talking. I put my ear right next to the hole and poured out the rest of the water from the jug. A faint coolness stroked my cheek while I waited for the splash, which was very faint when it came at last. They'd made a river to take away

the dirt. That made things nice for whoever was in charge of cleaning the bathrooms. Which probably would be me.

I left the alcove, letting the heavy curtain swishing shut behind me. The old woman had rolled up my pallet and was tucking it into one of the chests. “All nice and tidy!” she said, clapping her big, knobby hands together as if she were still a little girl. She tilted her head up to heaven. “That’s the way, isn’t it Lord? A place for everything and everything in its place.”

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“Offering the first fruits, of course,” she said, with a jerk of her chin toward the courtyard beyond. Up went her eyes to heaven again. “And where else would they be on the feast of Shavuot, Lord? That’s what I’m wanting to know.”

I reassured myself that just because someone liked to include God in the conversation didn’t necessarily mean they were crazy.

“If you aren’t my aunt Elisheva, then who are you?” I asked.

She ducked her head, the light around her coloring like a blush, and peered up at me, swinging her big hands together and apart, her feet braced apart on the ground like it was the deck of a ship and she might lose her balance. “Me? I’m old Anna, the laundress,” she said. “No one fancy, not like your auntie and uncle, but I do what I can.” She raised up on her toes and then down again, arms still swinging back and forth, and I realized how hard she was working to be brave. My heart smote me—that’s what Imma used to say when we saw something that made us want to cry—and I tried to think of a way to help her know she didn’t need to worry about what I thought of her.

“My Imma used to say that laundry was the hardest job,” I offered. “She said the worst part was that no one ever said thank you but just pointed out the spots she’d missed. I bet the Lord is really thankful that you do it for Him.”

Her eyes brimmed and she ducked her head again, scrubbing at it with a rag she pulled from her sleeve. “Well, Lord, I think we’ll keep her,” she told Him, then turned to me. “You sound like your auntie, and that’s a fact,” she said. “Now, you’re the little one. Salome, is it?”

I nodded.

“Is your sister like you?”

I shook my head. “She’s much nicer and smarter than I am.”

Anna threw back her head and wheezed some more. “Well, little Miss Peace,” she said after she was done, “you slept right through the offerings. We’ll need to hurry if you don’t want to miss the meal, too.” Without further ado, she swung her head around, leading with the oversized lip that told me that she was a weaver, and made for the door.

The meal! How could I have forgotten about the Shavuot feast? Mouth watering, I scampered after her.

Shavuot was the one time you were *supposed* to eat as much as you wanted. It celebrates the way God cares for our bodies as well as our spirits. In Deuteronomy, God tells the Children of Israel that he has led them to “a land of wheat, and barley, and vines; of fig trees and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey.” So we eat all of those things, as well as the meat of the sacrifices.

Two priests, one very old and the other very young, stood guard outside the chamber door. At least, they were supposed to be standing, but the old one was slouched on a stool with his eyes shut and his mouth open. The younger one--who had hair the color of fire, something I had never seen before--scowled when he saw me noticing. He didn’t need to. Everyone knows people get tired when they’re old. At home I would have stuck my tongue out at him. But I was a temple maiden now, so I pretended not to notice.

“That’s the Court of the Priests down there,” Anna was explaining. “No women allowed, because of the blood. Just maidens like you and crones like me!” She cackled.

The boy tried to pretend he wasn’t listening, but his cheeks gave him away. They flamed as bright as his hair.

If I hadn’t been a temple maiden, I might have laughed at him. But since I was, I was much too dignified to even think of it. Imma had told us that boys were sometimes like that about women bleeding, which I thought was just plain stupid. Life is in the

blood. Grown up women bleed every month (unless they're pregnant) because they're the ones in charge of bringing life into the world. This is such a special job that when they are bleeding women don't have to do anything else. They don't have to do chores, or cook, or anything at all. It's their special rest to thank them for all the ways they take care of everyone else all month long, and when it's over, they have a wonderful relaxing bath with all their friends before they go back to work.

Some people said the reason women who might be bleeding couldn't go to the temple because the blood made them dirty. Imma and Abba said we must be kind to those people, because they didn't know any better. They explained that just like mothers bring us into this world, priesthood prepares us to go on to the next. The temple is the place we learn to sacrifice our earthly, mortal lives for the eternal lives we'll have in heaven. Women don't belong there not because they're bad, but because their job is different. Inviting women who bleed into the temple would be as silly as asking a priest to help you have your baby. It would only confuse things.

I would have been happy to explain all this to the boy with the fiery hair, but Anna was half-way down the stairs, and I had to scamper to catch up. She paused at the bottom to catch her breath. It wasn't until I was almost next to her that I could see what lay on the other side of the arched doorway.

What I saw took my breath away. Literally. I was staring across the most enormous stone courtyard you can imagine. Six Nazareths could have fit on those acres of polished stone bounded by colonnades and galleries. Maybe even twenty. It was beautiful. It was vast. But it was also dead as the stone it was cut from, despite the armies of people swarming every which way.

Anna waved her hand at it as carelessly as if it were just another chamber pot. "Court of the Women," she said. She nodded her chin at the space behind me. "The Sanctuary, the altar, and the Court of Israel are through there. There's no point trying to show it to you, since whatever course of priests is on duty this week will be on the lookout for anyone they can shoo away." She sniffed.

I wasn't really listening. The Court of the Women sucked up every drop of my attention. I was, I realized, looking at more people than I had seen in the whole rest of my life put together. People carrying wood or sacrifices, and washing their hands and

feet; people consulting with priests, and putting their offerings in boxes shaped like trumpets. People begging, and crying, and teaching. Directly in front of us, a whole group of Levite men and boys were disbanding from what looked like a musical performance.

They disappeared behind the trunk of what I first mistook for a huge golden tree. But it wasn't a tree--at least not the kind with leaves and fruit. It was a menorah, the tree of light. Tall as a village's worth of men standing on top of each other, it danced like a living flame in front of my dazzled eyes. I blinked and turned away, and but there was another golden tree--and then another, and another, shining like echoes of the first, reflecting light and color into the deep shadows of the stone colonnades that bounded the immense courtyard.

The whirl of all those people, all those feelings and desires and actions, all the noise and smell and movement, tossed me around until I couldn't remember where I ended and they began. I pressed my hands over my ears and looked down. I saw my feet--my ordinary, dirty, stubby little feet. I watched them with fierce concentration, loving them for staying the way they had always been.

"Well, come on!" Anna urged.

I risked a glance up. She was standing a few feet in front of me, close to a gate leading out of the busy courtyard. Relieved, I ran after her--only to exit into another courtyard, four or five times as large as the first, with a huge fortress at the far end. Throngs of people were here, too, most of them clumped in the shade of porticoes that lined the endless flat stone of the courtyard--more, probably, than in the first, but since there was more air and space, they didn't press on you in the same way. And Anna had her big old hands on my shoulders, weighing me down, keeping me where I belonged. I gave up trying to take it all inside and waited for the next thing to happen.

"Now, Lord, I'm counting on you," Anna murmured as she scanned the crowd. "My old eyes are not what they used to be and that's the— Oh, good. There they are. Praise to Thee."

She hobbled toward the shade of one of the great stone porticoes, which were divided, I saw now, into little alcoves, each one with a shop (shuttered in honor of the holiday) and stone benches. Most were now occupied by family groups, the old people

taking their ease on the benches while mothers bustled about setting out food on rush mats and cousins chased each other around. But I couldn't find my father, or anyone who looked like she might be Imma's big sister.

A roly-poly old priest was calling something that sounded like my name but couldn't be. I looked away but could not help looking back again, captivated by the exuberant orange light of welcome and hospitality that sparked out about him. "Salome!" he called again, and I realized he *was* talking to me. "Salome! Miryam and I have saved you a place!"

It was only then that I noticed the happy, dark-haired little girl clutching at his hand, waving and jumping around just as exuberantly as he was. It was Miryam, looking the way she used to before Imma got sick, and I was so happy to see her the way she used to be that I broke away from Anna and raced toward her. "Your colors are back!" I rejoiced, and threw my arms around her.

I felt her stiffen in my arms, and drew back, appalled by what I had betrayed. And in front of a *priest*.

But the man who I guessed was my Uncle Zakharya didn't seem to notice anything. "Come sit here, by me," he said, patting the bench next to him.

I was ready to be intimidated by my uncle, who had a reputation for scholarship and saintliness. But it was impossible to be scared of a soft-bellied man with splayed feet and tufts of hair protruding from all sorts of unexpected places, especially when he was beaming at me with such obvious good will. I started toward him without a second thought.

"Wait, Zakharya, the birds have been there," came a musical voice. "Let me fetch something to protect your pretty dress, Salome." A tall, dark-haired woman who smelled like a garden smiled down at me. "Do you know how happy we are that you have come to stay with us?"

From the affectionate way my mother had always referred to the older sister who had raised her, I'd always imagined Aunt Elisheva to be a short, plump, cozy sort of woman. But the beautiful, assured woman at my side was none of those things. From the earrings that dangled nearly to her shoulders to the tip of her jeweled sandals, she

was the embodiment of refinement. I had met plenty of strong women before. But they wore their strength on the inside, like Imma. The power of Elisheva's womanliness shone out around her, dazzling and unafraid.

Miryam nudged me. "Close your mouth, Salome," she breathed into my ear. "You look like a fish." I did, but I couldn't look away from my aunt, even though I knew I was staring.

I was glad when Elisheva left in search of the cloth and I could retreat back into my own self in the comparative quiet and coolness of the portico. Images and ideas pressed so insistently upon me so that my head ached. I closed my eyes and willed everything to just back off for a minute until I got my bearings.

But the shouts and laughs of all those people kept right on going. After a while I felt around until I found Miryam's hand, and then I could be brave enough to open my eyes.

Miryam was talking to Anna. I looked around for my father, but he was nowhere to be seen. He wasn't in our alcove, nor could I pick him out from the surge of people thronging about us. Uncle Zakharya was taking up a good part of the nearest stone bench, but I decided there was enough room for me to climb up next to him for a better vantage point. So, being careful to give him as wide a berth as possible, I did.

He noticed me anyway.

"What do you think of Herod's temple?" he asked, making affable conversation as I climbed past him.

Herod's temple? It wasn't Herod's temple. It was the Lord's. I looked down at him, my lips ready to laugh when he realized his mistake. But he didn't seem to know he'd made one. He just waited to hear what I had to say, his jowly old face as calm and patient as a baby's.

I didn't know what to do. It wasn't my place to correct him, but still. That was an awfully big mistake for anyone to make, let alone a priest. I slid my eyes around, hoping someone else had been listening and would correct him for me, but Miryam was busy introducing Anna to our cousin Cleopas, who had materialized from somewhere. I'd have to do it myself.

I beckoned to Uncle Zakharya, who leaned closer, his eyes wide open to show me how ready he was to hear what I was going to tell him. I cupped my hands to his ear and whispered, "You said *Herod's* temple."

His eyebrows shot up, looking so much like a pair of startled caterpillars I had to concentrate on not brushing them away. "So I did," he admitted.

I squirmed a little. "But it's the House of the *Lord*."

He tried to bite back his smile, and then pretended he was coughing instead of laughing, but he didn't fool me. My face got very hot. I started to slide down off the bench, but he held me back with one of his big soft arms.

"I'm not laughing at you," he said.

I scowled at him.

"I give you my word," he promised. "I'm laughing at myself. You are exactly, entirely, completely correct." Chuckling, he fumbled at his girdle, pulled out a small bundle of cloth, opened it, and extracted two sweetmeats. He handed one to me and took the other for himself before returning the bundle to its hiding place. When he saw I had accepted his gift and was not in any danger of running off, he settled himself more comfortably into the corner of the bench, folded his hands on top of his large stomach, and took a gulp of air. "They call it Herod's temple not because it is a temple to King Herod, but because he's the one who is building this particular version of it, the way they call the first temple Solomon's temple. No one meant that the temple was to Solomon, just that King Solomon was the one who built it."

"Oh," I said.

Now it was his turn to slide his eyes around to see if anyone was watching. He motioned me closer, and when I was, cupped a hand between his mouth and my ear. "Just between me and you, I suspect the real reason that Herod is doing this is not to honor God, but to honor himself," he whispered, his breath tickling my ear. "But that's an opinion that I usually keep to myself."

He sat back to see how I was taking all this.

I was taking it fine. I nodded and tried to wink knowingly, but both eyes kept closing and the only way I could do it was to prop my arm up and casually hold one eye open while I closed the other.

“Salome,” he said, “I can truthfully say that although your Aunt Elisheva and I were delighted to hear that you and Miryam were coming to stay with us, we had no idea how much fun it was going to be.”

“Us either,” I confided. “You’re not nearly as scary you looked at first.”

My uncle snorted. “Haven’t been in years,” he said, his fingers wandering toward his girdle. “Your Aunt Elisheva has broken my spirit.”

I heard the swish of silk and smelled flowers. “Don’t you listen to a word he says,” Elisheva tut-tutted.

Well. No woman from Nazareth—not even Imma—would ever have spoken to her husband like that in public. But Elisheva just smoothed the cloth she had brought onto the stone bench with hands as practiced as any housewife’s, lifted me as if I weighed no more than a feather, and plopped me down on top of it. She patted me on the knee. “Make sure you get your fair share of the dinner,” she warned me. “Zakharya can be grabby.”



Miryam’s stomach growled loudly as men carrying platters of roasted meat from the sacrifice began to stream along the porticoes. Embarrassed, she covered it with her hands and looked around, hoping no one had noticed. It didn’t look like they had. They were all too busy waving and calling to two men bearing a particularly large portion of meat between them. One of them was Abba. The other was a tall, well-dressed man who moved with the over-exaggerated precision of someone who was either very very tired or had had too much wine to drink. Miryam looked again, noting the expensive sandals on his well-tended feet, the crisp pleats of his fine linen robe, his smooth chin and carefully oiled hair. Or maybe he was just bothered by the smell and press of the crowd.

“Josef, as I live and breathe!” Aunt Elisheva said, her hand at her heart. She gave a quick look around, something like fear sparking into her eyes. “What are you doing here? Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine,” he reassured her. “I heard about Hannah, and wanted to offer you and Eliakim my condolences.”

That stern man was Uncle Josef? Imma and Elisheva’s younger brother? All the way from the temple in Egypt? He certainly *looked* like a foreigner. He had the poise, the slightly too well-groomed body and empty smell that Miryam associated with wealthy city men, although his skin was as dark as a fieldworker’s—but that could have been from travel.

“You are certainly welcome,” Aunt Elisheva said, although she didn’t sound like she meant it. “But, Josef, is this wise?” She glanced around uneasily and dropped her voice. “They will already have informed the High Priest.” Her hand went to her mouth as something occurred to her. “Is that why you are here? Has something happened to Sarah? Or the boys?”

“No, no, everything’s fine,” he grunted as he and Abba set the platter down. He stood up, wiped his brow, and then put an arm around Aunt Elisheva and pulled her to him, kissing her on the forehead. “You always were a worrier,” he said affectionately. “Sarah and the children are still getting settled, so I came on alone.”

Now that he was right up close, the family resemblance was unmistakable. Uncle Josef moved as quickly and economically as his older sisters, and his manner was, like theirs, an unusual combination of gentleness and decision.

His news clearly disturbed Aunt Elisheva. “They’re getting settled? Where?”

“In Rama,” he said, as if reminding her of something she already knew.

“*Rama!* What are you doing in Rama? Why aren’t you in Egypt?”

That surprised him. He glanced at Miryam’s father and Zakharya, but they were suddenly very busy carving up the meat. “I’m part of the family business now,” he said slowly. “I assumed you knew.”

She looked around again, shushing him. “That’s what I *meant!*” she almost hissed. “What you are thinking, coming to Jerusalem during Shebout...”

A chill snaked up through Miryam’s middle. In her distress, her aunt had referred to Shavuot by its old name, Shebout, the Feast of the Covenants. That was what it used

to be called, back when Lady Wisdom, the Spirit of the Lord, still dwelt with Him in their Temple, and the Children of Israel made personal covenants with Elohim and hearkened to the living words of the Spirit.

But that had been a long time ago. Before the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, when King Josiah and his priests produced the new Law they ascribed to the prophet Moses. This new Law denied the Lady and the spiritual nourishment she offered, and distanced itself from a Lord that it described as being too dangerous to approach directly. Instead, it seemed to worship itself and the scribes who interpreted it. Or so Miryam's family and a few others believed. But would never, ever, dare to say out loud.

Miryam darted a quick look around those close enough to hear. To her relief, none gave any sign that they had just heard the Matron of the Temple blaspheme.

What she did see was Uncle Josef looking a question at her father and Uncle Zakharya. Unbelievably, the two older men hung their heads with exactly the same expression on their faces that Salome had when she'd been caught doing something naughty. Miryam saw the moment when Aunt Elisheva realized the same thing. Her hands went to her hips and her mouth pursed in an unconscious imitation of Imma at her most exasperated.

The two older men slowly, reluctantly, began to huff themselves to their feet. Uncle Josef offered a hand and then a shoulder to Zakharya, so Miryam did the same for Abba. He surprised her by accepting, leaning on her so heavily that she almost lost her balance.

Once Uncle Zakharya was all the way up, Uncle Josef patted his brother-in-law's old, sloped back, readjusted his own robe, hesitated, then took Aunt Elisheva's hands in his own. "I've left Leontopolis and the temple," he began.

Aunt Elisheva was crying. It wasn't until she bent over their joined hands and turned his up so she could kiss them that Miryam saw why. The first and third fingers on Uncle Josef's right hand were gone.

It was not uncommon for the people of Palestine to lose parts of their bodies to accidents, fights, or disease. But Uncle Josef's stumps were different. They aligned perfectly with the top of his palm, as neat and square as the walls of Herod's temple, and

alternated with fingers left whole. This had been no accident. Someone had maimed him on purpose. And recently. The scarring was still a shiny, angry red.

They'd done it to stop him from being a priest. Miryam knew it as surely as if she had been told. Priests had to be perfect. Someone had cut Uncle Josef's fingers to make him imperfect to prevent him from serving as a temple priest.

It was a sickening realization. Not only that someone had harmed Uncle Josef in this way, but that she, Miryam, had worked it out by herself, without being told. Was that *legal*? Of course it was. But it was a lonely feeling, somehow, watching herself decide things by herself. Miryam moved closer to her father. She stopped short of touching him, not wanting to bother him the way Salome had bothered her the night before on the road from Nazareth, but needing the physical reassurance of his presence. He didn't seem to mind; in fact, he put an arm around her and pulled her close.

Uncle Josef was trying to soothe Aunt Elisheva, though it was hard because she hadn't given him his hands back yet. "It's all right, Elisheva," he said. "I hardly miss them at all, and it doesn't hurt. I tell you the truth, it was time and past for me to leave. The temple was no longer worthy to receive the Lord's spirit. Between them, Greek culture and Roman prosperity have conquered our people more completely than the Assyrians and Babylonians combined. The Jews of Alexandria are so anxious to prove their loyalty and trustworthiness to Herod, the Romans, and their Greek trading partners that the old ways have become an embarrassment to them. We'd hoped to keep at least one of the Lord's temples holy, but what does it matter if no one is worthy to serve there? It was time for us to come home. My only regret is that now we are here, the boys are not fit to be your students."

Aunt Elisheva, lifted her head, straightened her shoulders, and dabbed at the corners of her eyes with the towel she wore over her shoulder. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "*You* may not be able to be a priest anymore, but your boys..."

"Have been treated as their father was," he said quietly.

Her eyes widened, and her hands went to her mouth.

"Once Herod's agents discovered we were the last of Aaron's direct line, they worried that we might be a threat to the legitimacy of the priests Herod has appointed.

They told me I had a choice to make.” Uncle Josef’s eyes flickered toward Miryam, then to Salome, and back again. “I leave the nature of that choice to your imagination. In the end, they persuaded me that it would be best for all concerned if the boys left the priesthood as I had.”

She shook her head as if she was trying to clear it. “But that can’t be. What about the promises?”

“I was told that a way would be made clear,” he said deliberately, as though he wanted her to understand something his words pointed to, instead of what they actually said.

But Aunt Elisheva was too upset to understand. “What about the covenant?”

Uncle Josef took her face between his hands to help her pay attention. “I was *told*,” he repeated, each word as slow and echo-y as thunder, “that a way would be opened.”

Aunt Elisheva went absolutely still. Her eyes seemed to drink Uncle Josef up.

He gave her a tiny nod, and dropped his hands. “I was told,” he went on, and Miryam could feel the echo of his words vibrating in her middle, “that although it would *appear* that we could no longer serve the Lord, that was not the case. It was only the nature of assignment that had changed.”

“So you are no longer a priest. Or Simon or Alphaeus or Tolomei either,” Aunt Elisheva said. “And now you’re home, where you belong.” She tried to smile, but her lips trembled, so she had to look away. Her face was the color of wax, and her features sagged, as if the bones of her face had started to melt. “And the temple at Leontopolis...” She couldn’t finish.

“Elisheva,” said Uncle Zakharya, her name perfume in his mouth. He put his arm around her, led her to the cloth she had brought for Salome, and set her down on it as gently as if she were a precious glass vessel. He fussed a bit, smoothing the folds of her gown just so, then picked up one of her hands and stood up straight. “Elisheva, remember Isaiah.”

Then he did something strange. He looked right at Miryam, as though what he was about to say was partly for her.

“Ye are my witnesses, and my servant whom I have chosen, that ye may know and believe me,” Zakharya quoted. He looked down at his wife. “I am such a witness.”

She gaped up at him.

Abba cleared his throat, the sound rumbling down through the arm that still gripped Miryam’s shoulder. “And I.”

Miryam was conscious of something inside her opening to receive the vibration of her father’s voice. She might not have noticed, or overlooked the flicker that told her it was a question, that whatever was wakening inside her came only when invited. Last night she hadn’t been ready, had worried that the energy thrumming through her body might overcome her. But when it had gone, she knew she was less than she might have been. She would not make the same mistake again.

It was a new day. She was rested now, and surrounded by people who loved her in the House of the Lord. They were offering her something—or maybe He was, or His Spirit, or his angels, or even Imma—and this time, she would take it.

She let her body open, doing her best to soften the skin that stood between her and the world. Gradually, the inside of her chest followed suit, subtly turning and adjusting itself to more fully receive—she didn’t know what. Energy. Warmth. Life. Movement. Love. Power. Whatever it was, now that she had made place for it, she felt it take root within her and begin to spread.



I could tell something was happening. Something important. It was going back and forth between them, the little circle of Elisheva and Josef and Zakharya and Abba and Miryam.

I looked around for someone who could explain it to me. Anna. But her head was bent and her arms folded tight around her. Cleopas stood next to her, his eyes bright

and interested, and *he* looked just fine. I couldn't decide if he were an adult, whom I shouldn't pester, or a child I could. An adult, I decided regretfully.

But I remembered how kind he had been about the hurt lamb. Everyone else was too caught up in things to scold me, and he probably wouldn't even if he should.

So I went and stood next to Cleo and waited for him to notice me. When he didn't, I tugged at his robe.

He looked down to see what I wanted.

"What's happening? What do they mean?"

He hesitated, then sighed. "I guess if you're old enough to ask the question, you're old enough to hear the answer. Zakharya and your father are telling Elisheva that the Lord sent them the same dream He sent Josef."

Dream? What dream? I hadn't heard anyone say anything about a dream. "What dream?"

"The dream or vision or whatever you want to call it when an angel told Uncle Josef it was more important to save his son's lives than to keep them unblemished."

I knew, of course, that Abba talked to angels. After he and Imma had prayed and fasted for children for many years, angels had told them that we were coming. But we weren't supposed to talk about it, in case it made the other children feel bad that their parents didn't get angels of their own. If I'd thought about it, I probably would have assumed that Cleopas, whose father Jacob had been Abba's twin brother, would have been told. But it was still shocking to hear him talk about angels out loud so anyone could hear him. Still, I had asked.

"So Uncle Josef can't be a priest anymore, and neither can my cousins Simon or Alphaeus or Tolomei?"

"Doesn't sound like it," Cleo said. He began to laugh, the way boys do when someone has punched them in a way that hurts more than they thought it would and they don't want anyone to know. "And they were the last ones."

"The last what?" I wanted to know.

“The last of Aaron’s lineage,” he said. “The last ones who had the authority to serve in the temple.”

I inhaled sharply.

He looked at me, surprised. “Hadn’t anyone told you?”

I shook my head.

“When your grandma died giving birth to him, your grandfather took Josef to Leontopolis, hoping that would be far enough away to protect him and keep the line alive. But it wasn’t.”

When the Hasmoneans came to power, they drove the legitimate priestly families out of Jerusalem. Those priests who had survived the persecutions had fled to Egypt, where the pharaoh had let them build another temple at Leontopolis, near Alexandria.

“Uncle Zakharya is a real priest.”

“So he is,” Cleopas said. “But he has no brother or son. And he’s old.”

I looked at Uncle Zakharya. Cleo was right. He was old. Lots older than my father, who was the oldest father in Nazareth.

“Priests can only serve until they are fifty,” Cleo went on. “Zakharya must be nearly that already. That’s probably what’s saved him. The only reason Herod hasn’t killed him or chased him away is that there’s no reason to. Everyone knows that Elisheva has never bled.”

Since women had to purify themselves in a mikveh after their monthly bleeding, who was and wasn’t bleeding was public knowledge.

“If Zakharya had divorced her for it,” he continued, “as was his legal right, it might have been different. But as long as he neither challenges Herod nor has any children, it’s not worth the trouble it would cause to have him murdered.”

It took me a moment to work out what he meant, but eventually I did. “Because if Herod did anything bad to Uncle Zakharya, it would make people who knew Uncle

Zakharya angry," I said. "And since he teaches the temple school, he probably has a lot of friends."

"A lot of friends," Cleo said. "But no descendants."

He was talking loud and fast, the way I did when I thought I might be about to cry.

"The prophet Jeremiah promised that *David shall never want a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel. Neither shall the priests the Levites want a man before me to offer burnt offerings, and to kindle meat offerings, and to do sacrifice continually.* But someone must have forgotten to tell Herod."

There was a little pause, and I realized that the others had fallen silent and were watching us. Aunt Elisheva patted Uncle Zakharya's arm thank you, and rose to her feet. Some color had come back into her cheeks, and her face had come back into focus. "Jeremiah also wrote," she said, "*To subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not...Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens.* And that is what I plan to do--leave the problem of passing on His priesthood to Him. We've done the best we can, and today is Shavuot, a time the Lord has set aside for rejoicing. Let's enjoy our lovely dinner and the pleasure of each other's company."

I stared at her. Five minutes ago she had been huddled against Uncle Zakharya like a boneless crone. But here she was, as gracious and welcoming as ever.

"Close your mouth, Salome," Miryam said in my ear. "You look like a fish."

I jumped. I hadn't heard her coming, but I was too busy watching Aunt Elisheva smile and press food and caresses on everyone to make a fuss. "Why is she pretending that everything's all right?" I asked.

Miryam knew what I meant, like she always did. "She's not pretending," she said. "The Lord renews those who have faith in Him."

I looked at her, turning the words over in my mind. Did she really believe them? Or was she just trying to calm me down? I wanted to look for her colors, but wasn't sure

if I should since we were at the temple. Before I could decide, Anna's big rough hand closed around my upper arm and I found myself being dragged toward the food.

I couldn't look away from my family's animated faces as she pulled me past one small, chattering group after another.. Didn't they *remember*? Didn't they *realize* what had happened? God had promised that there would always be Levites to serve in his temple and prepare a holy place for Him to come. But only Uncle Zakharya was left. What would happen when he was gone? Would God just go away?

Anna wrapped my hand around a flat loaf of bread and pushed me toward the platter of roasted meat from the sacrifice. I had been looking forward to this moment for almost two months, since the lamb we'd eaten at Passover. But now the sight of the roasted flesh steaming gently in the sun turned my stomach. Sacrifices renewed the promises we had made with God and that He had made with us. But now it looked like He was going to break one of His promises anyway.

Or maybe it was us. Maybe we hadn't done what we were supposed to. I looked at everyone eating and drinking and laughing like everything was just fine. My grip tightened so suddenly that my food tilted and almost got away from me. I caught at it in time, and then fought down the impulse to fling it all in those smug, laughing faces. Didn't they realize that it was our fault? That God was going to leave and it was all because of us?

A shadow fell across me. I jumped, but it was just Abba. He looked at me, really looked at me, in a way he hadn't done since before Imma died. It fills you up, to have someone look at you like that. All the way through, and loving what they see. I put down the bread and meat, and held my up arms like I was still a baby. He picked me up, and I pressed my face into the hollow place I loved between his chin and his shoulder.

He kissed my hair, then whispered, "Don't you worry, Salome. It's not your burden to carry. And everything will be all right in the end. I don't know how and I don't know when, but God doesn't break His promises, and we have done the best we could."

I lifted me head so I could see his expression. "Really, truly?" I asked, trying to ignore the way my mouth wanted to wiggle around.

“Really, truly,” he said. His eyes were strong but calm, and I felt that some of his strength and peace flow into me.

I dropped my head onto his shoulders and let go. Tears streamed out of me, more than I would have thought could have fit inside one little girl. Abba’s robe got so wet that it stuck to his skin, but he didn’t seem to mind, just rubbed my back and made little soothing noises like Imma used to when I couldn’t fall asleep. It wasn’t exactly the same, of course. His voice was too deep, and the hand against my back was too big and hard. But he smelled the way he always had—of the sun and the earth, of water and animals and hay—and even though he was much, much bigger than I was, it was bigness that I could trust. It was bigness he would use to protect me. I butted at his shoulder with my head until we remembered how to fit together. His heart thudded steadily beneath my cheek, and I could hear the promise it made that emptiness would always be filled. The cold lump of grief that had lodged between my lungs and my stomach softened, broke into pieces, and began to flow away. I took a deep, shuddering breath.

Abba put his lips against my temple. “Look at your sister.”

I cracked my eyes open and saw Miryam up on her tiptoes, whispering something to Aunt Elisheva, who had bent down to listen. Their expressions were identical, and it was as if for one moment you could see the girl Elisheva had been and the woman Miryam would become. The gray cloud that had hidden their goodness from me a moment ago began to lift. It was lifting from me, too, so I screwed my eyes shut and burrowed back into Abba’s shoulder. I wasn’t ready to examine the wound of my mother’s death just yet. I was snuggling with my Abba, and for the moment, that was enough.

Chapter 4: Washing Up

Being a temple maiden was a big responsibility. I didn't realize how big until that evening when Abba and the others left. As the dusk swallowed them up, I dropped the arm I had been waving. "*Now* do we get to weave with the other girls?" I wanted to know.

Aunt Elisheva smiled down at me and smoothed the hair out of my eyes. "I don't know," she said. "Anna, what do you think? Does this young person look like a temple maiden to you?"

"I can't say that she does," Anna said, swinging her arms and bouncing on the balls of her feet. "No, I can't say that she does."

I felt as though I had been slapped. "I don't?" I said. I glanced down. My hand was lying on the marble balustrade. The perfection of the polished white stone threw my blunt, dirty fingers with their bitten-off nails into horrible relief. Only my thumb was clean, from sucking it, but it had a big blotchy callous. I tugged the sleeve of my tunic down, but it was as coarse and dirty as the rest of me. My eyes slipped to my feet, and they were even worse. I hunched my shoulders and snuck a quick look around for something to hide behind, then realized that any movement would only draw more attention to me. I stood frozen, willing back baby tears as I fixed my eyes on the least babyish thing I could find--Anna's big crooked toes.

"What do you think we should do about it?" Aunt Elisheva asked Anna.

"Give her a bath and change her clothes, of course."

Was that--had they been *teasing* me? I gaped up at Anna, who was smiling so hard that I could see the gaps where her teeth used to be.

I could feel my own mouth smiling back in relief. "*Thank* you," I said. "Oh, thank you!"

"You might want to wait to thank her until *after* your bath," Aunt Elisheva said with a wink.

Anna tsk-tsked. “Nothing to fear from a little soap and water, now is there, Lord?”

Half an hour later, I sat shivering on Aunt Elisheva’s lap, wrapped in a large linen towel and deciding that this must be what cooking pots felt like after being scoured with sand. Every inch of my skin throbbled with cleanliness. My head snapped back as Aunt Elisheva’s comb found another snarl.

“I’m sorry, Salome,” she apologized. “But I think that’s the last one.” She drew the comb through my hair a few more times, just to be sure. “The hard part’s over,” she promised. She laid the comb aside and picked up a gilded horn. She poured out a small puddle of the perfumed oil it held into her left palm, then anointed my legs, back, shoulders, and arms with long, even strokes. My body relaxed against the warmth and softness of her lap until I wanted to purr like a kitten.

My reverie was interrupted by choking noises from the other side of the carved wooden screen that separated the *mikveh*—the ritual bath filled with flowing “living” water—from the larger room. They were followed by a series of loud splashes. I had tried to warn her, I thought virtuously. It wasn’t *my* fault if Miryam thought that holding her nose might hurt Anna’s feelings.

“Everything all right?” Aunt Elisheva asked.

“Oh, we’re fine, aren’t we, lambie?” came Anna’s voice. “Just making sure we’re clean all the way through for the Lord.”

A large linen towel, twin to the one I wore, disappeared over the top of the screen with a snap, followed by such vigorous rubbing noises that Aunt Elisheva and I couldn’t help wincing in sympathy.

Anna came out from behind the screen unrolling her sleeves. Miryam trailed behind, pink and dazed.

“Miryam’s turn,” Aunt Elisheva told me.

“Come and sit here with old Anna,” Anna said, taking a seat on the other big chair and patting her lap.

I hopped down and, trying not to show my reluctance, went to sit with the old woman who smelled of bread instead of flowers and holy oil. Her lap was broad and comfortable, but I couldn't help a little jounce of impatience. When were we going to get to the new clothes?

"Before we dress you," Aunt Elisheva said, working her comb through Miryam's hair. "I wanted to talk with you about what it means to work at the temple."

I sighed. It came out louder than I meant it to.

"Don't worry," Aunt Elisheva said. "This is not going to be a lecture about remembering to use your temple voices and always minding the priests. I'm sure you've already realized that temple workers represent the work of God to the world, and so our behavior should always bring honor to Him."

"Praise Him," Anna said, whacking me fondly on the shoulder. It really hurt, but I remembered that I was a temple maiden and bore it with dignity.

"What is the temple for?" my aunt asked.

I swallowed another sigh so fast I burped. I tried to make it as small and lady-like as I could.

"It's a place where heaven and earth come together, so the Lord can visit His children," Miryam said.

I was impressed by her words, although there was something about the way she said them that hinted she might be holding back a sigh of her own.

Aunt Elisheva put down the comb and reached for her gilded horn. "So it is," she said comfortably. She unstopped it and poured some oil onto her palm. "But if He's our father and we're His children, why do we need to go to all the bother of a temple to be with Him? Why must we wash ourselves with living water and anoint ourselves with holy oil? Why does He ask us to bring Him the very best we have, and then burn it up? It's not like it does Him any good. He's the one who made all this in the first place."

I stared at her, shocked to my core. It wasn't *our* place to ask the Lord His business. That was practically *blasphemy*. I turned to Anna for help, but she winked and

nodded like everything was fine. Then I tried Miryam, who only mouthed: “Close your mouth, Salome. You look like a fish.”

I snapped it shut.

“I don’t think He has us do it for Him, but for us,” Miryam said.

Aunt Elisheva made a “that’s interesting, tell me more” sound as she smoothed the oil all over Miryam’s body, from the crown of her head right down to her toes. It must have felt as good to Miryam as it had to me. Her shoulders relaxed, her eyes drifted closed, and the words rolled out of her as easily as if it were just the two of us, talking over our day in the darkness before sleep.

“Imma used to say that people don’t really grow up and become themselves until they move away from home and have families of their own. Which is why the Lord sent us away to this world. So we would finish growing up, and could decide for ourselves what kind of people we wanted to be.”

She opened her eyes, looked right at me, and said slowly, “I think our life in Nazareth was like our life in heaven. Imma loved us like our heavenly parents had, and helped us recognize their goodness. And Abba taught us how to obey the Law, how to take the shape and pattern of the Lord’s ways into our bodies so we could bring them into the world. We learned if we obeyed them, if we received their goodness and put it to work, that we would be happy.”

Her words nestled comfortably into my heart. Nazareth *did* taste of heaven. And now the temple would, too.

“The funny thing was that we couldn’t really see how good and simple our lives were in Nazareth until after we were gone.”

I smiled and nodded, waiting for her to explain that now we would find the same goodness and security in our new life in the temple. But Miryam didn’t smile back. She looked at me so seriously that I felt a cold stirring of uneasiness.

“Imma’s death changed everything. We’re in a new place, with more people and new and more complicated problems. We know the way things worked in our family in Nazareth, but so many things have changed that we’re going to have to change, too. It’s

going to take us time to figure out how to take the good things we learned there and combine them with the new things we find here, especially since the people who taught us those good things aren't around anymore to tell us what to do." She gave a tiny shrug. "It's all up to us now."

It's all up to us. The words crashed into me like a boulder torn from a mountain. The impact reverberated through my seat, my chest, my limbs, my throat, spiraling deeper and deeper until there was no still place, no refuge no matter how far I burrowed into Anna's ample softness, until the thing I had tried so hard to hide, even from myself, boiled, roiled, and belched forth in all its terrible nakedness. "But what if we're not *ready*?"

"Of course we're not ready," said Miryam. Her words were plain, matter-of-fact, *real*. I clung to their steadiness, and hers. "Imma and Abba knew that. They knew they couldn't just abandon us. Instead, they sent us here, where there are people to love and protect us while we learn how to apply the things we learned from Imma and Abba to a more complicated world." Her face softened into a smile at last. "While we practice growing up."

I put my hands over my ears and turned my back to the room. I didn't *want* to practice growing up. And I didn't see the point of talk talk talking about all these sad, hard, depressing things. I just wanted to get my new clothes and go to bed.

"I think Salome's had about all she can take for one evening," Aunt Elisheva said. I put out a hand ready to push myself up when she ruined everything. "But I'm curious about one thing. What did you mean when you said you thought God created temple rules and rituals are for us instead of Him?"

"Because I think the temple is like the Sabbath," Miryam said.

I wanted to scream and kick and shout—anything that would just stop these new ideas so that I could crawl into my bedroll where it was dark and soft and safe. But I wasn't a little girl anymore. I was a temple maiden. And temple maidens didn't make big noisy fusses about things they didn't want to hear. They remembered that they represented God, and were good examples on the outside even when their inside feelings were catching up to the way things needed to be. So I did what I had to until my feelings were ready to be changed. I made myself more comfortable on Anna's lap,

closed my eyes, and, when I judged it safe, slipped my thumb into my mouth while my other hand crept up to the soft hair at the back of my neck.

“The Temple and the Sabbath are both there to help us find...proportion,” Miryam was saying.

“Proportion?” Aunt Elisheva prompted.

“Proportion. Pattern. Relationships. You know. The way to put everything together so that it all fits, so that it happens in the right way at the right time and in the right place so everyone gets what they need and no one gets hurt. You can’t do that when you’re in the middle of things. You have to go away to somewhere separate and apart so that you can see everything, not just the tiny sliver of yourself. The temple and the Sabbath are both designed to help you find....” She hesitated, groping for the word she wanted.

Wisdom, I supplied in my mind. But she didn’t hear me. I squirmed impatiently, thinking it harder. *Wisdom!* But she still looked blank. Finally, when I could bear it no more, I sat up and said it for her. “Wisdom!”

“I beg your pardon?” said Elisheva, looking startled.

“She’s talking about *Wisdom*. You know.” I rattled off the words my parents had told us a thousand times. “*Wisdom gives life. If we search her out, she’ll teach us to do the right thing in the right way at the right time and in the right place so that whatever needs to change and grow can without hurting anyone else.* That’s why Imma and Abba sent us here. To find Wisdom in the Temple.”

Aunt Elisheva took a long, shaky breath. “Looks like Hannah has done our work for us,” she said to Anna.

“She surely did, Mistress,” she said, her big head bobbing emphatic agreement. She drew her sleeve across her eyes and gave a loud sniff. Pressed as far back into her side as I could get, I curved my fingers into talons in case I had to claw myself free.

Now can we get our clothes? I didn’t actually say it, but I certainly thought it as loud as I could.

Aunt Elisheva smiled at me like she had heard my thoughts, the way Miryam sometimes did, and patted my sister's shoulder to tell her she could get down. "Let's get you two dressed and off to bed, shall we? We want you well rested when you meet the other girls in the morning. And I want to think some more about the interesting things you said."

I felt my cheeks going pink with pleasure. Aunt Elisheva thought we were interesting. I tried to think of something else I could tell her that she might want to know.

Miryam slid off Aunt Elisheva's lap.

So did her towel.

Alerted to the peril, I made a more gradual descent, as befitted a temple maiden. "I also think," I said, as I reached for the back of the chair with one hand, clutched my towel with the other, set one knee firmly on the square inch of seat not currently occupied by Anna's generous bottom, and extended my other leg, "that being in a place like the temple where everything is clean helps us see our own..." My foot flailed, feeling around for the floor, "...our own...FAULTS!" as I finally found it. I turned around, pleased that I had made it to the floor with my towel intact. "That way we *want* God to help us be better."

Three pairs of eyes were staring at me. I checked my towel, but it was where it was supposed to be, which was a relief.

"You are absolutely right," Aunt Elisheva said, smiling at me with Imma's eyes. "Now let's get you two dressed."

Taking her keys from her girdle, she unlocked one of the chests pushed against the wall and held the heavy lid up for Anna, who had taken the linen towel tucked in her girdle and spread it out on top of the adjoining chest. Anna knelt down, creaking the whole way, and sorted through the neat stacks of clothing. She selected two bundles tied with plaited reeds, laid them on the towel she had ready, and pushed herself to her feet.

"Oldest first," Aunt Elisheva said as she let the heavy lid down. She chose the larger of the two bundles, untied the reed that held it together and set it aside, then

unfolded and shook out the pile of garments: white linen shift, white linen tunic, white cloth slippers, white linen headcloth, and a blue woolen robe. The robe and slippers she set aside, explaining that we would use them during cold weather.

She and Anna dropped the loose shift over Miryam's head, holding it away from my sister's body so there was room for her towel to slither to the floor. Then they laid their hands on her head and blessed her with the protection she needed to keep the garment unspotted as she sought to live in obedience to the Lord's commandments. They did the same with the robe, promising her that to the extent she sought to fulfill her obligations, He would clothe the nakedness of her understanding.

They tied her hair back with the headscarf, blessing her that as she disciplined herself to live modestly, her eyes would be opened to the richness of the world around her. Last of all, they tied the girdle around her waist, blessing her with strength and fruitfulness as she reached out to those in need and bound them to her with cords of faithfulness and love.

Then it was my turn. I was glad that I was second; it made the promises easier to remember.

When it was all over, Anna gave my headscarf an extra half-knot so that it wouldn't slip. Her hands were surprisingly light and gentle as she smoothed the lovely thing over my hair. "There, lambie," she said. "Now you look like the princess you are."

A princess! No one had ever called me a princess before. But then I had never had clothes as lovely as these, nor had I ever been as clean or smelled as good. And I had interesting things to say. Aunt Elisheva had said so I twirled around on my toes. "Do I really?" I asked. "Look, Miryam! Do I really look like a princess?"

"Better!" she said, the warmth of her affection reaching out to embrace me. "If the Queen of Sheba could have seen you, she would never have dared to show herself to Solomon!"

"Maybe some of the people who come to the temple will decide to worship me instead!" I said.

The room froze, as if it had gone from summer to winter in a snap. I looked to Miryam to see what I had done, but her face was as closed as the others.

“I didn’t mean it,” I said, frightened and confused by their reaction. “I’m sorry.” But it wasn’t enough. My stomach contracted with the sick panic that had been my hated companion for the last few weeks. I had thought it had gone. But it had been there all along, biding its time until I blundered and did something so terrible that Aunt Elisheva and Anna would never be able to forgive me. Miryam, either, because if she did, she’d be bad like me. I turned away so that I wouldn’t have to see the coldness on her face as she saved herself, so I wouldn’t know how alone I would always be, and burst into bitter tears.

Something grazed my shoulder. I flinched away. But it insisted, so gently that I let it stay. Then there was an arm, and the cool whisper of silk against my streaming cheeks. I buried my face in Aunt Elisheva’s fragrant softness and sobbed as if my heart would break.

“Salome, don’t!” Miryam said, shocked. “You’ll ruin her lovely dress!”

“Poo,” said Aunt Elisheva. “What’s a dress compared to a princess in distress?”

Making a great effort, I pushed myself away from the warmth and strength of the living flesh beneath the smooth fabric. I wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go. I held an arm over my face, hunched my back, and turned away. “I didn’t mean it,” I said.

“You didn’t mean what?” Aunt Elisheva asked, sounding interested.

I wasn’t sure. “The bad thing I did.”

“What bad thing was that?”

I dropped my arm and stared at her. “*You* know,” I said. “The thing that made everyone so...” I searched for the word, but when I found it—the thing that made everyone so *disappointed*—the truth was too raw. “So quiet,” I said instead.

“Ah,” Aunt Elisheva said. “That.” She looked around the room. “Miryam, fetch me my basket. I always like a little treat before bed, don’t you?” She sat on a cushioned bench and patted the place next to her. “Anna, you’ll join us, won’t you? Or are we keeping you from something?”

“People are more important than chores, isn’t that so, Lord?” Anna said. She sat with a huff, so that the bench creaked loudly.

The treat was a dish of cherries and another of almonds. "I'll just fetch a bowl for the pits," Anna said, starting to rise, but Aunt Elisheva laid a restraining hand on her arm. "No, Anna, I think that's a service Salome could do for us."

I scrambled to my feet, eager to help but not sure where to go.

"Anna?" Aunt Elisheva prodded.

"In the first chest there," she said, pointing. "On the left-hand side."

The lid of the chest was so heavy I needed both hands to lift it. I propped the lid back against the wall, snatched a dish, and in the rush of my eagerness to please would have let the heavy lid bang down again until I remembered the grumpy priests. I sighed, laid the dish on the floor out of the way where I wouldn't trip over it, then used both my hands and nearly all my strength to lower the lid gently.

"Nicely done, Salome," Aunt Elisheva said when I handed her the bowl. She chose a cherry and popped it in her mouth, savoring it. Then she put her hand over her mouth for a moment. The hand moved to the dish I had given her, and to my surprise I heard a little *ding* as a cherry pit fell into it.

She laughed at the surprise that must have shown on my face and offered me some. But I shook my head, fully aware that I would not be able to listen and eat them politely at the same time, so she handed them to Miryam.

"What would you do," she asked her, "if I told you that the Lord was here right now, in the Holy of Holies, and he wanted to see you?"

Miryam had just bitten into a cherry. She blanched, choked, and by the time she got her breath she was dribbling cherry juice.

Aunt Elisheva and Anna were both laughing and Aunt Elisheva was apologizing. I could see from the expression on my sister's face that Miryam was as worried as I was that she might have already stained her new tunic. I *knew* I had been right to refuse the cherries.

Anna managed to blot up the dribble before it went anywhere. "No harm done," she said. "Although it wouldn't have mattered a scrap if you had dirtied your gown without meaning to. You just do your best to keep it clean, and then when accidents

happen, you can be confident the Lord understands.” She took her seat again with a *woof*.

“I think the girls might be interested to hear about that dream you had back when *you* were a temple maiden, Anna,” Aunt Elisheva suggested.

Anna flicked her big, knobby hands as though she were shooing away a fly. “I doubt that, mistress. Two bright young ladies like these? They have better things to think about than some old dream that happened a hundred years ago.”

“Are you really a hundred years old?” I asked. I’d known she was old, but I didn’t know anyone could be that old. At least since Noah and Adam.

She snorted. “Am I a hundred years old, Lord? What do you say to that? No, my lamb, not quite a hundred, although some days it feels that way, and that’s a fact.”

“Go on, Anna,” my aunt urged. “It might be a help to them. It was to me.”

Anna cocked her head like a bird and studied my aunt with her clear blue eyes until she was sure she meant what she said. “Well, I don’t know how ramblings from an old woman have ever helped anyone, but you know I can’t say no to you, Mistress.” She folded her arms, leaned her head back against the wall, and spoke to the ceiling.

“I had a dream, oh, years and years ago now, when I wasn’t much bigger than you are now that the Lord had come to see me. But I’d done something—what was it?” She clicked her tongue and shook her head. “I can’t remember—imagine that, something so small I can’t remember! Played with one of my brother’s toys without asking, probably. I was so flustered thinking of this bad thing that the Lord and I both knew I had done that I just couldn’t stand the thought of meeting Him. I ran away to the bushes and hid until I was sure He was gone. When I woke up, I thought—well, Anna, what if that was your only chance for a vision and you missed it all for the sake of something that really didn’t matter?” She mopped at her eyes with one of her big hands, and I realized she was crying. “Never have forgiven myself for missing that chance to see the Lord, and that’s a fact.” She slapped her big hands on her knees. “Water under the bridge, that’s what that is.”

Miryam patted my hand, then got to her feet and stood next to Anna. Anna’s big old body kind of overflowed when she was sitting, and Miryam looked very slim and

very straight next to her. It took Anna a moment to understand that Miryam wanted to say something to her. She reached out and draped her big arm over Miryam's shoulder, pulling her closer. "What is it, Lambie?"

Miryam could be shy sometimes, and she had to take a big swallow before she said what she had come to say. "If I were Him," she told Anna's wobbly chin. "I think it would matter more to me that you have kept remembering that dream and used it to get better than that you ran away in the beginning."

There was a short silence, but it was friendly, not scary like the one I had made. I looked around to see what Aunt Elisheva was doing. She was choosing an almond. Without looking up, she said, "Salome, do you understand why we were so—what did you call it—so *quiet* before?"

Now it was my turn to swallow. "Because I said I was a princess?" I hazarded. "And that would make other people feel bad?"

Miryam giggled. I shot her an evil look.

"Not exactly," Aunt Elisheva said, her mouth looking like it wanted to smile. "Because you talked about people coming to the temple to worship *you*. But that's not what it's for, is it?"

I felt my face redden as I realized what I had done. I shook my head mutely.

"It's for worshiping the Lord. Why is it so important that we remember that?"

"Because it's His house and He will be angry if we don't?"

"Partly," she agreed. "It's important for us to remember how small and weak we are without Him so that we are willing to trust Him when He asks us to do something hard or surprising. And it's important to remember that the temple is different from ordinary life, and to keep it separate in the ways the Lord has told us He wants it to be. But I think the most important part of worship is to remember that the reason we do it is not to make ourselves smaller, but because by following Him we are making ourselves bigger and stronger and wiser and more powerful."

A huge yawn took me by surprise. I clapped my hand over my mouth, but it was too late.

Aunt Elisheva's eyes laughed at me. "Tell me one thing, Salome, and then I'll let you go to bed. How do you feel when you are in the middle of growing?"

I wished she hadn't said that part about going to bed. All of the sudden every part of my body was so heavy that it was all I could do to form the words of an answer, any answer. "Bigger and stronger?" I managed.

My eyes and ears were just open enough to catch her amusement. One beautiful eyebrow shot up. "Really? Change usually leaves me feeling small and confused, especially at first."

I couldn't imagine this vibrant, assured woman being any of those things. I didn't say anything, but she must have seen the doubt on my face, because Aunt Elisheva laughed, dropped a kiss on my forehead, and smoothed back the hair from my face just the way Imma used to. "*Very small, very confused, and very irritable,*" she insisted.

I'm sure she knelt with us to hear our prayers as she always did, but I have no memory of it. My thoughts were a tired jumble of Imma, and Aunt Elisheva's earrings, and the creaking Anna made when she lay down on her pallet, and feeling little even when you were getting bigger. Aunt Elisheva said my name, and I realized she was holding up a corner of the bedclothes for me. I nestled into the ticking, my back pressed against the strength of my sister's spine, as my aunt lit her lamp from the small one we kept burning, blew us a kiss, and disappeared out the door and down the staircase.

"It must be hard to be God, watching us all make the same silly mistakes over and over," Miryam said, so tired her lips barely moved.

I adjusted my body more comfortably. This was the way my sister sung me to sleep, by turning over whatever she was wondering about until all the rough spots were smoothed away. I half-listened, waiting for her to say something I could ride into my dreams.

"He *knows* we'll get burned but if He rescues us we'll never learn for ourselves. That's why He gave us the Law and the temple, to help us remember that He's still here, even though we can't see Him. He's watching over us."

There. I'd found it. *He's here, watching over us.*

I slept.

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Miryam woke, as she always did, to the first wisps of color streaking into the darkness. She loved this pause before the dawn. What had come before was over and what would happen next was still watery with possibility. She bobbed about for a while, swimming through the steady, wordless knowing that was her truest self.

After a time she eased into her body, stroking the top of her feet against the smooth linen of her bedclothes. She was deliciously clean, as were her sheets. She brushed her nose against them, breathing in the pleasant mixture of incense, perfumed anointing oil, and roasted meat that she associated with holiness. She rolled on to her back, pushing her heavy hair out of her face, and the scent got stronger. It wasn't coming from the sheets, she realized, but from *her*. Her skin had absorbed the temple oil Aunt Elisheva had anointed her with, and now her every movement was releasing the scent of holiness into the world.

Not ready to take that startling thought inside her, Miryam retreated under the covers.

The comfortable warmth at her back grumbled and turned over.

Oops. Miryam waited a moment, then cautiously raised herself on one elbow. Salome was still asleep, her blond curls dark with sweat, her perfect small face twisted into a scowl.

A wave of tenderness swept Miryam. Only Salome could be fierce even in sleep. But the bundle her sister made beneath the bedclothes was so small. Too small, surely, to behave as a temple maiden should. Miryam was going to have to work very hard to teach her the things that mothers usually did.

Miryam felt the weight of her responsibility to her sister push against her chest. It didn't matter how heavy it felt--it was a job that needed doing and there was no one else to do it. She tried to think of something cheerful. Imma had been even younger than Salome when Grandmother died giving birth to Uncle Josef and she'd come to live in the

temple with Aunt Elisheva and her new husband Zakharya. And *that* had turned out just fine.

Imma might have been younger than Salome, her traitorous brain whispered. But Elisheva had been older and wiser than Miryam. And she'd had a husband to help her.

Miryam.

She answered the call she'd heard thousands of times before just as she always did: "Here I am." It wasn't until her words ripped the stillness that she realized her mistake.

Even though they made no sound, the words came again, so drenched in the familiar warmth of her mother's love that she could not doubt their reality.

Miryam.

"*Here I am,*" Miryam responded, this time silently, opening herself as fully as she could to the light and love that seemed to descend not only around her, but through her, penetrating more and more deeply until it seemed that every part of her body--every particle, every crevice, every drop of blood and salt and bone--was sitting up, was noticing, was making the tiny adjustments it must to receive and reflect the resonance of her mother's love.

The love is not all from me.

Miryam knew that tone of amusement.

What you feel may be dressed in the form of your mother's love for you, but that is only its beginning, never its end.

It was so sweet, so good, so true that Miryam could not bear to breathe, because then this feeling that she realized had been the source of all her yearnings, all her desires, might leave her again, and that she could not bear.

She felt a mild rebuke.

You are always seen. You are always known. There is nothing you can do, nowhere you can go that can separate you from what you experience now. You may not feel it, but it is always there.

The circumstances that dress your world are new and different, but you are still you, and Salome is still Salome. Do not hide from what you do not yet understand. The first steps along an unfamiliar path are hard to see and hard to bear, full of brambles and jolts, but you will find your footing soon enough, and the treasures you find will never leave you. Open yourself to them, and they will make you strong.

Once again, Miryam felt herself shrink away from a reality too large to comprehend. She did not argue. She did not reject. But the merest whisper of doubt, the tiniest shiver of fear, loosened the gossamer threads of light and love that had, for a few remarkable beats, united her to all that was good and powerful and just.

Please don't go! I'm not ready. I'm not enough. There's so much I don't know, that I don't see...

There was a click and a faint wheeze. Automatically, Miryam's hands moved to cover her ears as the mechanical pipes the priests used to regulate the order of the day emitted their morning shriek.

There was a brief pause, long enough for her to register the sickening loss of grace. Then the whole building shook with a bone-jarring rumble that was enough to rouse even Salome, who, without sitting up or even opening her eyes, patted her hands around the bedclothes until they found her pillow. She got it over her head just in time.

Miryam set her teeth against the tortured squeal of wood straining against stone. Then, just when she knew she could bear the caterwauling no longer, the waterwheel caught, the gates to the temple cisterns opened, and a torrent of water rushed into the great bronze laver in the courtyard below.

It was all Miryam could do not to shriek right back. She hadn't been ready. It wasn't enough--whatever that wonderful, puzzling, sorrowful encounter had been, it had ended before she could make sense of it. It hadn't been enough.

She was conscious of a tantalizing whiff of laughter, a feeling that she should know the difference between enough and all she wanted, and then the last few bits of brightness really did drop from the air, and she was alone.

Not for long. Already she could hear the shuffle of dozens of feet as the priests filed out of the Chamber of the Pancakes, where they had breakfasted, and assembled in the courtyard for the lottery that would assign them their duties for the day. Inside the Chamber, Anna would be packing a basket with the priests' leavings for their own breakfast. She'd be here as soon as she could drag her heavy body up the stairs, and she'd expect to find the two girls washed and ready for the day, their bedrolls stowed neatly away in the chests. Miryam tore the covers from Salome's hands and pulled her grumbling sister to her feet. The day had begun.

Chapter 5: Instructions

When Anna appeared, she didn't have their breakfast. Instead, she produced a rosy, bright-eyed dumpling of a girl who was, Anna trumpeted, sure to be one of their dearest friends among the maidens. Or at least she tried to produce her. The little girl, who she introduced as Tabitha, actually had to be coaxed, flattered, and finally dragged by one arm out from behind her skirts.

"We're so pleased to meet a real live temple maiden at last!" Miryam said, hoping to encourage the mite.

"You don't *look* like a Tabitha," Salome said doubtfully.

"Salome!" Miryam reproved, although she secretly agreed. The shy little girl blinking up at them, clutching a knobby parcel as though her life depended on it, looked nothing like the graceful antelope for which she was named. Nor did she look much like a temple maiden, judging by the queenly light bearers that had welcomed them to the temple two nights ago.

Anna exchanged a laughing look with the girl. "Sure and you're not the first to notice that, now is she, dearie?"

The little girl shook her head, grinning. "Mostly they call me Zippora," she confessed.

"Because she's a friendly little sparrow, aren't you dearie?" Anna said. "Always bustling around watching out for people."

Salome tried the name on her tongue. "Zippora. Zzii—ppoorr—raaahhh." She nodded. "That's much better. It suits you. I'm Salome, and that's my sister Miryam, 'the exalted one.'"

Zippora beamed at them. She opened her mouth, but couldn't seem to find the right words to communicate the good will that shone from her cheerful face. Her lips moved as she rehearsed and then discarded several options, her face growing redder and redder and shinier and shinier.

“What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?” Anna said. She whooped at her own cleverness and gave Zippora a friendly whack. “Enjoy the silence while you’ve got it,” she advised Miryam and Salome. “Never did know such a child for running off at the mouth, and that’s a fact!”

“Except maybe for me,” Salome said.

“True enough,” Anna said, rocking back on her heels.

“What’s that you’ve got there?” Salome said, proving her own point.

Zippora glanced down at her clumsily wrapped package, her open face suddenly caught in a rictus of embarrassment. “Nothing much,” she mumbled, turning it in her hands as if looking for somewhere to hide it.

Her head drooped forward so that all Miryam could see was a very pink, very trembly lower lip. Zipporah was not, Miryam realized, the kind of person who was good at hiding her emotions.

Miryam caught Salome’s eye and jerked her chin meaningfully.

“I hope it’s something good to eat,” Salome said a shade too heartily. “I feel as though my stomach is wrapped around my backbone!” She raised her eyebrows at Miryam, inviting congratulations for her quick thinking.

One glance at Zippora--who was now hunching her shoulders up around her ears and giving every evidence of wanting to disappear--was enough to establish that the basket did not in fact contain anything edible.

“Salome didn’t mean to be rude,” Miryam apologized.

“Rude!” Salome bristled. “How was that rude? I was trying to be nice!”

“Now, now,” Anna said, belatedly doing her part to smooth things over. “Don’t you never mind about your breakfast, missy. The Lord will provide and that’s a fact.” She winked and smiled broadly at Zippora.

Miryam heard an excited little giggle, quickly smothered. It took her a moment to realize that it had come from Zippora.

Battered by repeated confusions and miscalculations, Miryam reached down deep for an extra measure of strength—and found only emptiness. She was tired. She was hungry. And scared and small and confused. She wanted nothing more than to crawl back into her bedroll and pull the bedclothes over her head.

As if on cue, a flock of girls dressed in white linen fluttered into the room, laughing and hugging and talking all at once.

“Here are my lambs!” Anna crowed, her face alight with welcome. She clapped and wrung her hands with delight. “Here are my pretties! Come give old Anna a hug, all you girls, and meet the matron’s nieces, Miryam and Salome.”

Miryam took an involuntary step backwards, needing a moment to gather herself. Half-hidden in the shadow cast by an obliging loom, she studied the girls who would be her friends.

Her first impression was not comforting. They were as beautiful and self-assured as she remembered. They held themselves like queens, their olive skin nourished by precious oil, the lovely lines of neck and spine echoed by the shining braid that flowed nearly to their waists. But it was their tunics that were the real surprise. Made of fine linen bleached to a dazzling white, each had sleeves that extended exactly to their wrist bones and hems that ended precisely at their ankles. In a world that clothed its girls in castoffs, the care implied by the beautifully constructed and fitted garments was startling to the point of strangeness. These young women were perfect. Much too perfect to have anything to do with her.

As she continued to watch, however, the shimmer of formality that seemed to hold them apart thinned and disappeared. Once she could look past the outward similarities, she saw bodies and faces and mannerisms as varied and ordinary as any group of village girls. After the third or fourth pair of eyes met hers only to slide away, it also occurred to her that they might be as curious about her as she and Salome were about them.

“Here’s Matron,” Anna said, and the laughter and chatter stopped, just like that.

“Good morning, ladies,” Aunt Elisheva said, sweeping into the room. “How lovely to see you all again!”

The girls bent their heads, a bed of white rockroses ruffled by the wind. "And you, Matron," they repeated in unison, with Zippora, the youngest except for Salome, trailing half a beat behind the rest.

"This is an exciting day with four new friends to welcome!" Aunt Elisheva said as two girls, one broad and decided, the other tall and angular, stepped through the door and joined her. She half-turned, gesturing them forward. "Rachel, why don't you introduce Joanna?"

Rachel, the chief girl, was what the women in the village called "big boned," with large gray eyes that were guileless to the point of transparency. She put her arm around the tall, dark-haired girl at her side and drew her forward. It was only then that Miryam noticed the young girl, half-obscured by the large, lidded wicker basket Joanna carried, clinging, face averted, to the tall girl's skirts.

"This is such a happy day for me," Rachel said, in a voice as generous as her hips. "I'm meeting three new cousins for the first time. This is Joanna Bat Gamaliel, who has just moved here from Alexandria."

"Thank you all for making us feel so welcome," the tall girl said. She was not beautiful--her thin body was too lanky, the grain of her pale skin too coarse, her eyes a little too small, her nose a little too long--but she moved as if she were.

"And Joanna's sister, Priscilla."

Priscilla didn't budge. Joanna knelt down and whispered something to her. The little girl shook her head. Joanna straightened and gently loosened the little girl's desperate grip. At length, Priscilla allowed herself to be turned to face her new classmates.

There was an audible intake of breath. Priscilla was, quite simply, the loveliest creature Miryam had ever seen. Unlike the others who, except for Salome, had the dark hair, dark eyes, and olive skin of their countrymen, Priscilla glowed with light. Her hair was the color of ripe wheat, her eyes pools of summer sky, her skin softly curved alabaster, her mouth a velvet rosebud.

She looked nothing like her angular, queenly sister. If Joanna was a camel (Miryam didn't want to be rude, but really, the resemblance was too strong to

overlook), Priscilla was an exquisite bird, her bones so tiny and perfect that it was all Miryam could do not to scoop her up in her arms.

Like Zippora, however, this particular bird was having a hard time finding her song. The rosebud opened and closed, twice, thrice--then disappeared in a whirl of gold as Priscilla flung herself once more into the comforting embrace of her big sister's skirts.

Some of the other girls tittered, but Miryam didn't. Nor, she was glad to see, did Salome. There was nothing funny about a little girl who was clearly terrified. Why that was, Miryam couldn't begin to imagine. Not only had Priscilla been blessed with wealth, privilege, and unspeakable beauty, she had a big sister who obviously adored her, and Rachel's welcome had been both gracious and genuine.

"Some of you probably know Joanna's and Priscilla's family," Rachel said. "Their mother is my Aunt Chania. Their father is Gamaliel Ben Hillel, who has just been named to the Sanhedrin. They also have two brothers. The older one, Josephus, is singing in the Levite choir, so we'll meet him during our lessons."

An impressed murmur rippled through the room. Miryam didn't know if it was because the girls' father was part of the Sanhedrin--the governing council of the Jews--or because they came from Alexandria, the Egyptian city that stood second only to Rome itself as the most brilliant and glittering of the Empire's great cities. And not even Rome could pretend to equal its learning. Scholars from all over the known world gathered to debate philosophy at its university dedicated to the muses, while its library was rumored to have a copy of every scroll ever written.

Zippora sidled up to the shy little girl. "My brother Abel visited Alexandria once," she offered. When Priscilla's only answer was to burrow a little further into Joanna's skirts, Zippora looked to the older girl for help.

Stroking Priscilla's hair with her free hand, Joanna made a face at Zippora and mouthed the word, *Sorry*. Then she added aloud, "Did he? What did he think of it?"

Zippora seemed to swell with importance. "He said that the lighthouse and the city were so grand that it was if they had been built by giants, not men, and that the air smelled of perfume," she said, her words tumbling over each other like puppies.

“He probably wasn’t there at low tide in August, then. You’ve never smelled such a stink in your life!”

Zippora beamed, her face pink with pleasure, as Joanna turned back to the others and adopted a more formal tone. “Alexandria may be a lovely city, but none of its beauties compare with your magnificent temple,” she said, her voice and carriage as confident as if she were a great Roman lady addressing the emperor. “Thank you for allowing us to join you in serving the Lord in His holy house. As a mark of our family’s appreciation, we hope you will find a use for these rolls of papyrus.” She handed her basket to Elisheva with a little bow.

There was another ripple of excitement. Papyrus was very dear--a single sheet cost more than a day’s wages. A large basket stuffed with rolled scrolls of it was a generous gift indeed.

A gift. Miryam’s heart sank. Should she and Salome have brought something to mark their admission to temple service? Such a thing had not even occurred to her. But now that she considered it, it seemed the kind of graceful gesture mothers taught their daughters. Miryam darted a nervous glance around the room. What she saw made her stomach hurt. Joanna and Zippora were not the only ones who had arrived this morning with bundles tucked under their arms. Every girl, every single one of them, held something.

Panicked, she sought out Elisheva’s gaze, trying to signal that she and Salome were not prepared. But it was too late. Her aunt was already extending her arms toward them, gesturing for them to join her at the front of the room. “And here are our other two new maidens, my nieces Miryam and Salome,” she said, her voice strong with pride and happiness.

Miryam fought the impulse to close her eyes and wish them all away. The quickest way out of the humiliation that awaited was to get through it as quickly as possible. Stiff with embarrassment, cheeks burning, Miryam took Salome by the arm and half dragged, half marched her to their aunt’s side.

Now she knew what it had been like for poor Priscilla. There were eyes everywhere, attached to bodies that seemed to press closer and closer as everyone strained to get a better look at Elisheva’s nieces, Zippora visible only as a brown head

here, a round shoulder there as she bounced about outside the circle of the watching girls.

Elisheva gave Miryam an encouraging smile. But it didn't help. The inside of Miryam's throat had managed to glue itself together--not that it mattered, since she could think of nothing to say. The best she could do was *not* to close her eyes while she waited for the horrible moment to be over.

Zippora, apparently assuming that the other girls had been struck dumb by the magnificence of a gift she couldn't see, could bear the suspense no longer and said in a piercing whisper, "What did they *bring?*"

If Miryam could have cut off her all-too-empty hands, she would have. She looked desperately at Aunt Elisheva, willing her to please, please, *please* pretend she hadn't heard the question.

But Elisheva was not the kind of woman who pretended. "Open hearts and willing hands," Elisheva said matter-of-factly as she gathered Salome, who was closer, into a quick embrace and dropped a kiss on her head. "The greatest gifts of all."

Now Miryam did close her eyes, partly in relief, partly in shame. She wished there had been something else to say, but she knew there wasn't. And it was a relief, really, having her aunt acknowledge what every one had already seen--that she and Salome had no gift.

"And the incense of course," a clear young voice said loudly. "Lots and lots of incense. More than you've ever seen in your life. Too much for us to carry here."

It took Miryam a moment to recognize the voice as Salome's. And a moment more to understand her words.

Miryam swung around, horrified. How could she? How *could* Salome tell such a ridiculous, shameful story?

One glance at her sister's beet-red face, one glimpse of the small worried hand plucking at the softness of her tunic, and Miryam understood. The shame had been bigger than Salome had room for. It had swept across and through her, knocking her off her feet and confusing her and turning everything upside down until the only thing left

to do was to say the words she wanted so desperately to be true, hoping against hope that the fierceness of her desire would be enough to transform the thought into deed.

It wasn't, of course. Any more than it had been when Imma had gotten sick. Things didn't happen just because they ought to, or even because you needed them to. Someone had to *make* them happen, use body and bone and muscle to make things different. And if you weren't prepared, if you didn't know how, that was just too bad.

But Salome's cheeks were so flushed, and she looked so small, so easy to shatter. The heaviness in Miryam's chest deepened until her knees actually begin to sway. She dropped her eyes away from her sister's desperate little face. She had to. If she hadn't, she would have fallen and that would have just made everything worse for everyone. It only took a second--maybe even a split second--for her to see where the floor was, to steady herself and find her equilibrium--but when she looked up, the space where Salome had been was empty.

This time her knees really did give way. Fortunately, Anna's big hands shot out and saved her from the embarrassment of an actual tumble. The problem was that the old woman didn't let go of her once the danger was past. Miryam tried to twist away in a polite sort of way, but the old lady only tightened her grip.

"Wait," Anna said simply.

"But Salome..." Miryam said, trying to extricate herself as quickly and quietly as she could.

"Salome is my responsibility now," Elisheva's voice said in her ear. Then, more loudly, "Rachel, dear, why don't you take the girls down to breakfast?"

"Where are they going?" Miryam asked idiotically as the girls filed obediently from the room.

"We always share a special breakfast with the boys the first school day after the holidays," Aunt Elisheva said absently. "Wait, Miryam. Listen. There's something you need to hear."

Realizing that she wasn't going to be allowed to go after Salome until after Elisheva had said whatever it was that she seemed to think was so important, Miryam

dragged her attention to the concerned face next to hers. She drew in a breath, held it for a moment, and then let it go.

Aunt Elisheva patted her on the shoulder. "You are a trusting soul, aren't you, my lamb?" she said. "You'll find that a supremely useful quality. I hope you can hang on to that trust for a just a few more minutes, and open your mind to what I am about to say."

She bent her head, biting her lower lip with her perfect white teeth as she made a business of loosening and retying her girdle, adjusting the folds of her tunic, pulling out the combs at her temples and using them to smooth back the dark hair that already gleamed like water. She touched her gold necklace, assuring herself that it was still centered, checked that her gold ear bobs hung freely and that her bangle bracelets hadn't tangled.

Miryam braced herself. She knew, even if her aunt did not, what the ritual meant: Elisheva was buying herself some time while she gathered her thoughts. And no one had to gather their thoughts for good news.

"The life of a temple maiden is quite demanding, you know, my dear," Elisheva began.

Miryam's heart sank. "Yes, of course," she said, her eyes slipping toward the ground. Her lips quavered. She felt her face stretching into an unnatural grimace as she tightened her lips to hold them still.

Her aunt's fingers, soft and smelling of flowers, lifted her chin. "No need for that, my lamb," Elisheva said. "Neither you nor Salome is going to get rid of us that easily! If the little awkwardness about the gifts was anyone's fault, it was mine. I was so excited about having you girls come that I spent all my time thinking what arrangements we needed to make for you, forgetting that you might have some arrangements you needed to make for us. I apologize for the oversight, and hope that you and Salome will forgive my clumsiness."

Miryam had a lump in her throat. She tried to gulp it down. But her chest was stuffed so full of feelings she didn't have words for that the lump just stayed there, lodged in her throat and getting bigger all the time until she could scarcely breathe.

Miryam could find no space to create the words that could acknowledge the gift her aunt had given her.

Aunt Elisheva seemed to understand, all the same. She gave Miryam a quick hug. “So. We will speak no more about it.”

Miryam managed a husky, “Thank you.”

Her aunt waved her words away. “No need, no need. Children make mistakes. It is what they do. The world is new to them, and from time to time they encounter situations for which they are not prepared. Do not imagine, my lamb, that this will be the last or the worst of Salome’s mistakes--or your own, if it comes to that. I daresay some of Salome’s will be quite embarrassing for you, particularly as she is younger than the other girls and has suffered a terrible trauma. But when that happens, your only job is to remind yourself that her mistakes are not your responsibility.”

The words were completely unexpected. “But she’s my sister,” Miryam said. “Of *course* she’s my responsibility.”

Aunt Elisheva shook her head. “You have a responsibility to *love* her. But it’s not your job to *raise* her. That’s why you are here—so that your uncle and I can take care of Salome and you can turn your full attention to growing into the lovely young woman you are meant to be.”

Until the moment when she first glimpsed the possibility of surrendering it to her aunt and uncle, Miryam had not realized the weight of the burden she carried. But she also knew she had no business passing it to someone else. Families loved each other. They took care of each other. That love, that security was the stuff of life. What good would all the education in the world do her if she were to cut herself free from Salome? She’d be nothing but a mess of knotted, tangled threads, a half-woven web cut away from the loom that gave it shape and purpose.

Miryam’s chest constricted and the world blurred. She dropped her gaze to the floor, and forced herself to say what she knew to be true. “I’m sorry,” she said, her lips feeling oddly stiff. “I cannot agree. Imma would want me to take care of Salome.”

“Oh, my dear lamb, of course she would. Of course she *does*. But she wants you to take care of Salome *as a sister*, not as a *mother*.”

The words hung on the air, bright as sunshine. Miryam blinked. Such a thought had never occurred to her. Was there a difference? But she knew already, from the relief blooming buoyant and free in her chest, that there was. Tears of relief and gratitude blurred her eyes. “Oh,” she managed. “Thank you.”

Miryam felt a handkerchief being tucked into her hand. “No, thank *you*,” Aunt Elisheva’s voice said. “You know, the great sorrow of your Uncle Zakharya and I have had to bear was not having any children of our own. Isn’t it just like your dear mother to arrange things so that we have the privilege of helping raise her children?”

She took back her handkerchief, dabbed at a place on Miryam’s cheek, then smoothed back her hair, just the way Imma used to. “There,” she said with a smile. “You’re perfect. Now hurry down to breakfast before the choir boys eat all the cardamom cakes. I got up far too early this morning to make them for you, and if they are all gone before you get there I shall be quite cross.” She dropped a kiss on Miryam’s forehead and gave her a little push.

Miryam went.

Chapter 6: Squaring Up

I plunged down the stairs, desperate to escape my shame. I had told a lie, out loud to all my new friends, right here in the Lord's temple. Even worse, I had done it dressed in the pure white linen of a temple maiden, which I'd had no business wearing in the first place since I already knew I was a sorcerer.

I shot out into the inner court, right in front of the entrance to the Holy of Holies. It was the busiest time of the day--animals lowed, priests bustled, worshippers pressed forward to lay their hands on the beasts they'd bought to bear their sins. There were eyes everywhere. Even the huge golden vine that adorned the great door to the Lord's resting place seemed to wink and leer at me in the morning sun. I moaned and turned away, covering my face with my arm, although it wouldn't do any good. The Lord saw. The Lord knew.

I couldn't be here. I turned and ran, sobbing, and plowed straight into something--no, someone--so broad and sturdy I bounced to the stone pavement.

I had an impression of more white linen, embroidered with blue. A priest. I scrambled to my feet, making for the gate behind him. But he was quick, for a priest, and seized my arm before I could get away.

"Just where do you think you're going?" he demanded in a voice higher and younger than I'd expected.

"Nowhere," I panted, trying to squirm free. "Away. Let me go!"

"Not until you calm down. There's no running in the temple--especially here, with the blood and the knives."

The *what?* I looked around, vaguely registering the fact that we were in the Shambles, where the animals were butchered for the sacrifice, and that here and there the paving stones glistened with slick pools of blood that priests hadn't washed away yet. My brain, sluggish with grief and shame, took in the mention of knives. Was *he* carrying one? Had I hurt him? Had he hurt me?

A quick scan reassured me. No knife handles were visible, either in the fists that clutched my arm, dropped helter-skelter on the pavement at our feet, or protruding from anyone's quivering flesh. In fact, my captor wasn't a priest at all, but a Levite singer. And not even one of the real ones, but one of the boys who sang the choruses. Despite his size, he couldn't be more than thirteen or so.

That's when I finally recognized him. It was the boy I'd seen with the napping priest my first morning here. I'd thought afterwards that I must have imagined the color of his hair, that maybe it had just caught a shaft of sunlight or something, but I realized now I had not. It crackled about his head like liquid fire.

I moaned again, realizing what I had done. I was seeing the color of the air, being a sorceress, right here in front of the Holy of Holies. I deserved the death that awaited me as soon as I worked up the courage to confess. I was so bad, so evil, that I did witchy things without even meaning to. Despair rushed over me, tumbling my senses so that I didn't know where I started or stopped. I tried to fight back, but nothing worked the way it was supposed to.

Someone was asking me what I was doing. Someone was telling me to hush. Someone was shaking me, and asking who my people were, but it didn't matter.

I didn't have people any more. Imma was gone. Abba was gone. Our house and the village where I belonged, where Huldah gave me all her marigolds and showed me how to hold my skirt, where Miryam and Cleo could make the hurt lamb better, was gone. And Miryam had looked away. When I told the lie, Miryam had looked away. I was too dirty to see. Too dirty to be with. I hadn't meant to be. I hadn't even known that I was.

I didn't deserve to be here. I didn't even deserve to *be*. So I let go. I dissolved the connections that kept me together. I shrugged off my skin, loosened my joints, shut down the channels for sight and sound and breath and drifted to a stop.

But the world kept going. Someone had gathered me back together. Someone was carrying me. I tried to melt between his fingers, but they were too strong. I tried to summon the words that could tell him that he shouldn't bother, that wherever I went the badness would follow, because it was in me. But they fell into the empty places I had made, and I hurt too much to find them. So I let it go. I let it all go.

It was the smells that brought me back. Good, strong smells of cinnamon and hot bread and cleaning salts. I tried to push them away, but I was too late--they were already inside me, and now they were unfurling, teasing open the body I had worked so hard to close. I could hear music, too. A thin, sad melody wove in and out of my head. I followed where it led me, suspended in the comforting blankness of some netherworld, until the music stumbled and broke. It started up again and went on, moving smoothly past the place where the mistake had come the first time, and I couldn't stop myself from riding along.

I didn't want to come back. But the good smells and the lovely wandering melody insisted. I realized that I was on a stone floor, and that it would hold me up whether I wanted it to or not. And that my chest was moving all by itself, pushing out the old air so that there would be room for the new. A memory tickled at me, an impression of a rumbling voice that insisted on calling me back from wherever it was that I had tried to go. A man's voice. Abba?

No. Not Abba. He was gone. He had left us.

Memory returned, crashing into my brain, forcing it open. The cinnamon smell was incense. I was in the temple, although I shouldn't be. I was bad, and bad things couldn't be in the temple, because God's glory was there. There was nothing stronger or brighter than God's glory. It was a cleansing fire that consumed everything bad and dirty and made it clean.

I had to tell. Right now. I had to. I sat up and opened my eyes.

The boy with the orange hair took the flute from his lips and scowled at me.

"So you're up, are you? Here." He pushed a dish toward me with his foot. "They brought this for you."

I glanced down at the dish. It was a feast. Bread and fruit and cheese and honeycomb. My stomach roiled. "I don't want it," I said, and pushed it back. I looked around, trying to get my bearings. We were in some kind of storeroom dimly lit by high windows. Stone counters ran between built-in bins and shelving and a loft space above.

“We’re in the salt cellar,” the boy said. “You were making such a noise that I had to get you out of the crowd and this was the closest place.” He pushed the dish back again. “Here. Your uncle says he won’t admit us to class until it’s gone.”

“I’m not hungry,” I said, pushing it back again. “And I’m not going to any class.”

“Of course you’re hungry. That’s probably your whole problem. Your uncle says you haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

“I won’t,” I said, thrusting out my lip. “And you can’t make me.”

“Actually,” the boy said, standing up and pushing his barrel-shaped chest forward, “I probably can.” He was half again as tall as I was, and at least twice as wide.

I gaped at him, registering my helplessness, then burst into furious tears. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t *fair!* I couldn’t do *anything!*

The boy looked startled. He put out a hand toward me, then thought better of it. He put it behind his back and retreated a step or two. “I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said awkwardly, his voice cracking a little. He hunted for something to say. “Just because I *can* doesn’t mean that I *will*,” he said earnestly. Then, realizing that his words might not have been as comforting as he had meant them to be, he added hastily, “or ever would.”

I was beginning to feel better.

He lowered himself to the floor, keeping a wary eye on me as though I were a wild creature he didn’t want to startle. He cleared his throat. “Look, Salome, is it?”

I nodded.

“Look. I don’t know how much longer I can stay here, not here, in the storeroom, but here, at the temple. Your uncle is a wise man, and he has lots to teach, and I want to learn as much of it as I can before they call me home. Don’t you think you could eat just a morsel so we could go to class?”

I considered.

“You’re going to have to go sooner or later, you know,” he said. “Class is required for all the Levite singers and the temple maidens.”

I scowled at him.

He shrugged, reached for the dish of food, and began to poke through it. "Well, if you're sure you don't want any, I'd hate to see all this go to waste." He picked up the comb of honey and turned it around in his hands, deciding how best to attack it.

"What are you doing? That's mine!" I said, outraged.

"You said you didn't want it," he reminded me. "It's a sin to let anything this good go to waste. I think I'll put in on that bread."

He picked up a napkin and unwrapped it, so that the aroma of hot, fresh bread invaded my nose and traveled all through my body. My stomach growled. I'd need provisions for my journey. To keep up my strength. "Don't," I said. "Give it to me."

"Maybe I would, if I thought you'd really eat it." He looked at me out of the corner of the golden, tilted eyes that made him look like he was about to laugh, even when he was being rude.

"Maybe just a mouthful," I said.

He put down the honey and bread and pushed the dish toward me without a word. "This doesn't mean I'm going to any class," I said, spraying crumbs everywhere.

"Oh, right," he said. "Because you're the only six-year-old girl in the land of Israel who already knows her letters."

"I'm practically seven," I told him. "Next month. And I do, too, know my letters. I'll prove it!" I seized a lump of salt and scratched my name on the stone floor. Salome bat Eliakim.

The boy had been rooting around for something. He found it and came over to stare down at what I had done, thrusting a jug in my hands. "Zakharya said you were to drink this, too," he said. Then, before I could argue, "You've only written your name. Everyone knows how to write their own name. Bet you couldn't write *my* name if I told it to you."

"I bet I could!"

"Bet you that pomegranate juice you can't," he said.

"I can too!" I bristled. "What is it?"

"What's what?" he said.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"My name, you mean?" he asked, narrowing his right back at me. "Jonas Bar Matthias."

Carefully, with my tongue between my teeth, I scratched out the letters.

"Not bad for a girl," he said. He pulled out the stopper and passed me the jug. I drank down the juice, which was tart and sweet and cold, and immediately felt better.

"So why would a smart little girl like you be afraid of temple school?" he asked.

I drained the last drop of the lovely juice and set the bottle down with a triumphant smack. "I'm not *afraid*," I said scornfully. "It just wouldn't be..." I fumbled for the word. "Suitable. It wouldn't be suitable."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're a temple maiden, aren't you?"

I looked down at my white linen tunic, and felt the flush of guilt creep across my face.

"Aren't you?" he pressed.

I forced myself to meet his eyes, no matter what color my cheeks were. Their gold brightness pulsed like a breath. I couldn't lie to that brightness.

"They dressed me and prayed over me, but I don't think it took," I admitted to my feet--which, to my considerable irritation, appeared obstinately clean and white.

"Why not?" he asked, astonished.

I was so mad at my feet for forgetting themselves that I answered him straight out. "I'm not worthy."

He snorted. Was he *laughing*? "None of us feel worthy. That's why they send us to temple school in the first place. To prepare us."

I wanted, how I wanted, to leave it at that. But I knew that hiding my filthiness would be even worse than confessing it. I forced the words out one at a time. "This isn't something that can be fixed."

There was a short pause. "Salome, anything can be fixed. That's what the temple is for."

"Not this," I said. The room blurred, which made it easier to say the awful thing. "I'm a sorcerer."

"A sorcerer?" Jonas said. His voice shook, probably in horror. He swallowed. "I can see why you would be worried. What makes you think you're a sorcerer?"

I blinked the tears out of my eyes and peered at him. He looked right back, his face relaxed and amber eyes wide and interested.

"I don't know," I hedged. "Is it really all right to talk about something that wicked in the temple?"

He folded his arms high on his chest and stuck out his jaw, considering. "I think so," he said. "Especially since the reason I'm asking is to recognize the signs so the next time I come across sorcery I'll be able to fight it off. No offense," he added hastily.

"None taken," I said with a gracious little wave of the hand I had learned from Aunt Elisheva. I debated whether or not to confess. I certainly wanted to. The knowledge of my filthiness pressed on me, making it hard to breathe. I looked at the boy, who was rooting around for something else on the shelf behind him. He looked sturdy enough to stand what I was going to tell him. And we were, after all, in the temple. If he was overcome by my filthiness, there wasn't a better or more convenient place in the whole earth for purifying himself.

"All right," I said. "I'll tell you."

He put up a hand, stopping me before I could go any further. My heart sank. I knew it. He'd thought better of it.

But that wasn't it at all. "I nearly forgot," he said, and produced a covered dish. He removed the cover with a flourish, revealing some small sticky cakes dusted with cardamom seed. "Your uncle said your aunt made these special for you and your sister

and to make sure you got some so that you could tell her how good they were, or no one's life would be worth living."

I stared at him.

"Go on!" he said. "Try one! They sweeten and loosen the tongue, so it'll be easier to tell me whatever it is that has you so worried."

I took one and swallowed it obediently. It was good. I took another and let it rest on my tongue until all the sweetness had melted away. Then I sat up straight and talked to his golden eyes. "I see colors."

He waited.

"In the air around people."

He nodded politely, encouraging me to go on.

"They tell me things--like if the people are brave or telling the truth or sick."

"The colors do?" he said.

I nodded.

He leaned forward, sparkling with excitement. Excitement! "Do I have colors?" he asked.

I put up my hands. "Jonas!" I said, horrified.

"Oh, that doesn't mean you're a witch," he said, brushing aside my fear. "God talks to people in all kinds of languages. I hear Him in music. Other people have dreams."

"How do you know it's a gift from God, and not a trick?" I asked.

"That's easy. Does it tell you the truth? Can you trust what the colors tell you?"

I thought of the plainness and purity of Anna's white light, and the way the gray had overshadowed Imma's blue. "Yes," I said. "I can trust what they tell me."

He nodded. "Good. Then the other question is, does seeing the colors make you think about yourself, or does it connect you with the rest of the world? Does it separate you, or make you part of something bigger?"

I thought about it. That was a harder question to answer. I had felt so guilty about my gift that it was hard to think of it as something that might help anyone. I thought of the way it told me Imma was sick. Was that a gift, or a curse? A gift, I supposed. Knowing she was sick didn't make her sick. It just helped our family get ready to say goodbye.

"I suppose--it helps?"

"Well, then, I think you have your answer," he said. He licked the last crumbs of the last cardamom cake from his fingers and pushed himself to his feet. "Come on. They're all in the schoolroom."

"Right now?" I said.

He looked down at me. "As soon as I wash the rest of your breakfast from your face," he said. He shook crumbs from the napkin the cakes had been wrapped in and dipped a corner of it in stone jar of water. He wrung it out with his big hands, then motioned to me to hold up my face.

I closed my eyes as he laid the wet cloth on my face, all at once. I thought that that was the kind of thing a boy would do--scrub the whole thing at once, instead of dabbing at each individual smudge and crumb. He started to swish it around and without thinking, I put up my hands and held the edges down so he couldn't take it away. My lips shaped the dreadful words, and then I spoke them. "I told a lie. A big one. In front of all the girls and Aunt Elisheva and Anna and everyone. Now they'll all hate me, and they'll know I shouldn't be here, but I don't know where to go."

I felt the napkin lift up from my face, but I couldn't look at him. My stupid eyes were crying stupid tears undoing the service he had just done me. I hunched my shoulders and knuckled the tears away, furious at myself.

"Careful, or you'll give yourself a black eye," he said.

I dropped my hands to my sides and stared at the dust on the floor.

"Is this your first lie?" he wanted to know.

It took a physical effort for me to answer. "No," I finally admitted. "But it was the biggest."

“Hunh,” he said, mulling it over. “Do you plan on making this a habit?”

My head came up. “Of course not!” I snapped, hands on my hips. “Don’t you understand *anything*? It made me feel dirty and...” I searched for the word, gesturing wildly with my right hand as if I could pluck it from the sky. “And...and *small*. I don’t ever want to feel that way again.”

“All right, then.” Jonas looked down at the napkin in his hands, folded it into quarters, then leaned forward and daubed one of my eyes, then the other. He stepped back to check his handiwork. “There, that’s better,” he said. He turned away and began to tidy up our leavings. “If what happened this morning makes you want to be a more truthful person, then it was probably as good a way as any to start your time in the temple, if you think about it.”

I stared at him.

“Close your mouth, Salome,” he said, not unkindly. “You look like a fish. It’s time for us to get ourselves to school. You can tell me about my colors after.”

It turned out that the “Schoolroom” was really just the Chamber of the Veil where we usually worked and slept. Uncle Zakharya and the old priest who’d been sleeping instead of guarding us sat in the big carved wooden chairs at the center of the room. A younger priest with the narrow face and yellow eyes of a goat whose job seemed to be managing the big rolls of the Torah stood between them.

The students sat on rush mats in front of them, boys on the right, and girls on the left. I picked Miryam out at once--she had placed herself so she could watch the door for me and was practically thrumming with worry. She relaxed when she saw me, and motioned me to her side.

With a nod of thanks to Jonas, I picked my way over and sat down in the space next to her. She stuck her chin out to indicate a cloth-lined basket of wool. I looked around and saw that every maiden had one, though the older girls had been given flax, which was harder to spin than wool. Relieved that I was not one of them—unlike Miryam, I had no special gift for handwork—I combed through the bundle of fibers until I found a spindle and a whorl, tied on the first length of wool, and set to spinning it into thread.

I cast a quick glance at the boys' side of the room. There were more boys than girls, which was only natural since maidens had to leave the temple before they became women at twelve or thirteen, and boys didn't. Their hands were busy, too, although not with spinning, of course. They were busy copying texts; the older ones with ink and parchment, the younger ones with wax tablets and styluses. Most of them would eventually become scribes, the officials who were in charge of helping people find out what exactly the law had to say about things.

The room went silent. I suddenly realized that my fingers had stopped moving. I reached for some more wool, nearly knocking over my basket in my haste. I grabbed at it, forgetting that my hands were already full until the spindle and whorl clattered against the floor. I could feel my face flame as I steadied the wobbly basket, pulled out a random handful of wool, retrieved my spindle and whorl, and attempted to add to my meager little thread. But my hands were shaking with embarrassment, and I could not do it.

Silence.

I could feel the weight of a room full of accusing eyes. It was all I could do not to throw the horrible tangled mess of my spinning in their smug faces and scream and kick and cry like a baby. But I'd already made enough of a spectacle of myself for one morning.

I sat frozen. It took every ounce of will I had not to turn tail and run. There wasn't anything left over to plan what to do next. As the silence stretched on and on, I could feel my self-control begin to slip. With a gigantic effort, I dragged my gaze to Miryam, hoping for help although I knew I deserved none.

She caught my eye and shrugged in the way that meant, sorry, I don't know the answer either. Then she went back to her spinning.

Was that all?

I looked around, and realized that no one in the schoolroom was paying any attention to me at all. Most of the other students were scowling down at their own spinning or tablets. I risked a quick look at Uncle Zakharya and the other priest. They

sat surveying the students with identical expressions of placid interest, obviously waiting for some kind of response.

Finally, Joanna, the new girl from Alexandria, laid down her spinning. Uncle Zakharya inclined his head to her, and she got to her feet. "The children of Israel were told to make holy garments for Aaron 'for glory and for beauty,'" she said.

"Exactly right!" Zakharya said. "Well done, Joanna. So you temple maidens do your spinning and weaving for the glory of the High Priest, is that right?"

"No, sir," she said. "Not for the High Priest. For the Name, whom he represents."

I knew that when she said "the Name," she meant God, whose name was so holy you weren't supposed to use it in ordinary conversation. I looked back and forth between Uncle Zakharya and the priest with the sticky-outy ears, and thought that if I were the Name, I wouldn't choose two old men with stooped necks, hair coming out of their noses and ears, and crooked, misshapen fingers to represent me. Nor would I choose the priests I'd seen working in the courtyard a minute ago, their beards dripping sweat and their hands and feet spattered with blood. I'd want someone who shone, someone young and beautiful and confident, so people would notice my greatness and glory.

Two of those misshapen fingers lifted in a salute. Startled, I looked up to see that Uncle Zakharya had caught me staring at him. He gave me a deliberate wink and a ghost of a smile before turning to listen to something the old man next to him was quoting from Leviticus.

Love, as warm and real as Imma's arms gathering me into her lap at the end of a long day, broke over my whole body. Uncle Zakharya saw me. He knew I was here. It mattered to him that I was here. My nose and eyes prickled.

Imma should know. I hoped the Name knew that. I was pretty sure He already did, but I took all the energy I could find in and around me and sent it to Him to remind Him in case he had forgotten. My Imma would want to know about Uncle Zakharya, and Jonas and his red hair, and the priest with the sticky-outy ears whose words rolled out of him as though they were bigger than he was. She would want to know about Joanna and her lovely shy sister Priscilla, and Uncle Josef, and the way they'd hurt his hand and

moved his family here. And that that was confusing to our family, but we still kept going, being happy when we could.

I breathed it out to God. When I breathed in again, Aunt Elisheva and Anna were there, and the feeling of Miryam's strong back protecting me when I lay down to sleep. God knew. Imma knew. They were still there. They would help me find room for all the new things and people. I was still me.

Uncle Zakharya made a loud noise. He tried to turn it into a cough, but I could tell it was really a laugh about something one of the Levite singers, a scrawny boy who looked about twelve or thirteen, had just said. I looked at the boy again, seeing the resemblance to Joanna and wondering if that were her brother Josephus.

Uncle Zakharya caught my eye. He made a comic expression and rolled his eyes, and I knew he was laughing at his mistake, not the boy's. I saw his crooked fingers wander toward his girdle, and I knew he was wishing for a sweetmeat, but then he folded them in his lap, because this wasn't the time or the place.

I knew him, just like he knew me. There was enough room for both of us, and for the others, too. For the lives they used to live, for the lives we shared right now, and for the ways we would change each other.

Satisfied, I pulled some more wool free and schooled myself to listen.

Chapter 7: By Hand

When classes were over, the boys went to sing the afternoon service. The girls took a moment to fasten off their spinning, then lined up to pile their bobbins in a big basket set out by the door. Miryam deposited her offering and was turning to follow the others downstairs to the laundry when she felt a hand on her arm. She looked up to see who it belonged to. Rachel, the head girl with the wide hips and the kind eyes.

“Stay here and help me sort the thread,” Rachel invited with a friendly smile. “I’d like a chance to get to know you.”

Miryam glanced uncertainly at Salome, who was fussing over stacking her bobbin exactly right and hadn’t seemed to hear Rachel’s invitation. “I’m not sure...I mean, there’s Salome...” Miryam fumbled.

“Oh, Salome will be all right,” Rachel said. “Won’t you, Salome?”

Salome looked up. “Yes, I’m sure I will,” she said firmly, even though it was clear she had no idea what Rachel was talking about.

“Rachel asked me to stay here and help her for a few minutes while the rest of you go to the laundry,” Miryam explained. “Would you be all right if you went on your own?”

Salome looked at Miryam as if she had made an embarrassing noise. “Of course I’ll be all right,” she said. “We’re in the temple, remember? Bad things don’t happen to people in the temple.”

“Don’t worry, Miryam,” Zippora said, bouncing up behind them, face beaming with helpfulness. “I’ll watch Salome for you.”

Salome bristled. “I don’t need anyone to watch me!”

“Not like a babysitter,” Zippora said hastily. “I didn’t mean that at all. Like one friend taking care--I mean, like between friends. Maybe you could tell me about Nazareth?”

“That shouldn’t take long,” the next girl in line sniffed as she dropped her bobbin on the pile.

“Leah!” Rachel said sharply.

The girl called Leah scowled and turned away without saying anything, her movements so decided they practically sliced through the air.

“Don’t mind Leah,” Zippora told Salome. “That’s just the way she is.”

“What way is that?” Salome asked, interested.

Zippora looked around to make sure no one else was listening, then put her head close to Salome’s and began to tell her.

Miryam and Rachel watched the two little girls head off for the laundry. The door shut behind them, and the room was suddenly very quiet.

Rachel’s cheeks were pink, and at first she didn’t seem to know what to say. “I’m so sorry,” she managed. “My sister doesn’t always realize...”

Sister? What sister? When the answer came, it was so unexpected that it knocked all thought of the older girl’s distress right out of Miryam’s head. Had Rachel just told her that the rude girl Leah was her *sister*? Miryam was dumbfounded. They seemed such opposites—Rachel broad and welcoming, at home with herself and the world she stood in; Leah angular, abrupt, her slight frame barely able to contain the willful energy of her spirit.

Now that Miryam looked for it, though, she could see the family resemblance. They had the same unusually fair coloring, the same translucent hazel eyes matching the same gold highlights of their ruddy chestnut hair. They were both older than most of the other temple maidens; old enough, she would have thought, to be thinking about getting betrothed and leaving the temple. Then she realized something else. Rachel and Leah must be twins. According to tradition, Leah and Rachel, the mothers of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, had been twins, and it was common to name twin daughters in their honor.

“I didn’t know we were cousins,” she said. She cringed at the baldness of the words. “It’s just—Nazareth is so far away from everything. Just like Leah said.”

Rachel waved away the awkwardness. “Not close cousins. My grandmother Rachel is your Uncle Zakharya’s sister. She and my grandfather had three daughters: my

mother Marit, Joanna's mother Chania, and your Uncle Josef's wife, Sarah." She saw Miryam's confusion. "I know. And it gets worse. That boy your uncle sent to find Salome? He's my brother Jonas."

Miryam tried to rehearse what she'd just been told, laying it out nice and neat in her mind so she wouldn't forget. But she already had.

"Don't worry," Rachel reassured her. "You'll sort it all out eventually. Now, let's get to the thread." She rolled up her sleeves and tucked her skirts up under her girdle so that Miryam could see nearly to her sturdy knees, then gestured for Miryam to do the same.

Miryam wasn't sure how to react. Not that women didn't do that kind of thing all the time when there was hard work to be done and no men to see their immodesty. It just wasn't the kind of thing you expected to see a temple maiden do on temple grounds. Well, she supposed there was work to do here, same as anyplace else.

When she was ready, Rachel picked up one end of the big basket of the bobbins they had just spun. "First thing to do is get what we did today out of the way so it can rest."

Miryam picked up the other end. It was so much heavier than she'd expected that she grunted and almost lost her grip.

Rachel went right on explaining as though she hadn't noticed. "If we tried to ply it now, the twists would fight against each other and pull the finished thread to one side." As the two of them staggered across the floor, half-carrying, half-dragging the load of bobbins toward a curtained-off alcove, the flow of her voice thickened and broke. "Then we'll fetch... last week's thread... and ply it... and skein it." Rachel's half of the basket disappeared behind the curtain, and Miryam obediently followed. The basket thumped down with a loud creak.

Out of habit and despite her starving lungs, Miryam held her breath until the dust had a chance to settle. Since this floor was made of wood, not packed dirt, it was a wasted gesture, which Miryam would have felt worse about if she hadn't had to work so hard not to give into the shifting shapes and colors pressing so heavily behind her eyes.

Rachel managed to get herself upright. "Do you know how to ply?" she puffed.

Miryam was too busy gasping for air to do anything but shake her head no.

“Doesn’t matter,” Rachel said, waving the thought away and nearly going with it. She caught herself against the wall of the alcove, rested a few minutes more, then hooked the curtain out of the way. Light streamed in, revealing five additional baskets arranged in a tidy row. “Now all we have to do is move these one place to the right.”

Miryam could not repress a little shiver of dismay.

Rachel laughed. “No, no, it’s not as bad as you think. Come stand here by me.”

There was just enough space for the pair of them to scootch down with their backs to the line of baskets. “Put your feet up against the wall, just like that,” Rachel instructed. “Now on my signal, shove back as hard as you can. Ready? One, two, three, *push!*”

The baskets behind their shoulders scraped grudgingly along the floor. “All right,” Rachel said. “*That’s done.*”

They sat for a moment, catching their breath, then got to their feet and dragged the oldest basket free of the alcove. “These bobbins should be nice and stale,” Rachel said. “Especially with the holiday—it’s had plenty of time to rest and forget which way it’s used to pulling.” She picked up a bobbin. “Oh, this is nice work.” She untucked an end of the thread and held it out for Miryam to see.

It was nice work--smooth and regular. More regular than anything Miryam could spin. She couldn’t help darting a quick, worried glance towards the basket that held her own lopsided bobbin.

“Don’t worry if yours isn’t quite as perfect as this one,” Rachel said as if she could read Miryam’s mind. “It will be soon. Besides, they always use the thread we spin the first few days after a festival for toweling instead of garments. It takes all of us a while to get back into the rhythm of things.”

She showed Miryam how to walk out one end of the thread while she held onto the bobbin. Then they folded the length in half and twisted the two lengths together. “Plying reverses the twist you use when you spin,” Rachel explained as the girls paced toward each other across the glossy wooden floor. “You’re balancing it out, so the yarn hangs straighter and so weak or bulky thread can be balanced out by a partner thread.”

“Like a marriage,” Miryam said absently.

“Or a sister,” Rachel added.

But Miryam was concentrating too hard on the lengths of thread playing through her fingers to pay much attention. The trick was to roll the two threads toward each other, then stop just as the little hairs on one started to hold hands with the little hairs on the other. Twist them more, and the thread became angry and awkward with tension. Twist it less, and the two sprang bashfully apart as soon as you released them.

“All right,” Rachel said when the two girls were within a few feet of each other. She stopped, and adjusted the play of the completed thread she was winding onto a new bobbin. “Now, don’t be embarrassed if your side of the thread is not quite as—My goodness!” She compared the thread she had already wound with that playing out from Miryam’s hands.

“What did I do wrong?” Miryam asked.

“Nothing!” Rachel said. “Absolutely nothing! This looks as though I plied the whole thing myself. You’ve really never done this before?”

Miryam shook her head.

Rachel examined the thread again, holding it close to her eyes. “This is really remarkable,” she said. “It took me more than a year to be able to...” She raised her head. “You’re certainly good with your hands. What’s your secret?”

She was half-teasing, half-serious. Miryam looked down at her hands, but they looked the same as they always did. She shrugged, not knowing what to say.

“I thought we’d have to go through a basket or two before you got the hang of it, but you’ve caught right on!” Rachel finished winding the plied thread on the new bobbin. “Shall we do another?” Miryam could feel a little smile tugging at her lips. She liked plying. She liked the silence, the glow of the light on the floor, the rhythm of their feet moving toward each other. And she liked knowing she was good with her hands.

When they got close enough together to talk without shouting, Rachel broke the silence. “I wonder why God makes us that way,” she said.

“What way?”

“Unbalanced,” Rachel said. “Leah thinks I’m boring and bossy because I like making sure that everything goes the way it should. And I think *she’s* careless and maybe even a little selfish. If you were God, don’t you think you’d want to balance things out? Give her more patience and me more flexibility so we weren’t always tugging at each other and could just get along?”

It was an interesting question. “I don’t know,” Miryam said, playing for time.

“You and Salome are the same way,” Rachel said as they marched past each other. “She talks and throws herself into things and you seem to hang back a little. Do you ever wish you could give her some of you and have her give you some of her?”

Miryam thought about it. The prospect seemed flat. “Not really,” she admitted. “There are plenty of times I’d like to throttle her--like when she said that about the incense this morning--but the world wouldn’t be as interesting if we were all the same.”

“Things would be easier, though,” Rachel argued. “And neater.” She sighed. “But boring, too. I guess.” She finished winding the bobbin. “That’s two!”

“It feels good to be able to take your time,” Miryam said as the girls approached each other near the end of the third bobbin.

“I know just what you mean,” Rachel said. “I think that’s the best part about working in the temple. God’s in charge, so there’s no hurry. You just do what is put in front of you, and leave the rest to Him.”

It was a restful thought.

Before that afternoon with Rachel, Miryam had never suspected that she was good with her hands. Afterwards, it seemed as though that was the only thing anyone said about her. She had never been famous for anything, and it was nice to have people notice her. Most of the time. But there were drawbacks, too.

One drowsy summer afternoon, a few weeks after their arrival, Miryam was scrubbing her way through a big pile of blood- and ash-smeared robes in the laundry. The splash of water, the creak of the washboards, and the after-meal chatter of the other girls had lulled her into a pleasantly dream-like state, and when Anna suddenly appeared at her elbow and announced it was time Miryam warped a loom of her own, it

took Miryam a moment to register that Anna was talking to *her*. Even after the old woman touched her on the arm, rolled her eyes, and then repeated the message, Miryam was sure she'd missed the sense of the words. Only a handful of the oldest and most experienced girls were assigned looms of their own. Anna must have made a mistake.

But she didn't *look* like she'd made a mistake. She stood planted in front of Miryam like a slope-shouldered old tree, too intent on the serious business of making shade and wood and fruit to bother much with the petty demands of whatever creatures happened to be scurrying by.

Miryam didn't want to be one of those scurrying creatures. She wanted to be the tree, planted solidly right where it already was. She was finally beginning to belong, and then the next thing you knew here was Anna uprooting her from the place she'd finally begun to understand and setting her down in the middle of new problems and complications she really didn't want to worry about just now.

"I'll wait while you tidy your things," Anna said, settling herself on the big stone bench Miryam usually used for folding. "No need to rush."

If being given responsibility for a loom of her own when she'd practically just gotten here wasn't rushing, Miryam thought crossly, she didn't know what was. She didn't say that, of course. She just took all the time she needed to rinse the robe she'd been washing; arrange it on the drying rack so that no part of it touched the floor; mop up the water that had slopped to the stone floor at her station; hang *that* rag to dry; and unroll her sleeves and rearrange her clothing and her hair. Only then, when she had exhausted every last possible way to put things to rights, did she pronounce herself ready, and dutifully follow Anna toward the shadowy entrance to the stairwell, casting one last wistful glance at the companionable chatter of the girls.

Ten minutes later, Anna was explaining that, "The warp threads are the men of the house." Her big knobby hands moved up and down, up and down between the horizontal beams of the loom, leaving parallel tracks of thread in their wake. "Everything depends on them. Without a steadfast warp, the finished cloth will be weak and distorted no matter what."

Fathers didn't make the shape of a family, Miryam (who was still wishing herself back in the laundry with the other girls) silently argued. *Mothers did*. That's why hers... but she wasn't going to think about that now. Besides, Anna was waggling the spool under her nose.

"I said," Anna said, "now *you* try. Mustn't woolgather." She cackled at her own joke.

Miryam had been doing a lot of that lately. Daydreaming. Wondering about things when she should have been busy laboring for the Lord. She hadn't been that way at home in Nazareth. But there were so many new ideas here she couldn't seem to help it. She shook every last distracting thought out of her head, grasped the spool, and began passing it up and down, up and down, just as Anna had.

"Space them just right, now," Anna admonished. "Each one needs room to be itself. But if you set them too loose or too far apart, they'll tangle."

It was the same lesson she'd discovered for herself when Rachel had first taught her how to ply thread. So why did it irritate her so much when Anna said it?

Miryam sighed. She didn't know why she was fighting this new task. She was in the temple, she reminded herself. Her only responsibility was to do what was asked of her. No need to examine her job, or have an opinion about it. All she had to do was obey.

But warping was harder than plying. When you plied, you were part of a team. You weren't responsible in the same way. And you were walking, and there was someone to talk to when the words piled up inside you. Looms weren't like that at all. They caught and held you in one place. And it was hard to lay down each line of thread exactly like all the ones before--no closer, no further, no tighter, no looser. Just exactly the same, so that you were absolutely true. And it was especially hard when you were doing it in front of someone who assumed you already knew what you were doing even when you didn't.

The heavy linen thread was rubbing a channel in her fingertips. The filaments of flax were stiff and angular, not soft and resilient like wool's. Her mother had always said that flax was for hard grown-up hands. Now Miryam knew why.

Her neck and shoulder were aching. She could feel sweat trickling down between her shoulder blades. She tried to shrug it away, but only managed to knock her elbow

against the heddle, which jerked, sending four columns of perfectly spaced threads crowding on top of each other.

Miryam wanted to scream. But she was in the temple. There was no screaming in the temple. She tried to swallow her frustration, but it lodged in her throat, an indigestible, sullen mass.

Sticking the spool under one arm, she teased at the crooked lines of thread with her fingernails. They didn't budge. The sullen mass of her frustration spread to her fingers, so that they became stiff and clumsy.

Anna's big hand descended, stilling Miryam's increasingly frustrated movements. "Not so tight, not so tight," Anna said. "Threading wants a gentle, easeful touch, like this." She tugged the spool out from under Miryam's arm and began to demonstrate, her movements soft and fluid. "Take a minute to shake out your fingers," she instructed. "They'll do their work much easier if *they* are easy."

Miryam stepped away from the loom and shook out her hands until her fingers blurred, but the antsy feeling inside her didn't budge.

Anna's big shoulder dipped and rose, dipped and rose. "I could warp looms all day long," the old woman said with deep contentment.

"*Really?*" Miryam said.

Anna chuckled. "That surprises you, does it?"

Miryam moved closer, the better to see the forest of perfectly spaced warp threads springing up in the wake of Anna's motions. "A little," she admitted.

"Now why is that, I wonder?"

A minute ago Miryam had been wishing for a friendly conversation. But Anna's question felt like a poke. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be a polite way of avoiding it. "I guess because I'm not any good at it yet and it's frustrating to make so many mistakes," she said. "But even if I were better at it, it's just the same thing over and over again. I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere."

"Ah," Anna said, raising her bristly eyebrows and nodding sagely as her hands swooped up and down, up and down.

"It's not as though you're really making anything yet," Miryam tried to explain. "Not you--I didn't mean you exactly..."

Anna waved her fumbling apology aside.

"Us," Miryam clarified. "I mean we--we're still just getting ready. I want to get on to the part with the colors and the pattern. The *real* weaving."

"The real weaving?"

"The part that shows," Miryam explained. Something about what she had just said bothered her, but she was tired of trying to explain things that she didn't want to think about, so she waved her hands in front of Anna's nose to show how nice and floppy they were. "Let me try."

Anna stepped back and handed her the spool.

Straining to keep her grip light, Miryam imitated the swooping motions Anna's hand and arm had made.

"That's better," Anna's voice said from behind her. "See how it frees you up when you let go a little? Just enough to get the job done. That's all you need. More than that is nothing but pride."

Miryam was still feeling contrarian. "Aren't we supposed to do our best?"

"Your best, yes, but not more than that. The Lord's never in a hurry, are You, Lord?"

"That's what Rachel said," Miryam said.

"Did she now? Well, she's a wise one, Rachel. The Lord knows how long things take, and plans for it. Sometimes it can be frustrating, and that's the truth. You think it's time to move on and He seems to be holding you back. Other times you feel like you aren't making any difference at all, that no matter how hard you try you will never get it right. But He knows what things are hard for you, even though other people think they shouldn't be, and He takes it all into account. So that's the first thing."

"What first thing?" Miryam asked.

"The first part of my answer."

Miryam didn't follow. "What answer?"

"I'm explaining why you shouldn't be surprised," Anna said.

This was what it had been like to talk to Old Huldah. Sometimes you had to fill in some of the words for yourself. "Why I shouldn't be surprised that you like to warp the loom?"

"Yes," Anna said. She made her hand into a fist and held it up. "You said it was frustrating," — one finger popped up — "boring," — another — "and not real." Three crooked fingers waved in the air. Anna pointed at the first finger, while Miryam fought her impatience. "So I explained that when you're not in a hurry, the frustration goes away." She folded it down. "Next, you said it was boring, is that right?"

Miryam nodded. She was being lectured to, and she didn't like it.

"The second thing is something my husband told me when we were betrothed. He was a good man, and I knew he'd be a good husband and father, but the first time he asked I refused him." She chuckled. "That caused quite a commotion, I'll tell you that!"

Miryam forgot her resentment. Anna had refused a suitor? Could that possibly be true? Although girls had the legal right to refuse a suitor, they almost never did. Becoming a wife and mother was the whole point of a Jewish woman's life. She tried to make sense of Anna doing such a thing. "Were you afraid he might be...unworthy?"

Anna waved her suggestion aside. "No, no, nothing like that. I just didn't want to be a wife. Not ever. I thought it sounded like the worst kind of drudgery I could imagine, and I told him so. Yaakov, I mean. My mother was so shocked I thought we'd lose her."

Miryam could see why. She'd never heard of a girl who didn't want to get married at *all*. Never mind one who was willing to say so right out loud in front of the whole village. She looked at Anna with new respect. "What a brave thing to do," she said. "I can't even imagine it."

Anna laughed and shook her head. "I didn't feel very brave, and that's the truth. I was trembling so hard I was afraid I'd fall right over in the dust." Her eyes slid once more toward Miryam then back again. "I knew my parents would be furious, and

thought that maybe they'd just tell me to scat and I wouldn't have a home at all." She had stopped warping the loom and stood gazing off into space.

"What did he do?" Miryam prompted.

"Yaakov?"

Miryam nodded.

"He laughed at me. It hurt my feelings something awful." Her eyes were wet, and she scrubbed at them and tried to smile. "Not that he meant to, of course. I was big for my age and strong as a horse — Mother always said I was built for hard labor — so he didn't have any way of knowing how I'd take it. But underneath I was a tender little thing, and if I could have dug a hole and hidden myself in it forever I would have."

Miryam felt an almost unbearable surge of sympathy.

"But that's neither here nor there," Anna said, recollecting herself. "What I want you to hear is what Yaakov said next. Listen hard, Lambie, because greater wisdom you'll never hear."

Obediently, Miryam opened her heart to receive the promised wisdom.

"He said he had no doubt that being a wife and mother would be hard work, but as for whether it was drudgery—that would be up to me. 'There's something to be learned in every situation,' he told me. 'If you are a drudge, that's no one's fault but yours. It means you're too lazy to open your eyes to find what your task has to teach you.'"

Those were Yaakov's wise words? Scolding Anna, the *hardest*-working, best-hearted woman Miryam had ever known, for her natural fears? Calling her *lazy*? A flicker of righteous indignation sprang up in Miryam's chest, wavered, then caught hold of the afternoon's accumulated frustrations and flared to brilliant life. How dared he? How *dared* he? The swine! The scum! The words burst out of her mouth like a swarm of angry bees. "If I'd been there, I'd have...I'd have...well, I don't know exactly what I would have done, but I'd have made sure he never said anything like that to you again!"

Anna's heavy jaw sagged in surprise.

So did Miryam's. Too late, she clapped her hands over her rude mouth.

Anna's mouth twitched, as if she'd been stung. Then, incredibly, she was laughing.

Anna laughed until her big lower lip was purple. She laughed until tears streamed in rivulets down her wrinkled face. She laughed until she couldn't breathe and Miryam had to help her to a seat.

By the time Anna had thrown her apron over her head and progressed to silent wheezes, Miryam was beside herself. Was the old woman having some kind of fit? What should she do—stay with her or run for Aunt Elisheva? She didn't know. She didn't *know*. The itchy, blocked feeling she'd gotten in her hands was back, but now it was in her chest, in her arms, in her legs, until Miryam felt as though she really was going to fly into a million pieces.

"My goodness, what's all this?"

It was Aunt Elisheva's voice. "I don't know!" Miryam cried, throwing herself at her bewildered aunt. Elisheva's arms came up to catch her, and then Miryam was sobbing against her aunt's soft chest. "She said...she said...she liked to warp looms, and *I* said it seemed boring and hard, and then she said her husband called her lazy when she wouldn't marry him. I told her..." Miryam gulped. "I told her he sounded awful, and then she started to—she just..." She waved at the older woman, who still gasped silently for air. "I didn't mean to upset her!"

"She knows that. You just have a good cry. It sounds like you've needed one." She stood and rubbed Miryam's back and made little soothing noises like Imma used to until both Miryam and Anna had recovered themselves.

"It's my fault, Ellie," Anna finally managed. "But if you could have seen her—hands on her hips, ready to go to battle against that sweet, humble Yaakov who wouldn't hurt a fly—" and then she was off again.

Miryam looked up at her aunt. The lower half of Elisheva's face was oddly stiff, and Miryam realized that she was trying not to smile. "I understand Anna's husband was quite a small, self-effacing individual," Elisheva started to explain.

"That's my Yaakov," Anna managed between wheezes. "Mighty in spirit in his own way, but you'd have bowled him over, and that's the truth. Here I was thinking of you as a fragile flower, and then up you roar, fierce as a lioness defending her cubs. Nine

years old, and you would have had Yaakov quaking like a leaf. You put me in mind of your good mother, and that's a fact. Oh, dear me, I don't know when I've laughed so hard." She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and patted the bench next to her. "Now, lambie, you come sit yourself right here and we'll sort ourselves out. Off you go, Elisheva. It's nearly afternoon prayers and I know you've work to do."

Elisheva teetered, obviously torn between her temple duties and her concern for her niece. She finally lifted Miryam's chin, turning her body so that they were apart from Anna. "Are you all right?" she asked for only Miryam to hear.

Miryam noticed again how beautiful her aunt's face was, even now, when little lines of concern puckered the corners of her eyes. She felt her eyes prickle again, and hastily refocused her gaze a few inches to the right, where her aunt's thick dark hair swept up behind her ears. "I'm fine," she said, and realized with mild surprise that she was telling the truth. She felt tired and sheepish, but like herself.

Elisheva patted her shoulder. "Excellent." She raised her voice, including Anna. "Don't keep at it too much longer, will you, Anna? We don't want to tire her out."

"She's hasn't quite gotten the trick of it yet, but she will," Anna said. "As soon as I stop talking and we get back to doing."

"If you're sure," Elisheva said. "It's been a long time since Anna gave a loom to someone as young as you, Miryam, but she said you're ready and she's never wrong. So you store up every little detail because your uncle and I will want to hear all about it at dinner. And now, if you'll excuse me, the priests are waiting...." She dropped a kiss on the top of Miryam's head, drew out a pile of linens from one of the chests, and bustled off.

Miryam watched her go. When she turned back, Anna was holding the bobbin out to her.

"Go on. Take it."

Miryam took the thread. She took a moment to study the loom, reminded herself to loosen her grip, then began. "Like this?"

Anna watched. "Almost," she said. She cleared her throat. "I did a poor job telling you about Yaakov. What I was trying to say was that wise people always have more to learn. They don't let themselves be bored. Instead, they notice what they don't understand, or something that isn't beautiful, and they wonder about it, and try new things until it comes right. It's the difficulties that make things interesting. Let me show you what I mean."

Miryam handed over the bobbin.

Anna used it to gesture toward the warp threads. "I think about how they are like soldiers, standing at attention. Then I think about them falling through the air," she floated the bobbin down, "and then I plant them in the earth, but I let them still yearn for heaven." She looped the bobbin round the bottom beam with a deft twist of her wrist. "Like so. Now you try."

Miryam did. She stood the thread at attention, then she floated it down and planted it in the earth, and drew its gaze back up to heaven. Then she did it again. And again.

"What did I tell you?" Anna said. "You were ready the whole time, weren't you, Lambie? No need to force things. You just have to play around a little bit and it all falls into place. Do a score more, and the feeling will have planted itself in your hands."

"And the third thing?"

"The what?" Anna asked, eyes intent on ranks of warp threads.

"The third thing you were going to explain to me?" Miryam reminded her. "About how warping the loom was just as real as weaving the design?"

"Look at what you've done," Anna said.

Miryam looked.

"Now close your eyes and imagine yourself weaving the design."

Miryam did. She saw herself passing a shuttle between the warps, laying down a line of crimson, then doubling back and back until the line became a shape. Then letting that shuttle rest while she added the next, this one of soft blue. And then one of purple, and another of white. And finally, a fine thread of gold-wrapped silk, so that the garden

she had seen in her mind, that had streamed through her fingers into the physical world, could be shot through with light.

“Now make the warp threads disappear.”

Miryam did. Instantly, her garden crashed to the ground in a welter of tangled thread. Her eyes flew open with the surprise and disappointment of it.

“We all need something to tug against,” Anna said. “Else there is no form.” She held up one big, misshapen hand, fingers parallel, thumb sticking out at a right angle. “Think how useless our hands would be without their thumbs. Couldn’t keep hold of anything, now could we?” She stepped away from the loom and stretched.

“That was a good afternoon’s work, Lambie. I’m proud of you. No, don’t go hurrying away. Your work’s not done until you’ve studied on it.”

So, for the second time, Miryam looked. The warp threads stood as straight and proud as... as... the strings of a beautiful harp. And she was the one—her hands, her arms, her listening ear and willing brain—that had made them that way. She felt her body opening to receive—or maybe just remember—a little more strength, a little more energy, a little more rightness than had been there before. *Remember this*, she told herself. Next time you aren’t sure, next time there’s something hard you must do. Remember what it will feel like when it is done.

Part II: Cultivating

Chapter 8: Living Light

I can tell you exactly when I learned to see colors. It was the spring before my fourth birthday. One night at dinner, Abba said the little trickle of water in the hills above our house had swollen to a stream. Miryam and I begged Imma to let us go play in it. She said no. We begged some more. And some more. Finally, after breakfast the next morning, she laughed, brushed the flour off her hands and my nose, and said oh, all right, the earth had probably dried out enough so we wouldn't track half the mountain in the house with us when we came back, and since it was such a beautiful day, maybe she'd come along too and bring the laundry.

Helping with the laundry had sounded like fun. But the water was so cold it burned and Imma kept telling us not to do anything that might stir up more mud than the rushing water had already, and to just be patient, she'd be done in a minute.

Miryam told me I was David, scouting out the smoothest, roundest, hardest stones to fling against Goliath. The real David only gathered five, since he knew perfectly well he'd only have a few seconds before Goliath ran him through, but Imma was taking so long that Miryam said he had decided he needed to find enough stones for the whole army to use in case he lost and they had to fight Goliath themselves. So I found the stones while Miryam picked apart an old goat hair blanket that had so many holes in it that Imma said it wouldn't survive another wash and used the twine to finger weave us each a slingshot. My pile of stones got bigger and bigger until I practically couldn't reach the top of it any more. Then I found the best stone of all, and it was so smooth and so round and wanted to splash in the water so much and if I'd tried to put it on the pile, it would have just rolled off and gotten lost, and I could feel it pulling me closer to the water...

I don't know how Imma knew I was there. I was creeping by so craftily, so softly, and besides she was facing the other way. And maybe she didn't know. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but her voice reached out and snagged me back. "Salome, I need your help." She turned around to show me the soaking wet blob of cloth in her hands. "This is

the last one, and the most special. This headcovering belonged to *my* Imma when I was your age. Do you think you are big enough to help me spread it out?"

Of course I was.

"Are your hands clean?" she asked.

I dropped the rock, wiped my hands on my tunic, and held them out for inspection. She checked, then allowed me to take careful hold of one of the edges and help her stretch it out on a big flat rock. "This is the only thing I have of your Grandma's besides that big cooking pot, so we need to be extra careful. Can you pull that corner a little further? Perfect." She put her hands on her forehead so that wind couldn't blow her hair in her eyes anymore and smiled at me, her eyes as blue as the sky. "You, my fine little friend, were a great help. Thank you. And now we're done and you can play."

"We're done!" I bellowed joyously as I raced to my pile of stones. "We're done!" I loaded up my arms with as many as I could carry and began heaving them into the water. Plop! Plop! Plop!

"Don't use them all up before the slingshots are done!" Miryam warned. "Besides, it's lots more fun if you do only one at a time, so you have a chance to really notice it."

I thought it was more fun to make the biggest, noisiest splash I could, and that took LOTS of stones. But it was such a beautiful day and she hadn't gotten to throw in any at all, so I let most of the stones I had in my skirt slide to the ground, and concentrated on every part of the next throw. Arm up, arm whipping through the air so I made the air into wind, then the wonderful, juicy *plop* and the brown muddy water went up into the air around it, turning clear and beautiful. "Flowers!" I shouted.

"Not flowers, Salome, rocks," Miryam corrected.

"No! No! Look! Flowers!" I said, and did it again.

This time she understood. "The water comes up like a flower around the rock, doesn't it, Salome?"

I beamed at her, and felt for another rock while *her* rock made flowers in the water. I had it half way to throwing position when it wriggled. I froze. When I could stand to, I turned my head to see why the stone in my hand was behaving so oddly.

It wasn't the stone. The stone just sat there the way stones are supposed to. But I had somehow picked up a lizard at the same time. I stared at the spotty gray creature squirming under my fingers. How had I done that? Miryam and I had spent HOURS trying to catch lizards, but they always ran away too fast. Now I'd caught one without even trying. The lizard squirmed again and stared at me with its scary snaky eyes. It was not as much fun to have caught a lizard as I thought it would be. I hesitated, but when it wriggled again, I threw it away as hard as I could, right into the river.

It somersaulted through the air, thrashing about like it thought it could fly if it just tried hard enough, then disappeared into a foamy eddy.

"What was that?" Miryam said.

The lizard surfaced. It was trying to swim, but only on one side. The squirmy feeling in my hand spread to the bottom of my stomach.

I needed that lizard to stop. He had to go away. I picked up a stone and threw it as hard as I could, but missed.

"Don't!" Miryam shouted. *"Imma, make her stop!"* She started scrambling toward that old lizard as fast as she could over the shifty, slippery rocks. She fell once, smacking her knees hard, but she didn't care, didn't even check for blood, just kept right on making for that old lizard. I couldn't tear my eyes off her, even though I wanted to. I knew I should be getting Imma, who would stop this nonsense before anyone got hurt, but I didn't know how long that would take—probably much too long, since Miryam didn't have that far to go, and if she fell in while I was gone I'd miss the best splash of the day. So I stayed right where I was.

To my disappointment, Miryam skittered to a stop just short of the rushing water. She'd been going so fast I thought she might tip right on in anyway, but although she waved her arms around for a minute, she managed to save herself. She looked around, found a stick, and held it out for the lizard to climb onto.

But it wouldn't. Or maybe it couldn't. Or maybe it didn't even notice—the half that was working was going slower and slower, like it was getting tired. Miryam had to keep jerking the stick away so it wouldn't clobber the lizard, and then it was hard for her to

put it in the right place and hold it steady. She was trying so hard her fingers turned as white and stiff as bone. So did her face, except for her eyes.

Then another hand—Imma’s—covered Miryam’s. “Let go of the stick,” she said.

“I can’t!” Miryam said desperately.

“Yes, you can,” Imma said. “I’ve got something that won’t hurt him.” She showed Miryam what she had in her other hand—a pale bundle that shook out into the headcloth we had just finished stretching out to dry. “That’s it—just let your fingers relax, one at a time.”

Finally, the stick dropped into the creek and was swept away. Miryam threw herself into Imma’s arms. “He’s going to die,” she wept. “The water is so cold and he’s getting tired and I think something’s wrong with one of his legs.”

“He might,” Imma agreed. “But he’s not dead yet.” She dropped her cloth on top of the lizard. Its edges sank lower and lower into the brown water, while the middle dropped over the lizard like another skin. She scooped the bundle out of the water then lay the lizard as gently as she could on a flat sunny rock, peeling away the headcloth and dropping it in the dust.

I was aghast. I closed my eyes and opened them again. And again. But no matter how many ways I looked at it, my mother’s headcloth still lay discarded in the dust. The one that was so special she almost wouldn’t let me touch it. And then two minutes later she’d ducked it into the water to save the naughty, squirmy lizard that had scared me. And then she’d still been so worried about the stupid lizard that she’d thrown away this treasure from Grandma like it was nothing, like it was less than the oldest, worn-outiest rag you could ever think of. *And* she hadn’t even yelled at Miryam for getting too close to the water.

There was only one possible conclusion. My Imma loved that stupid lizard more than she loved me. And so did Miryam.

I felt my lower lip push out and start to tremble. Big girls didn’t cry. I knew that. But when Imma and Miryam stayed too busy fussing over the lizard to even notice they’d hurt my feelings, tears started leaking out of my eyes all by themselves.

They still didn't notice, so I let them leak louder.

"Oh, be quiet, Salome," Miryam snapped without even looking. "If you were hurt would you want to have to listen to some little girl wailing on and on?" She raised her head, but it was Imma she wanted, not me. "Is he going to die?" she asked in a trembly sort of voice.

Imma smoothed Miryam's thick shiny hair back from her face with her strong, spare Imma fingers. "I don't know," she admitted. "Let's give him another few minutes—he might just be dazed."

I stomped closer, partly so they would notice how upset I was and partially to see what "dazed" meant. Imma and Miryam were still bending over him, but there was a space between them so I could see what was happening. Not much. The lizard just lay there, looking stupid, his scary black tongue hanging out one side of his mouth. I reached through and poked the soft white side of his tummy to see if he would wake up.

"Leave the poor thing alone!" Miryam snapped, knocking my hand away. "He's probably dead, and it's all your fault."

Her angry words punched me right in the heart. I staggered back, so hurt and confused that for a minute my legs forgot what they were supposed to do. I grabbed on to Imma's skirt and held on for dear life until the world stopped spinning. But when it did, I was sorry. I was looking at the lizard, and his strange snaky eyes were looking right back, like he wanted me to see what I had done.

It was horrible. I twisted away, starting to cry, but it didn't help. I could still feel him looking at me. Desperate, I shouted the meanest thing I could think of: "I hope you die, you stupid thing!"

I was talking to the lizard, but I think maybe Miryam and Imma thought I was talking about them, because both of their heads came up and their eyes were big and round and so were their mouths. But I didn't tell them that they looked like fish. I was in too big a hurry to get out of there. No one who said something so bad could stay in a nice village like ours.

There was only one place I knew of that might be willing to admit someone as wicked as I had just become: the gang of Zealots the big boys said were camping out in

the caves at the top of the mountain. The Zealots hated the Romans. They hated them so much they spent all their time practicing how to fight and how to steal. Well, if I couldn't live in the village anymore, I'd need to know how to do both those things. But those caves were a long way away. I'd have to hurry to get there by dark. I took off up the path leading to those scary caves, running faster than I ever had in my life—probably even faster than any lizard had *ever*.

I didn't get far. A pair of strong arms closed over my shoulders and the next thing I knew my feet were jerked right off the ground. Imma plonked me down right in front of her, hard enough to tell me she meant business. "Salome, what on *earth* has gotten into you today?"

I turned away, but there was Miryam, still hovering over that stupid lizard. I screwed my eyes tight shut so I wouldn't have to look at either of them, hunched my shoulders up over my ears, and refused to budge.

"I'm waiting," Imma said.

I shrugged. She could wait all she wanted to. I had already burned my bridges. There was no going back now.

Words I hadn't planned to say suddenly leaked—no, exploded—out of my mouth. "You love that stupid old lizard more than you love me!" I shouted.

I opened my eyes in time to see Imma and Miryam exchange a look, and that was enough to strip away the shreds of my control. I fought and sobbed and bit and kicked—anything to get away from this horrible place and these people who had *tricked* me, who pretended to like me but didn't at all. "I hate you! I hate you!" I screamed, drumming head and heels and anything else I could think of against the rocks on the path.

Imma said something to Miryam. I didn't care. I didn't care. I just wanted them to go away and take their precious lizard with them.

After a while, when I was too tired to do anything anymore but just lie there in a ball, I heard some whispers, some rustling, and then footsteps going away. I was so surprised I nearly opened my eyes to make sure, but they were too heavy. Besides, I was glad they were gone. Glad. I wriggled one arm under my head for a pillow, stuck the

thumb from the other hand into my mouth, and waited for the hiccups to go away so I could fall sleep.

A cool hand stroked the hair back from my forehead. I tensed, and Imma said, "It's all right, Salome. It's just me. Miryam has taken the lizard away."

That was more like it. I didn't say anything, but I let her take me up on her lap.

She shifted around a little bit until we were both comfortable. "Now," she said, as though we were talking about whether we should weed the garden before or after we did the spinning. "Why don't you tell me what got you so upset?"

But I couldn't. It was all too big and I was too tired.

She kissed my forehead. "You were mad about the lizard," she said. "I know that. Was there anything else?"

"The headcloth," I said around my thumb.

"The headcloth?" she said, holding me back a little so she could see me better. "Why were you mad about the headcloth?"

I shrugged. She cocked one eyebrow. I still didn't say anything. She sighed and gathered me back in her arms.

"You thaid to be careful," I reminded her when we were comfortable again.

Imma looked puzzled. "Be careful of the water?"

I shook my head. "Not the water. The...the..." but I was too tired to find the word again. I skated my arms down my head to show her. "The thing. That was your imma's."

"The headcloth?" she said. "So I did. And you were careful. Very careful."

I worried at a darned place on her elbow. "You weren't," I told it.

"What do you mean?" she said, surprised. "Oh, with the lizard?"

I felt my lips get trembly again, so I just nodded.

"It hurt your feelings that I told you to be careful with the headcloth and then went ahead and used it to rescue the lizard," she realized.

“You got it all dirty,” I told the darned place.

“Well, sweetie, I had to. I was afraid he was going to die. Animals are our friends. We don’t worry about silly things like headcloths when our friends need us.”

I scowled up at her from underneath my eyebrows. “Naughty old lizard.”

“Just because his wiggles surprised you doesn’t mean he was naughty,” Imma said. “He was just minding his own business and suddenly a big Salome monster was waving him around in the air—”

“Not a monster!” I protested, stung.

“Not to me,” Imma said, giving me a squeeze. “Not to the Lord. But lizards are very little, and not very smart. His tiny confused little brain told him that you were a big scary monster. So he used the wriggly fast body that the Lord gave him to keep him safe and tried to run away. He didn’t mean to scare you. He was just trying to stay safe.”

I considered what she had said. I thought about what it would be like to be a little wriggly lizard dozing in the sun without any friends or clothes or house to keep me safe. I thought about how scary it would be to see a giant Salome coming, how fast I would try to run to get away, how terrible it would be to feel her giant hand smothering me against the rock I was trying to hide behind. How hard I would try to wriggle and run away. And then—and then....

I burst into tears. “I *was* a Salome monster!” I wept. “A big scary Salome monster!”

Imma gathered me in her arms. “Shh, shh,” she soothed. “Not to me. You are my Salome miracle.”

“But I hurt him! I did!” I cried against her chest.

She pushed me back a little, so that we were face to face. “Yes, you probably did,” she said. “Although healthy lizards don’t usually let themselves be caught, so there may have been something wrong with him even before you threw him. But even if your throw was the thing that hurt him, you didn’t realize what you were doing. You were too little to understand. But now you do, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“So now when someone or something hurts or surprises you, you’ll remember that lots of times they didn’t mean to. That they are just being the way God made them. And instead of hurting them, you will try to find a way to make this world safe for you both, won’t you?”

The thought of all that extra worry made me tired. My mother’s presence suddenly seemed suffocating, not comforting, and I scootched myself a little away from her.

“Because that’s the difference between being a baby and a grown-up,” she went on. “A baby only thinks about herself. A grown-up is someone who is strong enough to make room not only for herself, but for everyone else, too. We call that Wisdom. Wisdom tells you you know how to do the right thing in the right way at the right time in the right place so that you can have what you need to keep growing without hurting anyone else.”

That sounded hard. We were sitting on a rock ledge dotted with potholes. The one closest to me had collected a little pile of pebbles and sand that glinted invitingly in the golden sun. I stuck my finger in and gave them a stir. The color of the light had fooled me. It had made them look warm and summery, but they were cold and damp. I wiped off the bits of sand and dirt as best I could, then put my finger in my mouth to help it forget the unpleasantness of those cold gritty pebbles.

“It’s not always an easy thing to do,” Imma said. “You make lots of mistakes and hurt others even when you don’t mean to, and they’ll do the same to you. But, Salome, can you imagine what it will be like when *everyone* finds Wisdom?” She stretched out her arms, as though she might be able to gather the whole day in the circle of her reach, and she looked up at the sky, and her face blazed, just blazed with happiness.

I’d never seen a face look like that before. I stared at her, trying to understand the brightness. It wasn’t just the sun on her skin. It was something from inside, some light or energy or power that had suddenly leaped up. She saw me looking and she grinned like a girl, jumped to her feet and started twirling around like the happiness was too big to hold. “Can you imagine the joy of belonging to world where everything is its truest self?” she sang out with a fierceness she hadn’t shown me before. “Where we’re never proud or ashamed of what we are or we aren’t, because the differences between us are

the ways we bless each other? Where every heart is pure, where every desire is good, where every feeling is love?"

I didn't have a place to put what she was saying. It was too big to fit inside me. But I loved my mother, and I wanted to be with her inside and out. So, heedless of the edges that kept me safe, I opened my heart and mind to receive.

A bolt of energy and love flashed between us. Something in my chest rose up and Imma's hands were lifting under my arms and then we were whirling around, part of a sparkling stream of light and energy and power that I realized I already knew, that had always been there and always would be, the bright and lively love of eternity that woke the song buried in our deepest selves, that called forth our truths and set them into beautiful and harmonious order—the Shekinah, the light of God. We were charged with its splendor, all of us—sun, sky, river, rocks; plants, insects, creatures—each a vessel for our own drops of its mercy; each a jewel set to reflect a different color of its light.

We didn't want it to end. None of us wanted it to end, because the withdrawal of any diminished the glory of all. But our bodies belong to earth, not heaven. Too soon, our legs were lead and our eyes were darkened, pleading for air. We sank down, Imma cradling my head against her skirts because I was dizzy and might bonk it if she didn't.

We lay sprawled on the rock like pieces of Imma- and Salome-sized laundry, swished and scrubbed and wrung out to dry. The beat of the light's song still thrummed through our veins, but it was fading. I snuggled closer to Imma, so that the steady beat of her heart could fill the place it had left.

It was spring, not summer, and too cold to stay stretched out on the ground for long. When the chill reached our bones we got up and, moving as unsteadily as a grandmother (Imma) and a toddler (me), picked up our laundry, folded it into two unequal bundles, and carried it home, where my father and Miryam would be wondering about dinner.

We never spoke about what had happened. We didn't need to. Once you've danced with the web of living light, you can't ever go back to forgetting that you are woven into it and it in you. Nor can you ignore the way the precious thread of that binding resonates to the deep truths of reality, awakening you to them, sustaining you as labor

to clothe them in the form of your own being, and then bearing them forth rejoicing to whatever hearts may need them.

After that I knew my colors were a reflection, an echo, of the Shekinah, the living fire of love bestowed, received, and reflected onward. Once I started looking, it was everywhere—streaming from Old Huldah's fingers into the flowers she coaxed from the thin, rocky soil of her garden and back again to her in their scent and beauty and healing properties; circling from my father's protective arm into my mother's heart and rippling out again as the food and love with which she nourished us, bright and warm and joyous and *good*.

If the Shekinah had found me in the backcountry of the Galilee, I'd been sure its brightness would be waiting for me in the temple. But if it was, I couldn't find it. At first I put it down to all the changes, reminding myself anything living could not be forced, that it would come only when I was still and soft enough to receive it. But even after things settled down, even after we had friends and a routine and began to feel at home, each time I reached out to the temple, I found nothing.

Then I wondered if it was because of it was made of stone. But our house in Nazareth had also been made of stone and it hadn't felt dead. Maybe not as lively as things made of wood, but certainly not dead. Stone is patient and steadfast. It is the memory of Earth, a true record of the forces of its creation: water, wind, fire, and time's inexorable and grinding weight. No, it wasn't the stone it was made of that kept the temple from life.

I started to keep track of the things that bothered me. Something about the precision with which each corner sliced the air. Something about the brilliance of its unnaturally white and gleaming walls. Something about the exactness of its predictability.

And I had it. The temple was dead because it left no space for difference, no allowance for the unpredictability of growth. Herod's engineers had chiseled out every bit of wildness, polishing away each bit of variation until nothing was left but the stupor of sameness. And the appalling, killing weight of pride.

One hot Friday afternoon, Miryam, Zippora and I sat working in the schoolroom while Anna took a nap. I hated Friday afternoons. All the maidens who lived close

enough went home to help their mothers prepare for the Sabbath. Everyone else had relatives close enough to take them in. Except for we three rejects.

I think Anna noticed I was feeling irritable, because before she lay down for her nap she said that my spinning was so good it was time that I began to do flax, like the senior maidens, instead of just wool like a beginner. She'd made a big ceremony of taking away my little bundle of wool and replacing it with a larger basket full of flax.

At first, I'd been pleased. But by the time her loud breathing had turned to a snore, I realized my mistake. I'd known that flax was stiffer and harder to work than wool, but I hadn't known how much harder.

It was a hot, sticky afternoon. The stiff, scratchy fibers of the flax alternately stuck to and slipped away from my frustrated fingers, determined to fold themselves into knots which responded to my attempts to untangle them by multiplying and replenishing all over the place. It took every bit of discipline I possessed not to throw the whole mess against the wall and scream.

"You know, Salome, I've been thinking," Miryam said from her loom.

I perked right up. Miryam hadn't talked much since we'd gotten here, and I missed her. I mean, she was still *there* and she'd answer when you asked her a question, but most of the time it was like she was gone inside herself. Not in an unhappy way. In a contented, thinking-about-interesting things kind of way. Which made me even lonelier, because when she came back again, she never said a word about where she'd been.

But now, just when I needed her most, she was. Feeling like an over-eager puppy, I forced myself to stay sitting right where I was and say, as casually as I could manage, "Oh, really? What about?"

At this, Zippora's head came up. She flicked a quick glance at me then at Miryam, her pointed little nose seeming to sniff at the air like a dog catching a scent.

"Have you noticed the way everything in the temple is squared off and clearly marked?" Miryam nodded to the diamond pattern in the linen she was weaving, her hands never slackening as they whipped back and forth between the bowing rows of threads. "Right down to the fabric of the priests' robes. Everything is so *precise* and *exact*."

Why had I doubted her? She knew! She saw it, too!

“That’s just exactly what I’ve been thinking about!” I rejoiced. “The way everything is separate!”

She smiled at me, a big smile, so that her eyes crinkled up, which they hadn’t done in so long I’d almost forgotten that they did. “*Temple* means ‘cut off from,’” she said. “Or ‘separated.’”

I nodded so hard that my eyeballs wobbled.

“I love that!” she said. “I *love* the way separating things lets you give all your attention to one thing at a time, so you have a chance to really get inside it without worrying about what else you are supposed to be doing. Don’t you?”

I stared at her. I fumbled for something to say, but my mind kept spinning round and round, like it was a wheel getting ready to fall off an axle. I looked to Miryam for help. But she didn’t notice. She’d already bent back to her weaving. She’d forgotten all about me.

I was alone. Truly alone.

And so was she.

The realization was so stunning that it knocked the breath I’d been holding out of me with a *whuff*. I felt so foolish. So humiliatingly unguarded. I’d thought I was safe. I’d thought that nothing bad would ever really be able to touch me, because Miryam wouldn’t let it. But now I saw that had been a dream. A stupid baby dream. We were different from each other, and I was alone.

For a moment, a memory of the Shekinah butted up against me, like one of Old Huldah’s bony-headed lambs nuzzling for a treat. But I pushed it away. Some shimmery net you couldn’t even touch wasn’t exactly the kind of guardian I had in mind. And so what if it bound us all together? It hadn’t been enough to save the poor, or the lepers, or beasts torn apart by predators or consumed by the sacrificial fires of this very temple.

I inhaled sharply, and sputtered as I tasted smoke. I was breathing in those poor, dead creatures. They were becoming part of my body. My stomach convulsed and I nearly vomited. Sweaty and shaken by the shame of my innocence, I felt my edges start

to dissolve, falling away into the immensity of the world beyond me. I clutched at myself. The warmth of my own flesh told me that I was still there. But only barely. Any contact, any requirement from the outside world, and I would shatter.

I had to get away. But I couldn't walk or even stand. I looked around, desperate for a haven. A big chest inlaid with ivory carvings crouched behind me and to the right. I shoved myself backward into its shadow.

But the walls of the chest were no refuge. They bristled with the brightness of its polished ivory inlay. Once those carved bells and pomegranates had been a tusk, part of a real, live elephant. But someone had killed that elephant. Someone had hacked off that tusk. And then they had gouged at it and scraped at it until it was something totally separate from its true self.

My stomach heaved again, threatening to turn me inside out. Ivory or no ivory, I wrapped my arms around the unyielding reality of that chest, closed my eyes, and hung on. *I'm still here*, I told myself fiercely. *I'm still me*. I closed my mind to everything but my own self, burrowing inward until I found the steady beat of my heart, the expansion of air filling my lungs, the solidity of the wooden floor bearing me up.

Something soft and warm settled on my arm. It waited while the stillness it brought spread, slowing and steadying the world outside until, at last, it clicked back into place.

I opened my eyes, squinting at the object through blurry eyes. It was a round, brown hand, its nails bitten almost to the quick. Zippora's hand.

I couldn't look at her. I bent my head, and felt her push a scrap of cloth between my fingers. I blew my nose, mopped at the rest of my face, and handed it back, head still averted.

I felt her plump down beside me. My spinning basket appeared at my knee, the knots gone. "Thanks," I mumbled.

"Mmph," she said. There was a rustle as she retrieved her spinning, then the soft whirr of the turning thread. She began to hum a little tune.

After a while, I sat up and joined her.

We sat together, not speaking, but moving our bodies together. It was almost like being back in the village.

Zippora finished her bobbin first. She tied it off, then looked out the window to see where the sun was and if she'd have time to do another before the Sabbath. She must have decided she didn't, because she began to clear away her things. "Is she as nice as she seems?" she asked in a low voice, nodding toward Miryam.

Bitterness warred with sisterly loyalty. The loyalty won, possibly because it was also the truth. "I guess so."

I felt Zippora waiting for more, but I had given Miryam what I could.

After a while, she got up and wandered over to the oversized windows that opened toward the outer courtyard, Herod's fortress, and the city beyond.

I didn't do a very good job on that bobbin, but I finished it, almost throwing it into my basket in my hurry to join Zippora. But when I tried to stand up, I staggered. My legs were asleep, and the itching and burning was almost unbearable.

"Oh, good, you're done," said Zippora. "I wanted to show you something." Somehow she had gotten herself up on the broad sill of the window, several feet above the ground. I walked over to join her, then hesitated. It was too high for me to manage. But she leaned over and gave me a hand, and eventually I managed to heave myself up beside her.

Without pausing to give me time to catch my breath, Zippora stepped back, hooked her arm through one of the big brazen rings that held torches during festivals, and leaned right out into the space above the courtyard. She gestured to the left of the fortress. "You can see my house from here," she said. "If you want."

I looked at her sturdy body leaning out over empty space. The afternoon sun painted her in shades of coral and gold--an altogether dazzling figure bursting with life and courage. I crouched down and crept cautiously to the edge of the sill, peering into the shadowed stone courtyard two tall stories beneath us. My eyes moved to the spot where Miryam and I had eaten our Shavuot feast our first day at the temple. It looked cold, hard, and very far away.

Zippora didn't puff out an exasperated breath or wriggle around so I'd know that she wanted me to make up my mind. She just waited. I checked the two bronze circles hammered into the huge blocks of stone. They looked sturdy enough. I moved a little closer so the side of the window would be in easy reach, threaded my arm through the second circle, and leaned out one careful inch.

Zippora's arm came up beside me, pointing. "There. The one with all the bundles of rotting flax."

"That's right," I said. "Your father's a weaver." I was mostly making conversation to take my mind off how far we were from those paving stones. I made sure of my footing, then leaned out another cautious inch, my eyes squinting along the line her arm made.

"Which one?"

"The one that looks like it's about to fall into Gehenna."

"Gehenna?" I said, jerking back. The Valley of Gehenna was Topheth, the burning place outside the Dung Gate where people dumped their filth. In the times of the ancients, it was where pagan kings had offered their children up to the fires of sacrifice.

Zippora looked at me. "Someone has to live there."

I had no answer for that, so I looked again for the house with flax on top that looked like it might be about to fall into the gorge. And there it was, just as Zippora had described it.

I looked at it, then I looked at her, trying to imagine how that dusty, disheveled hovel could give birth to someone as round and perfect and full of life as my friend.

"Do you get homesick?" I asked.

"For *that*? No. Too much for me to fix."

I looked back and forth between my friend and her ghastly house. That was certainly true. "Why did they tell you to do it?"

"Do what?"

"Fix your house," I said. "I mean, I know you're a good worker and you're really strong for your age, but aren't fathers the ones who are supposed to..."

She looked at me suspiciously, like I was making fun of her. When she saw I wasn't, her face took on a strange expression, half gentle, half angry. "I didn't mean the house," she said. "I meant everything."

"Everything?" I still didn't understand.

She took a deep breath. "Look, when I said we were '*anawim*, I wasn't exactly telling the truth."

I was confused. I was no expert, but I couldn't imagine anyone who *wasn't* a beggar living in a house like that one.

"We're certainly as poor as '*anawim*," she said. "But not the rest of it."

The rest of it? What rest of it?

"*Anawim* are supposed to turn to the Lord," she spelled out, her face as red as Moab. "But my parents didn't."

"Did they beat you?" I whispered.

She shrugged. "Sometimes. Not often. We learned to stay out of their way."

"How did you end up here?"

"You know how Anna always takes the leftovers out to the streets?"

I nodded.

"I met her once when I was begging. We became friends. After a while, she brought your aunt." She looked at me, then away. "You may not know this, but that's what Elisheva and Zakharya used to do, before you came. You know how they have a farm in Ein Karim?"

I nodded. I'd heard about it, but we hadn't seen it yet. Elisheva and Zakharya visited it once every seven weeks and for a whole month in the summer, but we hadn't been there yet.

"They couldn't have children here, but Anna was supposed to keep an eye out for some one they could take with them whenever they went to Ein Karem. If things worked out, they'd sponsor the child to be a temple maiden or Levite singer once the summer was over. So last year, that was me."

So many emotions were shuddering through me I could barely catch my breath. Shame for my whining. Admiration for Zippora and my aunt and uncle. Worry that we'd displaced her. "Why did you tell me all this?" I asked, hoping for something—I didn't know what—that could help me make sense of it all, and know what to do.

She shrugged, not looking at me. "I want to be your friend," she said. "And I thought you ought to know."

I felt something familiar stir between us, and I finally realized what I already knew. The Shekinah might not be everywhere here, like it had been in Nazareth. But that didn't mean it was gone. It reached out at me all the time—from Anna and Zakharya, from Jonas and Elisheva. Always from Miryam, no matter where her thoughts were. And now Zippora had just made it even brighter.

"Thank you for telling me," I said. "I'd like to be your friend, too. And Miryam, too."

"It would be my great honor," said Miryam from her loom, gazing at Zippora with compassion.

Zippora gave her a gracious smile in return. But Miryam, intent on sending all the wordless comfort she could muster, would not look away. Zippora's expression became fixed. Without moving her head, she looked to me for help out of the corner of her eyes.

"Look!" I said loudly, gesturing out the window.

"What?" they both asked.

I looked around for something, anything. A priest and a Roman official were coming down the steps of Herod's fortress. "Are priests even allowed over there?" I asked.

"Over where?" Zippora wanted to know, craning to see for herself.

"Over there. At the whatchamacallit. The fortress."

"There's a priest at the fortress?" Miryam said, coming to see for herself.

There was a creaking noise from the corner. Anna had woken up from her nap. She pushed herself up to a sitting position.

"Probably--aahhh--a Sadducee," she yawned.

I'd heard the word before, but didn't know what it meant. "What's that?" I demanded.

Anna sighed, patted absently at her untidy thatch of gray hair, rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and hove herself to her feet. "One of those ambitious up-and-comers who tells everyone that if God had only realized that some of the things He asked of us Jews might interfere with our ability to become rich and influential Roman citizens, He certainly would have changed his mind." She squinted out the window. "Well, well, well. I'd heard talk, but still..."

"What?"

She wagged her big finger, pointing. "You know that priest. Or at least you should."

We looked again. The priest was taller and thinner than most. Although his hair was thickly streaked with gray, he moved like a young man, every movement loose and yet controlled with a self-possession that I knew. "Is that Joanna's father?"

"It is, indeed. His name's Gamaliel Ben Hillel." Anna closed her mouth with a pop.

"Oh, right," I said. "That's what Rachel said the day she introduced them."

"Ben *Hillel*?" Miryam asked sharply. "Did you say Ben Hillel? As in Rabbi Hillel, the Nasi of the Sanhedrin?"

The Sanhedrin was the council that governed the Jews. I looked again, impressed. "He must be really smart," I said.

Zippora smothered a giggle.

"What?" I said defensively.

She jerked her chin toward Joanna and Priscilla's father. "*He's* not the president of the Sanhedrin," she said. "His grandfather is. Rabbi Hillel. You've met him. He was the one helping your Uncle Zakharya the first day of class. He always comes whenever there are new temple maidens and singers."

I was still impressed. "Priscilla and Joanna and Josephus's great-grandfather is the president of the Sanhedrin?"

Zippora and Anna both nodded. Anna was nodding so hard that her wattle, the skin that hung down from her neck, flapped around just the way Old Huldah's old goat's had. I watched, fascinated, until Miryam gave me a poke and changed the subject.

"I thought Rabbi Hillel was a Pharisee," she asked.

Most of the Jews at the temple were Pharisees, strictly observant Jews who followed not only the written law of the scriptures, but also the oral law, the traditions of the rabbis. In their concern to keep Judaism pure and separate from the Gentiles like the Romans and the Greeks, they were the exact opposite of the Sadducees.

Anna grunted assent.

"Then how can his grandson be a Sadducee?"

"Being a Sadducee isn't like being a Levite or an Ephraimite," Anna said. "You're not born into it, the way you are into a tribe. It's something you choose for yourself."

"Josephus certainly likes choosing things for himself," Zippora said. "Probably his father is the same way."

"Truer words were never spoken," Anna said. She gazed over my shoulder. I twisted around to see at what, but there wasn't anything there. "How that boy loved to argue. Used to drive me half-mad."

I looked back down at the men, who had gotten to the bottom of the steps but were too interested in whatever they were talking about to go on. It was hard to imagine the man with the gray hair as a boy. I squinted, trying to imagine it.

"Joanna said her family had moved here from Alexandria," Miryam said suddenly. "What were they doing there?"

"Gamaliel was chief priest at the temple of Leontopolis," Anna said carefully.

"But wasn't that where Uncle Josef..." I started to say.

Miryam gave a little shake of her head, and I stopped.

I looked again at one of the priests who had cut off my relatives' fingers. He was tucking something under his cloak. The Roman laughed and clapped him on the back,

before turning away and striding to the rear of the staircase they had just descended. A small door that I'd never noticed opened when he was still a few feet away.

The Roman turned to scan the courtyard and I saw his profile was as hard and deeply cut as an eagle's. Then, with a flash of what might have been gold on his hands and at his belt, he disappeared inside and the door shut behind him.

"Well, well, well," Anna said. "That's awfully exalted company for a priest."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but Miryam did. "Was that—the king?"

"King Herod *himself*," Anna said, nodding for emphasis. She watched as Gamaliel disappeared into the gate beneath us.

"Gamaliel was one of your uncle's best students, you know," she said. "Well, this old world will break your heart one way or another." She left the window and knelt down to roll up her pallet. "The Lord's our only consolation, and that's a fact."

Chapter 9: Making Space

Miryam didn't trust anger. She didn't like the way it warped her vision, nor the dangerous, destructive waves it sent crashing far beyond the place it started. She would do almost anything to avoid its acrid, ashy aftertaste. Over the years, she'd gotten better and better at ignoring its taunts. But hearing that Josephus and Joanna's father had been involved in maiming Uncle Josef and her cousins kindled a fire inside her that she was having a hard time putting out.

She spent most of the long, quiet hours of that Sabbath wrestling with herself. Just because Gamaliel had been the chief priest at the temple in Leontopolis didn't necessarily mean that he was personally responsible for ending the priesthood in a way that was really—when you got right down to it—a form of torture.

With an effort, she forced herself to shake the word *torture* out of her mind. Besides, even if he had, he probably had genuinely believed it was the right thing to do. Although it was hard to see how maiming the last priests worthy to serve the Lord could possibly be a matter of conscience, especially for a man who was himself a priest. And what about the pouch of money she'd seen Herod give him? Although the pouch might have had something besides money in it. And even if it was a payment of some kind, it could have been for something else. Or even a donation to the temple that the King didn't want anyone else to know about.

But if that were so why hadn't the King put it in the collection boxes like everyone else? And then the image of the expression on Aunt Elisheva's face when she heard that there would be no more priests fit to work in the temple would flash across Miryam's mind, and she'd have to start all over again.

After two nights of dreams staffed with conspiratorial priests and half-butchered animals that followed her around begging her to finish the job others had started, she told herself she was being ridiculous. Gamaliel might or might not be an evil man, but it was not her place to judge him, nor was obsessing about what had happened going to make anything better. It was time and past to put the whole distasteful episode from her

mind and get on with the things that *were* her responsibility—like learning all she could during her time here at the temple.

Too bad the first person Uncle Zakharya called on Sunday morning was Josephus.

“This week’s text is Leviticus 25, the Jubilee Year,” Josephus announced, then, in case anyone had forgotten, reeled it off. *“Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan.”*

He said it perfectly. Like always.

Josephus irritated her. He always had. She wasn’t proud of the fact, especially since she knew that he was probably feeling just as uprooted as she was. Although he didn’t seem to care. He didn’t seem to care about anything, except proving how much smarter and better prepared he was than everyone else.

Miryam heard the bitterness in her thoughts, and winced.

“Word perfect,” Uncle Zakharya was saying. “As always. Think of all the parchment and ink that could be saved if the whole world retained information as quickly and easily as Ben Gamaliel. It staggers the mind.”

Good heavens, was that a *smile* tugging at Josephus’s lips? A moment later, the flash of lightness was gone and he looked as bored and grumpy as ever. But Miryam knew what she had seen.

Uncle Zakharya was not finished. “That’s splendid. Splendid. Hard to think of a more useful gift than accurate recall. No question about it. But not, I think you’ll agree, sufficient in and of itself.”

Miryam blinked, unprepared for the sting at the end of the last sentence.

She swiveled to see how Josephus was taking it. Oddly enough, he didn’t seem as bothered as she expected. The tense line of his shoulders eased and flexed, like an

athlete limbering up before a contest. His eyes, usually as flat as two stones, came alive. "Certainly not," he agreed. "What more would you like to know?"

Uncle Zakharya templed his hands over his generous belly and considered. "Anything you think would help us *all* come to a deeper understanding of the Jubilee."

Josephus didn't miss the slight emphasis on the word *all*. He grinned and bent his head slightly, as if accepting a challenge. "I will do my best," he said. Then, after a beat, "Rabbi." He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. Then he began.

"The Jubilee Year is a covenant between the Lord and His children. Like all covenants, its purpose is to create a new and unbreakable relationship between people who had previously been separate, bringing them together under a common purpose as complete and compelling as that which unites one part of the body to another."

Miryam remembered the covenant she and Abba had made between them. For the hundredth time, she wished that temple maidens were allowed to wear their own girdles. She cast a longing glance at the chest that held her bedroll, where her mother's beautiful golden girdle was hidden. Oh, well. It was too big for her anyway.

With an effort, she turned her attention back to Josephus, who was pointing out that to break such a covenant was to invite consequences as difficult, painful and destructive as separating one part of the body from another. "That's why when the Lord made his covenant with Abraham, the fire of His presence passed between the divided portions of the animal sacrifice," Josephus explained. "He was teaching Abraham how important it is to consider the consequences of your covenant before you make it, because once you do, keeping that covenant becomes a matter of life and death."

Participating in any covenant required both parties to assume serious and permanent obligations. When your partner in the covenant was the Lord, a Being infinitely wiser and more powerful than mortal man, things became even more complicated. "If you bind yourself to the Name," Josephus pointed out, "you're basically accepting the fact that you're going to have to do things that you don't understand, and that may not even make sense. He knows everything, and He lives beyond time and space. We ordinary mortals, on the other hand, are appallingly ignorant, plus we're stuck inside our own minds and bodies, which plod along one place and one moment at a time. Although the Lord does all He can to reassure us of His love and absolute

trustworthiness, His ways are not our ways. In other words, the better we get to living by His rules, the stranger this world is going to seem to us, and us to it. Which brings us to the Jubilee Year.”

On the one hand, anyone who lived the law of the Jubilee Year were promised that they would never be permanently enslaved or impoverished. Every fifty years, or about once a lifetime, the Lord would redeem those of his household, freeing those who had fallen into slavery and debt and returning them to the land of their inheritance.

Truly, the Lord was King of Righteousness. Enough to eat, freedom to act, and a place to belong—what other ruler could promise the fulfillment of all these essential human needs? And what other kingdom could offer such a promise not only to those who lived there now, but also to those who might sojourn there throughout all time? The Jews really were a Chosen People, and their God the God of gods.

The Jubilee promised incredible blessings. But it asked a lot, too. Yes, the Jews were promised liberty, but only from slavery and prison, not from the need to exert themselves to provide for themselves and their families. And the forgiveness of indebtedness didn't only apply to the poor. For the rich it meant that whatever they had earned over the course of a half-century of hard work would be taken away and given to those who hadn't cared enough to do the same. It could be argued, of course, that that, too, was a blessing, that it ensured that every generation learned the blessings of work and sacrifice, but those could seem flimsy and unsubstantial rewards to the one removing from a palace to a village.

“The Lord says he'll free the captives,” Josephus said at last. “And that's true. But He takes care of them by giving them blessings that he takes away from the righteous who have earned them. No reasonable person would call that fair. But He says those are the terms if you want to worship Him. He's going to ask you to do things that don't make sense from where you are, but which He promises are necessary in order to realize what you desire.”

So much for Josephus thinking of the Torah only as a text to be memorized. The things he was explaining—they didn't just fall into place like that, clear and neat, at first try. Josephus knew the Torah as more than a collection of words. He knew it the way you knew something you think about all the time, examining it from every angle until

you glimpsed the purpose and moving them around until everything fits. He knew it, Miryam thought humbly, much better than she did.

That wasn't the only surprise. Instead of congratulating Josephus for his brilliant analysis as Miryam had been sure he would, Uncle Zakharya just nodded a few times at his steeped hands and cleared his throat. "I am interested by Josephus' comment that living by the Torah puts us Jews at odds with ordinary life. Do the rest of you agree?" He put up one large soft hand. "Don't answer too quickly. Take a moment to consider first."

The rabbi's question didn't make sense. How could the Lord want His children to be at odds with life? The whole reason He gave them the Torah in the first place was to teach them the things that would make their lives *better*. No. This was one time Josephus had made a mistake. The Torah didn't fight with life; it explained what you had to do so that when its rushing power passed by, you could launch yourself in and be swept along strong and free, instead of getting knocked around and smashed among the rocks.

A few feet away, Rachel's brother Jonas could no longer contain himself. "I think Josephus is absolutely right," he burst out. "Living by the Torah *does* put you at cross-purposes with ordinary life. It's supposed to. We wouldn't need it if it didn't."

Miryam realized she had gotten it wrong. Uncle Zakharya hadn't asked them to decide if obeying the Torah got in the way of *living*, but if it got in the way of *ordinary* living. In other words, was it possible to obey the Lord's commandments and still stay like everyone else, or did you have to choose?

That was a strong question. An uncomfortable question. But it didn't seem to bother Jonas. "We wouldn't need the Torah if living by common sense worked," he was saying. "But it doesn't. Life never is what you expect. You miscalculate. Things you think will be hard are easy, and things you expect to be easy are hard. Other people don't behave the way you are sure they will. No one gets it right. We can't. We don't know enough, and never will, no matter how hard we study and pay attention. Life is just going to surprise you.

"So what the Lord says is, 'I promise to give you everything you need. It may not come when you want it, or in the way you expect, but if you follow my instructions even

when you don't understand them, I will take care of you. But you're going to have to trust me."

"But that's not the Rabbi's question," Josephus broke in. "What he's really asking is..."

"I *know* what's he's asking, and I'm getting there," Jonas snapped, freckles practically popping off his flushed face. "Let someone else have a turn, why don't you?"

Now it was Josephus's turn to redden. He glanced at Uncle Zakharya, realized he could expect no help from that quarter, and subsided.

"I think the Torah is like a wise old grandmother," Jonas resumed, so intent on what he was saying that his orange hair practically crackled. "The kind who knows better than you do and is willing to make you do hard things even when you don't feel like it because that's how you grow. The kind who loves you enough to always be paying attention, and who isn't shy about reminding you about things you've forgotten or haven't noticed. But who also knows when enough is enough, even when you don't, and makes sure that things come out right in the end—that everyone gets their share at meals, and that everyone, even mothers and fathers, gets what they need to fill themselves up and be happy some of the time, whether it's peace and quiet or running around making noise with their friends."

Miryam gave up even pretending to spin as she considered what Jonas had said. That was a new idea. Of course the Torah was the word of the Lord, everyone knew that, but she'd never stopped to think through what that implied. If the Lord was perfect, and He was, then of course His law would be perfect, too. Perfect beyond anything on this earth was perfect, made so that it worked for everyone in every place and time. So perfect that if you did all it told you, if you aligned yourself with it as best you could, you would never have to worry. Because the Law was your grandmother, who knew you and worried about you and wanted the best for you. You could trust that the hard things were necessary, that they were helping you to grow, so you could lean into them. You knew they were there to help you, so you shouldn't run away, but stay right there and open up to what they had to teach you, and you could do that because your grandmother knew when enough was enough, and she'd make sure the hard part didn't

go on forever. And when it was over, you had always learned something or done something that mattered, and then it would be time to play.

Was it really that easy? Could something as simple as obeying the commandments protect you from having to worry ever again? Not just about what would happen, but about yourself—that you weren't wise enough, or brave enough, or disciplined enough? Could the Lord really understand about mistakes? Could He have planned for them? Could they just be the way you got from where you were to where you wanted to be?

Miryam felt, actually felt, her body rising up a little. Yes, she decided. Yes, it was that easy. God already knew her, all the way through. So there was no point in holding back. He knew her, He loved her, and He wanted what was best for her. And that's all the Torah was—instructions designed to teach her how to become better than she knew how to be by herself.

I promise, she began, closing her eyes. Then stopped. I don't just promise, she said from the deepest part of herself. I covenant with Thee. I will join myself to You. I will obey Your commandments, even when I don't understand, because You are wiser than I am, and I have faith that the things You ask me to do will bring me closer to Thee, and closer to the woman I want to be. She yearned upward, relaxing every barrier. I will open myself to You. I will let You know me, the good and the bad, holding nothing back. And I will strive to obey Your words, even when I must cross myself to do it, because I want to love and trust You the way You love and trust me.

Something happened then, something Miryam did not understand. She felt a wave of light or energy or she didn't know what pulse through her body, opening and stretching every part of her, preparing her to receive. And then it was gone, and Jonas was speaking again, and she knew, whether he did or not, that the words were for her.

"I think that's what the whole ritual of the Jubilee year is supposed to be about," he said. "It's a reminder that none of us can really take care of ourselves. We should try, of course, the best we can. But we're mortal. Sooner or later, we're going to fail. And no matter what we do to try and protect ourselves from failure—amass riches, win political office, make powerful friends—those things all fail, too. The only thing that doesn't fail us, the only Being who never *can* fail us, is the Lord. *That's* the reason for the Jubilee--to remind us that we have to depend on Him. And He promises in return

that He'll make sure we have everything we need, body and soul. The Jubilee is to remind us that ordinary life doesn't work. It's hard and it's unpredictable, and most of the time it's unfair, because someone who is smarter or tougher than you is always trying to grab your share as well as his. But there is a way to be happy anyway. And that is to recognize that no matter how rich and powerful and well-educated you are," he looked pointedly at Josephus, "in the end, you're going to fail. Something bad will happen. There will be a fire or an accident or an invasion, and no matter how hard you've worked to protect yourself and your family, it won't work—*unless*. Unless you do what the Lord asks. He will give you peace and love and protection. But the only way you can do it is by following his instructions. And since they don't make sense to our little brains, sometimes you are going to do things that won't make sense to anyone--especially the wealthy and powerful, because they're so sure they've got it all figured out. And they do—until that bad thing happens and all the things they thought mattered are gone."

Josephus tried to say something, but Jonas had only paused for breath, and as soon as he'd caught it he kept right on going. "The irony is that it's the little people—the ones the rich and powerful taxed and stole from, the ones they ordered around and humiliated—it's the little people who followed the Torah, who wove it into their bones by doing it instead of just reciting it like so many puffs of air, who put up with being laughed at and oppressed because they were willing to admit that God knows more than we do—those little people, these *'anawim*, are still pushing on, happy and hopeful as ever. Because even when bad things happen, they don't worry. They don't have to. They've done hard things before, they and the Lord between them, and they know as long as they keep doing the best they can, the Lord will accept their offering, and send them peace to help them bear what they must until the time of their reward."

He turned to Josephus. "So, yes, Josephus, I do agree with you. By any standard, the Torah asks us to do ridiculous things. The Jubilee Year makes no sense at all. It's thoroughly impractical. Which is exactly why I think the Lord asks us to do it. Because, in the end, we all have to choose. Do we want to be sensible, and hope for no more than a comfortable living in a world that is bound to surprise and disappoint us? Or do we dare hope for something better, something too wonderful and glorious for us to understand right now, but which the Lord, who has never lied, promises He will help us

find if only we will follow his instructions? *All* his instructions. Even the ones that make no sense at all.”

Jonas folded his arms and sat down. He was done. He looked, Miryam thought, completely drained. His big shoulders slumped, and underneath his cheerful thatch of orange hair, his forehead was mottled and beaded with sweat.

Josephus made a big show of turning his head this way and that, making sure no one else had signaled that they wanted to speak. Then, his face arranged into a model of patience and toleration, he began to get to his feet.

Miryam thought she knew what was coming—a long and clever repudiation of everything that Jonas had said by Gamaliel’s son. And right now, that was more than she could bear.

“Jonas is right!” she said, bounding up so fast she stepped all over her skirt and staggered once or twice before she had her balance. Everyone was gaping at her. It was unwritten rule that girls didn’t speak unless asked a direct question. But she didn’t care. She honestly didn’t. Her job right now was to bear witness. A full witness, she reminded herself. One that wasn’t about making her seem better than she was, because what she was was enough.

“I wish he weren’t,” she admitted. She realized she was wringing her hands and made herself stop. “I don’t want to have to make that kind of choice. I don’t think anyone does. We all hope that we can honor and worship the Lord in a way that is comfortable, in a way that makes sense, in a way that doesn’t interfere with everything else, that won’t stop us from marrying who we like or becoming rich or powerful. In fact, we hope that worshiping God will help us get those things, because they are the best thing we know, and we’re doing what He asks.”

They were all looking at her. She dropped her gaze, wanting to get it right, and saw to her disgust that she was wringing her hands again. She thrust them behind her back and kept going. “But that’s a mistake. Those things—being rich or powerful or married to someone that is—those aren’t the best we can hope for. If being comfortable were as good as it got, I’m sure the Lord would give us those things right now. But He hasn’t, which must mean there’s something better. And I think that’s why He’s given us the Sabbath and the Jubilee Year—to reassure us that He loves us and understands exactly

what we need and what we want, and every so often, when we really need it, He will give them to us. Like a grandma giving you a cookie and letting you go play after you've done something hard. It's not over yet—you know you'll have to come back for more tomorrow--but in the meantime, you have enough."

Zippora's eyes were glued to Miryam, her forehead puckered in either concentration or dismay, Miryam couldn't tell which. Telling herself it didn't matter, she plunged on. "That way, when things get hard again, we can be sure they won't stay that way for longer than we can bear. Because we remember that He has never asked us to do more than we could, just what we needed to do to learn something new. And He's patient with our mistakes, He *expects* them, the way your grandmother doesn't get mad if your first loaf of bread is all soggy and torn. She just keeps bringing you back, helping you to practice until you've got it. So although it's scary to try things you don't understand how to do yet, you can, because you know He knows you. And He knows how long it takes. So as long as you keep trying, you don't have to worry. He's the one in charge, not us."

Josephus smiled to himself, and Miryam prepared herself for a sickening wave of shame. But it didn't come. Instead, she felt, well, *calm*. And done. So she sat down and reached for her spinning.

She wasn't talking any more, but the things she'd said and thought nibbled at her, like a puppy who wasn't ready for you to stop scratching his tummy. Did it all really come down to that—being willing to admit when you didn't know? And being willing to consider that sometimes when you thought you did, you didn't? That just because something felt right and natural didn't mean that it was true?

And could the Lord really understand? Had He really planned it all? Did He understand right now, right this minute, how off-balance and public the temple made her feel, how much she yearned, so that it was almost a sickness, for the security and privacy, the unselfconsciousness of her life in Nazareth? Did He understand that so well that she didn't have to be embarrassed, no matter what everyone else in the whole world might say or think?

And what if they shared the good things too—if He knew how much pleasure she took in the sparkle of Aunt Elisheva's earrings and the scent of jasmine and gardenia

that trailed behind her; if He understood the way something Uncle Zakharya had said sometimes settled in her chest and began to bubble and grow; if He delighted in the way the rhythm of her loom caught and ordered and made a place for the feelings and notions that racketed around inside her?

What if the Lord didn't just understand about her triumphs and her struggles? What if He was the one who had put them there for her to find, because they were what she needed to prepare her for something better? And because He knew she would need help, He made the Torah and found a way to give it to her, a wise grandmother in the shape of a book who taught you hard things but knew when enough was enough. And He gave you new days, and Sabbaths, and new moons, and festivals, and new years, and the Jubilee—all those new starts, all those new beginnings, each one a step closer to Him from where you began.

And then she remembered it wasn't a "what if." She already knew. She'd already decided. And then it happened again, something warm and alive and real bursting all through her body, vibrating through every scrap of blood and bone and flesh until she was singing, every part of her was singing, and so was the light streaming in the window, and the wood of the chest, and the linen of the robes and the thoughts in every head—all joined together in a great chorus for a long moment that went on and on until she dared to hope it would never end.

It didn't end, exactly. It just faded, returning her to herself gently as a mother laying down the baby she had rocked to sleep.

A burst of laughter brought Miryam back to the classroom with a thump. For a dreadful moment, she thought they were laughing at her. But the laughter was for Josephus, who looked like he was winding up a speech. Hand over heart, he knelt to Jonas, who clapped him on the back and said something Miryam didn't catch that touched off another roar of laughter.

She couldn't make sense of it. Nor did she try. She was too tired. She had that achy feeling behind the top of her nose, and her hands were shaking and it was all she could do not to melt right down onto the smooth hardness of the wooden floor. But it was a good tired. A used-up tired that said you had done what you could and now it was time to rest.

She realized that everyone was getting to their feet. It took her a moment to realize why. Uncle Zakharya was leaving. Was class over? Already? She stood up too quickly, staggered, and nearly fell as the blood rushed from her head. When her vision cleared, she glanced around self-consciously, and caught Josephus watching—no, staring at her.

It was so unexpected that she forgot her manners and gaped right back for a long, uncomfortable moment. Long enough to see that the scowl that twisted his narrow, clever face arose not from dislike, as she had always imagined, but concentration.

Remembering her manners, she looked away, and promptly stepped on her basket. Grateful for the diversion, she knelt down and began to gather up the bobbins, whorls, and hanks of flax she had scattered.

A hand offered her a bobbin. She took it with a word of thanks, then realized it belonged to Josephus. She braced herself for whatever caustic remark might come next.

“I thought what you had to say was worthwhile,” he said.

She waited. “But?” she finally prompted.

His eyebrows shot up. “But nothing,” he said. “That’s all.”

She peered at him, trying to understand his game.

“I’m *paying* you a *compliment*,” he said, with a bit of his old asperity.

“Oh,” she said idiotically. Then, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. He started to say something else, seemed to think better of it, grinned at her, then was gone.

“What was that all about?” Zippora wanted to know.

“I have no idea.”

“Well, God does,” Zippora said sagely.

Miryam shot Zippora a startled look. “You’re right,” she agreed. Wasn’t that just what she had been thinking about? “He does. And if I need to know, He’ll find a way to tell me.” She gave Zippora a quick, hard hug. “Thank you, Zippora. You are a dear and good friend. That’s just exactly what I needed to hear. How did you get to be so wise?”

Zippora looked alarmed. “I don’t—I mean, I didn’t know,” she stammered. “I didn’t mean to be. I probably won’t be again.”

Miryam laughed. “I was *trying* to pay you a *compliment*,” she said. “All you have to do is say...” She stopped, hearing the echo. Now it was her turn to be embarrassed. “Say ‘thank you,’” she finished.

“Thank you,” Zippora mumbled.

They were both relieved when Salome called to them from where she waited at the door. “Hurry *up*, you two. Anna told me there are cherries for snack, and you know the boys will have gobbled them all up if we don’t hurry.”

Chapter 10: Wood for Kindling

You weren't supposed to stay in the temple for more than six weeks. If you did, you might forget your responsibilities to your family. So every seventh week, we said goodbye to Anna (who had no husband, parents, or child, so it was all right if she stayed right there and forgot them), and started the two hour walk west to Ein Karem and the farm assigned to the priest in charge of the temple school. Uncle Zakharya always made a big fuss about how important these visits were for Alon, the farm's overseer, and within a few moments of our arrival the two of them would set out to inspect the premises. But since my uncle knew nothing of farming and wanted to keep it that way, this basically amounted to striding briskly across one or perhaps two fields. Then, worn out by their exertions, the two of them would settle themselves comfortably in the shade of the date tree out front, the better to monitor any passersby, and share a companionable skin of wine while Alon brought my uncle up to date on what he really *did* want to know: the latest village gossip.

Sooner or later, Uncle Josef and Aunt Sarah or (if he were on a trip) one of their servants would arrive with our cousins Simon, Alphaeus, and Tolomei. Alon would make his excuses and go back to working the farm he'd managed for thirty years, while Uncle Zakharya tutored the boys on whatever we'd been studying at the Temple School. Meanwhile, Aunt Elisheva (and Aunt Sarah, if she had come) taught Miryam and me (and, more often than not, Zippora) the art of making a home. We cooked and cleaned and harvested and visited the sick, just like an ordinary housewife and her daughters, and at night we sat down to a dinner it had taken us most of the day to make and talked as long as we wanted to until it was time for bed.

Four years slipped by. They were years of plenty, like the ones in Pharaoh's dream, full of new people to know, new skills to practice, and new ideas to make room for. I discovered I had the gift of healing. Most days, if you'd asked, I'd have told you that I was the luckiest girl in Palestine.

But not every day. I wasn't clever like Miryam, and often lost the thread of our long classroom discussions. I was a passable weaver, but nothing special. I got along well

with the other girls, but did not share in the informal networks of Jerusalem's elite. There were days, weeks, when I felt as though those perfect stone walls were leaching every drop of life and light from my body.

I don't know how I would have survived without the promise of Ein Karem. When life became confusing, or painful, or even just flat, all I had to do was hang on. What made no sense in Jerusalem was sure to slip into place in Ein Karem's green and welcoming arms. And sure enough, sometime during our next visit—at one of our big farmhouse dinners, or walking through the fields as the gold of the afternoon gave way to the purple of evening—the haze obscuring the reason for a friend's sudden spite or a perplexing passage in the Law would lift. My edges would be back, allowing me to see my own part in the confusion, teaching me the rhythm of resistance and surrender and the small adjustments in position that transformed thrashings into the sleek, powerful thrusts of a dolphin at play.

Abba came to the farm after every Passover, and again to help with the olive harvest after the High Holy Days in the fall, and those were the best times of all. But we seldom looked backward—there just wasn't time—and the memory of the life we had known in Nazareth soon took on the faded colors of a dream.

Neither—and this is harder to explain—do I remember looking forward. I don't know why. It wasn't as if I didn't know that our life at the temple was temporary. You could only be a temple maiden until you were twelve. Since women became ritually unclean when they bled (for shedding blood, the essence of life), the idea was to get rid of us before we could mess anything up. Usually this was by betrothal, the purity of a temple maiden being more or less a sure thing. Betrothed or not, however, maidens were encouraged to leave temple service as soon as they turned twelve and required to by the time they were twelve and a half, as Rachel, the Head Girl, had when she married our cousin Simon.

Somehow—whether as a gift from heaven or a product of my own stubborn denial—that knowledge didn't intrude much on my present happiness. Until the spring of Miryam's twelfth birthday, when people started talking about who she was going to be betrothed to. And then, when Passover came and went without any sign of my father despite promises to many interested families that, yes, he'd be in Jerusalem for the

Passover and yes, that's when he expected to make arrangements for Miryam's future—well, even Zippora was getting tired of the endless speculation. Which reached a new crescendo when he didn't appear for Shavuot, either. It must have been getting to my aunt and uncle, too, although of course they never said anything, because they suddenly announced the estate was in dire need of some delayed maintenance and whisked us away for seven glorious weeks of just being a family.

But this time the trouble was too big to leave behind. Instead of relaxing, the other three seemed to be winding themselves tighter and tighter, although they kept insisting everything was fine. So, after nearly a month of pretend smiles and strained conversations, I was secretly pleased when Uncle Zakharya broke the news to Aunt Elisheva that he had given his permission for the temple to send people to harvest the farm's wood for the 15th of Ab. Annas would drive the big temple wagon, and here was a nice surprise—Simon, Alphaeus, and Tolomei were home, getting ready for Alphaeus's marriage later that summer, so they were going to come help, too. "It'll be just like old times," he said, helping himself to some more stew.

Miryam perked up.

"Rachel, too?" Miryam said, looking eager. The two of them had been thick as thieves before Rachel left to get married, but we hadn't seen her since.

"No, honey, not Rachel," Uncle Zakharya said absently. "She has things to keep her busy at home."

Miryam and I exchanged a hopeful glance. Maybe she was finally pregnant!

"It was something about her sister," he added. "Some trouble with her marriage."

But before we could get anything else out of him, Aunt Elisheva was letting fly. "Honestly, Zakharya, you might have told me sooner," she snapped, the lines between her eyes very deep.

"Well, I wanted you to be able to enjoy your time here on the farm. You know how you always worry so much about the food and, and what not..." he waved a pudgy hand. Unfortunately, the hand happened to be holding a sop of bread and stew, and lentils spewed out behind it and fell down the front of his robe. Aunt Elisheva rolled her eyes and reached for a cloth.

“This isn’t just some dinner party, you know,” she grumbled. “It’s food for at least fifty hungry young mouths. And then they’ll probably want to stay for the dancing, so that’s beds to find, and chaperones...”

“I believe the number is closer to seventy this year, my love,” Zakharya said.

Aunt Elisheva threw up her hands. “Seventy! And only two days to prepare!”

“You’re a good woman,” Uncle Zakharya said humbly. “Much better than I deserve.”

“Don’t try to butter me up,” Elisheva scolded. “I haven’t decided whether I’m going to forgive you or not.”

“Of course you are,” Zakharya said serenely, reaching for another round of bread. “The Lord cursed you with a forgiving heart.”

“He must have known I’d need it, married to you,” she sniffed, then leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “Good thing you’re so loveable that I’m willing to overlook it. All right, you two girls. Looks like we won’t go looking for those roots today after all. I’m going to need *you* in the kitchen.”

The law is that the Temple’s yearly wood supply has to be harvested by the 15th of Ab so they can be sure it’s had plenty of time to dry out and won’t get wormy over the winter. The temple needs a lot of wood, so every few years when Uncle Zakharya felt he had some to spare, he’d offer it to them, and they’d all come down to harvest it. Aunt Elisheva was right—it would be a lot of work to get ready for, but I was ready for a change. And looking forward to seeing my friends again.

And so it was that, two days later, Zippora and I were reunited at last. As soon as Uncle Zakharya’s sour-faced assistant Annas had left overseeing us and gone to plague the people in the next field over, I sidled over to her and began to share my grievances.

“No one *says* they’re worried,” I told her as we stacked the sticks we had gathered. “When I bring it up, everyone says what I’m already thinking—that Galilee’s a long way away and Abba probably sprained his ankle or something, that he’ll get here when he can and if anything too awful had happened someone would have gotten us a message, so there’s no earthly reason to worry. But then the three of them walk around all stiff

and careful, and at dinner everyone just kind of pushes the food around on their plates and tries to start cheerful conversations.”

Zippora had a fly on her nose but her hands were busy trying to tie a reed around the bundle, so I shooed it away for her. Then I pressed my index finger on the reed so she could make the knot nice and tight.

“Thanks.” She swung the finished bundle on top of the others we’d made.

“Did you hear me?” I wanted to know.

She sighed. “I heard you all right. Probably everyone else did, too.”

“Well, we are outside,” I said, a little nettled. Miryam says when I get excited I proclaim instead of talk. “I thought an outside voice was appropriate.”

She looked around for the next load of branches, but until my cousins managed to pull out stump they were working on, we were all caught up.

“It’s probably just your imagination,” she said. Before I could protest, she added hastily, “It has been a hotter summer than usual, you know.” As if to prove her point, she pulled out the bit of rag she had used to tie back her hair and used it to mop her streaming face. “I know I don’t feel much like eating when it’s hot, or talking either.”

“It’s not that we’re not allowed to *talk*,” I said, trotting beside her as she made for the water jar we had stashed in the shade of an obliging tamarisk tree. “It’s just that we’re not allowed to talk about *Abba*. No one has ever said it in so many words, but if it even looks like someone might, everyone starts tiptoeing around as if saying anything about his missing Miryam’s birthday would shatter her into a million pieces or the whole world will come to an end or something. It’s just not *fair*.”

I hadn’t meant to say the last part. I hadn’t even known I was thinking it.

Zippora sighed. “You know the real reason he’s always here for her birthday is because of Passover,” she said, half turning away as she lifted the jug and poured a thin stream of water into her open mouth. When she was done, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and passed the jug to me. “He’d be here for yours, too, you know, if it were close to one of the big festivals instead of right in the middle of the hot season when he’s on a ship half-way to Britain.”

My hand jerked, and sent some of the water I was pouring into my nose instead of my throat. I choked and coughed more than I really needed to, but it gave me time to compose myself. When the jug was safely tucked back into its place between the roots of the tree, I said, "Look, Zippora, I know I can be a baby about the way everyone always makes a big deal about Miryam's birthday and then practically forgets mine, but this is different. They're really upset."

Her response surprised me. "Of *course* they're upset," she said briskly, as though she was tired of some game she thought we had been playing and had decided it was time to say what needed to be said. "But it's not about Miryam's birthday being spoiled, as you very well know."

"It's not?" I said. "Then what?"

She said nothing, just looked at me with that kind of blank expression people use when they know something but think it would be good for you to figure it out yourself.

I cast around a bit, trying to think of what I might be hiding from myself. "Oh," I said, with a sinking heart. "It's my father, isn't it?" The next words were so hard to say it felt like my tongue was a hook jerking each one up from my middle. "Something really bad has happened to Abba, but they want to protect me. What is it? Is he dead?"

"Of course not!" she said, her eyes bright. "Oh, Salome, is that what you thought?"

One of many wonderful things about Zippora is that she can't lie, even when she wants to. I was so relieved that all I could manage was a little shrug. "I didn't think so," I finally mumbled. "But I wasn't sure. And I didn't understand why no one was suggesting it. I mean, he's pretty old for a father. But no one has said, 'oh, dear, I hope he hasn't broken his leg,' or 'had a heart attack,' or 'been attacked by robbers' or something. I thought it must be because they already knew, but just didn't want to tell me."

"If something had happened to your father they would have told you," she said.

"How do you know?" I said, wanting to believe, but not quite sure if I dared.

"I just know," she said.

I looked at her, round and stolid in the shadow of the tree, arms akimbo like there was nothing she couldn't do, and I believed her. I believed her so totally that it surprised an embarrassingly whiney little plaint from my mouth.

"Imma didn't."

"What?"

"Imma didn't tell us she was dying," I said. "Not at first."

"That," Zippora said, "was different. You were little then. Now, they would tell you."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

Reassured, I returned to my original question. "So what is it then?"

She stared at me. "You're joking, right?"

I was getting pretty tired of all this back and forth. "No, Zippora, I thought that the very best way to spend a morning with my best friend who I haven't seen in weeks was to make up some big fake uncomfortable story that she could puzzle through for a while until she finally figured out what I already knew! No, I really *don't* know whatever it is that no one wants to tell me, and it's making me good and mad, so if you're not going to tell me either, let me know that right now and I'll go bother someone else, someone who isn't my friend, but who at least has the common decency to tell me the truth! Now, do you or do you not know what it is that has everyone acting so peculiar?"

She hesitated.

"I asked you a question," I prodded.

"I do," she said. "At least, I think I do, but if it's what I think it is, I can't believe you really don't know."

"I've got a wonderful idea," I said through gritted teeth. "Why don't you tell me and then we'll know for sure."

She squirmed around some. "It's just... it's *complicated*."

I checked to see if Simon, Alphaeus, and Tolomei were making any progress with the stump. It didn't look like it. "We've got time," I told her.

She glanced around to see if anyone was listening. I couldn't see a soul, except for my cousins, and now that we had retreated to the tree they were out of earshot. But apparently whatever Zippora had to say required even more privacy. She stood up and surveyed the possibilities.

Ein Karem gets its name, the "Fountain of the Vineyard," from a good spring that unexpectedly bursts forth from the dry and scrubby Judean hills. The land fed by the spring is fertile but heavily terraced, so that it's hard to get a good view of the whole prospect, even when you are near the top, as we were. I heard Zippora give a little grunt of satisfaction when she saw the round stone watchtower.

It wasn't far. Like I said, we were already near the top. With a jerk of her chin that said, "Follow me!" Zippora took off for the stile that connected our terrace to its. I paused long enough to call to my cousins and motion where we were going. They nodded, uninterested, and I ran to catch up with my friend.

I don't like watchtowers. They're dark and damp and they stink. Plus you never know what might be lurking inside. I made Zippora wait until I threw a stone inside. But we didn't hear anything but a dull thump, so we joined hands and stepped into the pungent darkness. We felt our way along the wall, hands still joined, until we stubbed our toes on what turned out to be a stone staircase snaking up the inner wall. We had to let go then, because the only possible way to climb its steep, narrow, uneven stairs was on all fours.

The second floor was better. For one thing, you could see what you were doing. The builders had left square openings in the walls at regular intervals, each supplied with its own rough bench. I allowed my shoulders to droop and mopped conspicuously at my face and neck, hoping Zippora would take the hint that this shady refuge was much preferable to the roof, where the sun's scorching rays would undoubtedly suck every last bit of water from our shriveled little bodies, but I needn't have bothered. Her feet were already halfway up the rickety ladder that led to an opening in the roof, and her top half had disappeared completely. With a sigh I tucked up my skirts, removed a pebble that had gotten caught between two toes, and followed.

I pulled myself up into the sun and clambered onto a flat earthen roof scattered with bits of broken rock and a few determined weeds. After I'd made sure no creepy crawlies had hitched a ride on my skirts, I straightened up and took in the view. The Judean hills lay before me, reclining peacefully in the clear morning light. Somewhere a mother hoopoe called to her fledglings, and a clutch of woodlarks answered back. A breeze scented with tuberose and jasmine played with the damp tendrils of hair at my temples and the nape of my neck. I breathed it in, and its sun-warmed fragrance spread deliciously through my chest, relaxing me here, quickening me there as I found my way back into the natural world.

Someone had left a couple of reed mats rolled loosely against the knee-high parapet that ran around the edges. Zippora and I gave them a good shaking and laid them out, then plopped down a few safe inches from the stone railing, which might be hiding scorpions. She pulled a handful of dates from her girdle, nudged me to open my palm, and let half of them fall to me before settling back and popping one in her mouth. She chewed thoughtfully for a moment, her eyes on the hills. "This is the first year that Annas bothered to come with us for the wood gathering," she observed at last.

Was that all this was about? That lick-spittle Annas? After all the secrecy and bother, I had expected something exciting, maybe even dangerous. Goat-faced Annas, who made no secret of his plan to become the Temple's chief teacher after Uncle Zakharya turned fifty and retired, was too obvious to be interesting. "Probably just wants to stick his long nose into our business, as usual," I said. "Although what fascinating information he'll be able to uncover about the way Uncle Zakharya cuts and dries the wood he gives to the temple is beyond me."

"I'm guessing he came to watch the maidens' dance," she said. Twice a year, after the wood harvest on the night of the 15th of Ab and again after the Day of Atonement, the maidens who were ready for betrothal dressed themselves in white and danced by moonlight in the vineyard. At eleven, Zippora and I were old enough to be part of the preliminary "practice dances" to help prepare us for our own betrothal dance next year.

Miryam, on the other hand...

"She told me she's thinking of joining the Essenes," I said.

Zippora didn't bother pretending that she didn't know what I was talking about. She gave me an exasperated look, and opened her mouth.

"No. Really, she is," I said quickly. "You know how she is... always studying and praying and what have you. I know it's unusual for a young girl to take a vow, but Anna did after she was widowed, and Miryam says she's considering it. She's practically decided."

"Salome."

"She's not ready to go," I said too loudly. "You know she's not." I stood up, looking for the terrace where Miryam and Priscilla had gone to help Josephus and the new boy Zebdi, my friend Jonas's little brother. There they were. Josephus was holding a bundle of sticks and talk-talk-talking like usual while Miryam worked to tie them together. From where we stood, her slender body looked more like a boy's than a woman's. "She looks younger than I do," I pointed out. "She's no where near ready to be married."

"That's as may be," Zippora said with a quick glance at the way my dress was starting to poke out over my chest. "But rules are rules. She can't stay here much longer. It's time for her to be betrothed."

But I knew something Zippora didn't. I leaned toward her and half-whispered the words I'd hugged to myself ever since I'd overheard a conversation between Aunt Elisheva and Anna nearly a year ago. "Aunt Elisheva says she doesn't think they'll press the point, at least until the veil is done."

The priests had recently decided that Herod's splendid new temple required a splendid new veil. It was Anna's often-expressed opinion that they wouldn't have decided anything of the sort if it hadn't been for Miryam's amazing abilities.

"Trust me," Zippora said. "As far as Miryam is concerned, the new veil is the *least* of their worries."

"Uncle Zakharya and Aunt Elisheva's?"

Zippora rolled her eyes. "No, idiot, the Sanhedrin's."

At first I thought she was joking. “Very funny,” I said, but she wasn’t laughing. “You’re being completely ridiculous,” I insisted. “Why on earth would the Sanhedrin care anything about Miryam? They probably don’t even know she *exists*.”

“Of course they know she exists,” Zippora said impatiently. “They know both of you exist. Why do you think your father sent you here in the first place?”

I couldn’t believe she was asking me that question. “Duh. I don’t know. Could it have something to do with the fact that my mother died?”

She was looking at me with what looked like a cross between exasperation and pity. “That might be the reason you came when you did. But the real reason you’re here is to keep you safe.”

“*Safe*?” She was making no sense at all. “Safe from what?”

“Not from what—from whom.”

“All right then,” I said. “From whom?”

“From King Herod, and the Sadducees, and anyone else who has a reason to fear the coming forth of the Messiah.”

I stared at her, feeling as though her words had stripped me naked.

The Messiah. The *nezer*, the green shoot bursting upward from the garden of the Lord, the Anointed One who would redeem His people in the Jubilee of Jubilees and return them to the land of their inheritance, the King of Kings who would sit upon His father David’s throne and pour out an unending stream of justice and mercy upon the righteous.

The Messiah, scourge of the wicked, and King Herod’s biggest nightmare. So much did Herod fear the Messiah—Herod, who ruled his people with fear instead of justice, selling them into bondage to pay for lavish monuments to himself littered across the entire Roman Empire, who was himself neither of David’s lineage nor Israel’s rightful king—that he had hunted down David’s descendants, burned the ancient genealogies, killed the priests who knew the prophecy from the Book of Daniel that the Messiah, the Anointed One, would come forth during the Tenth Great Jubilee after the Babylonian

exile, the Jubilee of our generation, and forbidden any reference to the Messiah on pain of death.

It was a law our family had been especially careful to observe.

I didn't know what to say, or where to look. There was stinging in my ears, my eyes, my nose and throat. "I didn't..." I began. My head was shaking, and so was everything else, whipped tight by my fear that I had done this. "I didn't think..." I tried again.

Zippora put her plump arms around me. "You didn't say a word," she soothed. "Or give any hint. Not once. Not to me or anyone else."

I clutched at her, wanting what she said to be true. "But Miryam would *never*..."

I felt her shake a little. Was she laughing? "No, Miryam would never," she agreed. "But it's not the kind of thing you can keep a secret."

For a moment I just sat there, letting those words sink in. And then...poof! The terrible burden I had been carrying for so long was gone.

"You knew," I said, sitting up.

"We all did."

I nodded, looked around for a leaf to blow my nose on, and found one. "Why didn't anyone ever say anything?"

She shrugged. "What would it have helped?" She looked around and then leaned closer and whispered, "We're all Jews. We may disagree about lots of things, but we take the Messiah seriously."

"It's not like our family thinks there's anything special about us in particular," I said hastily. "Israel's had more bad kings than good ones. And my father's not the only one left of David's lineage."

"No," she agreed. "But he is the most prominent. You can see why people would be interested in who you marry, especially after..."

She broke off, but I knew what she'd been going to say.

"Especially after what happened to my cousin Yusuf's wife," I finished.

Yusuf, Cleo's older brother, had been betrothed to a cousin on his mother's side, a beautiful young girl named Hafzbah, meaning "my delight is in her." A few weeks before their marriage, while many of the men of the village were in Jerusalem for the High Holy Days, Hafzbah had gone out to fetch water, and hadn't come home. They found her the next day in a cave not too far from the village, rocking and humming to herself. She wouldn't look at anyone or speak to them, and when someone took her by the arm she became hysterical, biting and kicking like a wild animal. In the end, Yusuf was the only one who could coax her back to the village. It was to his credit that he went on with the marriage as planned—legally, he was under no obligation to do so, especially since any children born of the union would be considered tainted. After the marriage they'd moved home to her people in Bethlehem, where Yusuf had gotten work as a stone dresser for Herod's temple. The memories in Nazareth had just been too painful.

It had never occurred to me before that Yusuf and Hafzbah's tragedy was anything more than a random act of violence. Had somebody planned it on purpose? Because Yusuf was a potential heir to David? Surely not even Herod could do something so awful. But he could. Of course he could. He'd done many more vicious things to others, including his own family. What I really meant was, *surely something so terrible couldn't happen to me, to my family*. But what if it had?

"If Herod is so worried about Yusuf," I said, still working things through, "why not just kill him?"

"No one but Herod could have imagined Yusuf was any kind of threat to begin with. He's a peasant from the wilds of Galilee, no education, his father had a devil, his brother has a missing ear, and now his wife has lost her virtue. No one could believe he was worthy to be a Messiah, or any of his children, even if they *are* from Nazareth."

Once again, I felt a zing of fright. My ancestors had named the village they had been settled in a hundred years ago "Nazareth" after the *nezer*, the green shoot or fruitful branch, the Messiah that was prophesied to come from our number. We'd all hoped no one else remembered its significance.

"In some ways, Yusuf was useful to him *because* he came from a rocky place like Nazareth. He's a stoneworker, and, according to your aunt Elisheva, a gifted one."

That was true. Although I knew my cousin Cleo and his wife Naomi had to live very simply after poor Uncle Yakov died, I'd secretly thought their house was nicer than ours. Not as nice to be in, of course, but nicer as a *place*. Everything fit together just right, in the way things do that are made by people who know and love their craft, like Miryam's weaving and Aunt Elisheva's cooking.

"And Herod always needs more people to help him with his buildings," I said slowly. "Yes, I guess I can see your point."

Something like a whoop came distantly through the morning stillness. Zippora and I turned around to see what it was. The boys had finally gotten the stump. Time to go back to work. But when Zippora got to her feet, I didn't follow. "I still don't see what any of this has to do with me or Miryam," I said. "We're no threat."

"*You* aren't," she said, putting out her hand.

I grasped it and let her pull me up. As soon as I was steady, she leaned forward and dropped five words in my ear.

"But what about your children?"

Chapter 11: Setting Apart

When Alphaeus and Tolomei finally showed up with the collection wagon, it was already nearly full with everyone else's wood.

"Where's Simon?" Miryam wanted to know.

"He and Uncle Zakharya took Annas to spend the day with the elders at the synagogue to keep him out of our hair," Tolomei grunted as he and Zebdi hefted a particularly heavy log onto the pile. He unwound his keffiyeh and mopped at his head, grinning at her. "Told him it was an honor none of them would ever forget."

"He got that right," Alphaeus snorted as he and Josephus swung up a log in their turn.

Miryam's forehead wrinkled as she saw the way the boys were loading the wagon. "You might want to consider..." she started to say, but let the words trail away as Josephus and Zebdi exchanged a look that said, "*Women!*" If they weren't going to listen, there wasn't much point bringing it up. So instead she and Priscilla gathered the tools, wiped them clean, bound them into a neat bundle they propped next to the water jug, and looked for somewhere comfortable to wait.

They found a shady place under a tamarisk tree growing out of the retaining wall of the terrace. Careful to keep their distance from the terrace wall itself, they sank gratefully down to the earth.

Priscilla recovered first. Getting to her knees beside where Miryam lay propped on her elbows, the little girl clasped her hands, bent her head, and said humbly, "Goddess of the Field, I beg a crown from thee."

Miryam didn't know how to react to what was essentially pagan blasphemy. Of course Priscilla hadn't thought of it like that, but still. "I'm no goddess," she said lightly, pushing herself up to a sitting position and dusting off her elbows. "Just an ordinary girl like you." She caressed the glossy, sun-warmed brilliance of Priscilla's bright hair. "Besides, your hair is its own crown," she said. "You don't need another."

Priscilla, oblivious to Miryam's gentle correction, gave her a severe look. "I'm not asking for compliments," she said. "Just for my friend to weave some flowers into my hair."

"That doesn't sound like the shy little shadow I knew and loved," Miryam said, still a little bothered by the exchange.

"I'll gather the flowers myself," Priscilla wheedled. "You don't have to move a muscle."

"No, no, stay where you are," Miryam said, getting up. "Weavers always choose their own materials, as you should certainly know by now. Besides, I need you to keep an eye on the boys for me. The way they're throwing the wood in all anyhow I'm afraid the whole thing will slip out from under them."

Five minutes later, she rained flowers onto Priscilla's waiting lap. "Chicory to bring out the blue of your eyes, and broom to highlight the gold of your hair and the sweetness of your spirit. It's as if the Lord wanted to spread your beauty throughout all the Land."

"You say that every summer," Priscilla said, automatically sorting the flowers on to the ground at her side as if they were lengths of wool or flax.

"Do I?" Miryam said, nonplussed. The thought had seemed new to her. "I guess it must be true, then."

Priscilla came to kneel at her feet.

"No need," Miryam said. "My lap's much more comfortable."

Priscilla got up, shook the dust and bits of twig and grass from her skirts, and took a seat on Miryam's lap. But instead leaning into the curve of Miryam's body, as Salome always had, she kept her back as straight as if she were on a throne, lifted her chin, and went still as a Roman statue.

"I used to do this for Salome," Miryam said as she began to weave the flowers and the hair together. "But she never sat as still as you."

"You say that every summer, too," Priscilla announced, without moving her head.

“Shh,” Miryam said. “I’m working.”

Priscilla subsided, but only for a moment. “At first I didn’t think Zebdi looked anything like Jonas,” she said, her cornflower eyes on the boys. “You always felt Jonas was about to burst into flame, with that orange hair and how intense he got when he was talking. But Zebdi looks like everyone else.”

“Uh-huh,” said Miryam, only half-listening.

“But you can tell they’re brothers by the way they move. Plus they have those wide fisherman shoulders.”

“Priscilla!”

“Well, they do,” she giggled.

“That’s not the sort of thing that Temple Maidens notice or talk about,” Miryam reproved. She changed the subject. “What do you hear from Joanna? Is she happy to be back in Alexandria now she’s married?”

“Oh, she loves it,” Priscilla said. “Her husband is a scribe for Philo, you know. A very honorable position.”

Miryam had no idea who Philo was. But by the time she opened her mouth to ask, Priscilla had dropped three or four more strange names and Miryam realized there wasn’t much point trying to keep up. So she let her thoughts drift as Priscilla prattled happily on about a world she couldn’t imagine. What would it be like to be Joanna, possessing sufficient wealth, refinement, and position to create exactly the kind of life one wished, married to the suitor of one’s choice, living in whichever exciting and glamorous city suited you best, interacting with the world’s most interesting and gifted people, free of any constraint?

Although of course that wasn’t true. *No* one had *that* luxury. She supposed that in its own way, Joanna’s life was as full of responsibilities and expectations as the one that awaited her—marriage to someone too poor or old or disabled for even paranoid old Herod to fear. The truth was, she didn’t mind. Not really. She had no desire for a public life, the jockeying for position and power, the endless striving and calculation and petty deceptions.

No, she had no desire for a brilliant match like Johanna's. Nor was she holding out for a passion so great it would have the power to transform the ugliness and pain of ordinary life into one long happy dream of cherished ease. That was not the way the world worked. As far as she could tell, there were no shortcuts. Oh, there were moments of grace. But by and large, life was like farming. In the end, you reaped pretty much what you sowed. People became beloved by loving and serving others. They found peace and security by overcoming, rather than escaping, difficulties. In the end, where you started didn't have nearly as much to do with how you ended up as the way you behaved along the way.

So it really wasn't a tragedy that, what with the prophecies and her family and everything, the best Miryam could hope for was someone who would treat her and whatever children God saw fit to give them with some degree of gentleness.

She didn't think that was too much to hope for. It wasn't like there hadn't been offers. No formal ones, of course. But she knew from little comments Anna had let drop that there had been inquiries. Not from any prominent families, she was sure. That would be too dangerous, for both her family and the one she was marrying into.

The prophecies made everything more complicated, she knew. But if her mother and father and Zakharya and Elisheva had thought marriage for her and Salome was impossible, they would have said so, wouldn't they? Or at least hint at it? Plant the seed that Miryam should be preparing herself to tend to her father until he died and then be taken in to the house of a relative to spend the rest of her days hovering uncomfortably between dependent and servant? But they hadn't. Not once.

And she could feel that something was coming, in her heart and body as well as in her mind. Something inside was rearranging itself, making room for something new, the way it always had just before a gate to a new part of her life opened. What could the gate lead to besides marriage? Besides the adventure of coming to understand the male half of the world that had been closed to her, and the transformations of motherhood?

A sharp cry, bitten off, jerked her out of her thoughts. She and Priscilla scrambled to their feet, in time to see a great cloud of dust and the last few bounces of some of the bigger logs as the pile slid off the wagon.

Miryam felt sick. She'd *known* this might happen. But she'd also known they weren't ready to hear advice from a girl. If any of them were hurt...

But as the dust settled, they could see that all four boys were still upright, although Tolomei had his left hand, the one with the missing finger, to his mouth. Not a sprain then—a gash or bad splinter.

“Maybe they’ll listen to you now,” Priscilla murmured, then giggled at the expression on Miryam’s face. “One nice thing about being a shy little shadow is that you have lots of time to see what’s going on.”

Urgent cries of “*Miryam!*” called her attention back to the accident. Alphaeus and Josephus were yelling and gesticulating, telling her to hurry up, Tolomei was hurt. She hitched up her skirts, and ran.

Tolomei had half-turned away from the others, his shoulders hunched protectively over the hand he had thrust inside his tunic. Miryam moved in front of him, holding out her hands, palms-up, waiting for him to be ready to show her. He hesitated, his normally good-natured face pinched and private, then reluctantly drew out his hand and rested the tips of his fingers on her wrist.

Tolomei was no coward, so Miryam had already steeled herself for what she might see. Which was a good thing. A piece of wood the size and shape of one of the Temple’s big decorative nails had driven itself right through the middle of the palm of his left hand. There was surprisingly little bleeding on top, since a big knot in the wood was jammed flush against his palm. But when she gently turned it over to examine where the pointed end protruded from the back of his hand, she saw blood gushing out with every beat of his heart.

Fortunately, she’d worn a headcloth to protect her from the worst of the summer sun. Careful not to jostle Tolomei’s hand, she tore it off her head and, using her teeth and her underarm, managed to fold it into a loose pad. “What I want you to do is lay your hand there on the side of the wagon, just like that,” she ordered Tolomei. “Alphaeus and Josephus are going to help you hold it still. Zebdi, I want you to pull out the... the...”

“Wood,” Priscilla calmly supplied.

“It will have to be quick and smooth,” Miryam warned. “Can you do it?”

“Looks easier than some of the fish hooks I’ve had to pull,” Zebdi assured her. “You ready, Tolomei? On three, nice and easy. One, two, *three*.”

It was done. But judging from Tolomei’s hollow groan, there was nothing either nice or easy about it. Zebdi, his face twisted with distaste, cast the bloody knot of wood from him as quickly as if burned his fingers, then beat a hasty retreat back to the woodpile with Josephus.

Miryam was a competent healer, but she had neither Elisheva’s experience nor Salome’s gifts. They were the ones who should treat Tolomei, and as quickly as possible. Miryam tied on the makeshift bandage as firmly as she could. Except for a couple of gasps, Tolomei had made no sound, but he was trembling like a leaf. “The worst is over,” she promised. “But we’ve got to stop the bleeding. Can you rest the hand on your other shoulder?”

Gamely, he tried. “I don’t know how long I can keep it there,” he said, only for her to hear. She looked at his waxen face, beaded with sweat, and then at the oxen. If only they’d been mules, or even a donkey. But oxen were so slow. He’d get there faster by foot—if he had the strength to stay upright that long.

“I’ll take him back,” Alphaeus said, putting an arm around his brother’s waist.

Tolomei flinched away. “You will not,” he said, staggering and almost falling.

Alphaeus and Miryam exchanged a look. She understood a man’s pride was important, but there were times it simply had to be overlooked. “Tolomei,” she said calmly but distinctly. “You have a bad injury, and Elisheva and Salome need to see it as soon as they can. You’ve also lost a lot of blood. The longer you wait, the weaker you’re going to be. I think you can make it on foot if Alphaeus helps you, but if you don’t get going right now you’re probably going to pass out before you get there. Then we’ll all have to stop and lift you into the wagon and...”

“Shh!” he muttered, with an anxious glance at the others. “All *right*. I’ll go. But I don’t need a nursemaid.”

He took a step or two, then faltered. Without saying a word, Alphaeus put a firm arm around his brother's waist. He nodded at Miryam to tell her they'd be fine, but by the way his brow was furrowed, she knew he wasn't convinced they would be.

Miryam watched them go, one hand up to shield her eyes from the beating sun. Perhaps she should run ahead—but, no, Priscilla could not be left unchaperoned with the boys. Perhaps if both of them went—but, no. The farm was not that far away, and all the men were off cutting wood. By the time they'd arranged transportation, the boys would surely be there. No, the best thing she could do right now was help get the wagon loaded. She turned and began to plod toward the others. That is, if the boys would let her.

As she approached, Priscilla was scrambling up on top of the wagon. The little girl clapped her hands for attention. Josephus and Zebdi exchanged another of their *Women!* looks, but Priscilla ignored them. "Listen to me, you two. We've wasted a good hour while you boys pretended you knew what you were doing. But you didn't, and Miryam does. Miryam, get up here," she commanded.

Miryam hesitated. But she couldn't think of any effective alternative. Sighing, she pulled herself up, Priscilla doing her best to help but mostly making things more difficult. She glanced over at the boys, but they'd had the decency to look away until they were sure she had regained her modesty.

"Josephus and New Boy—I forgot your name," Priscilla continued. "Zebdi. Watch out, I'm going to jump." She did, then stood up and dusted her hands. "You two load all the logs that are too heavy for me to do by myself, then get in the wagon and do everything Miryam tells you to. She has a gift for this, you know. Or you would if you'd ever paid the slightest bit of attention."

It was discomfiting, having Priscilla refer so casually to something Miryam had never discussed with anyone, not even Salome, but there was no point denying it. She did have a gift. Nothing as spectacular or easy to put a name to as Salome's colors or Zakharya's political adeptness or even Aunt Elisheva's ability to give comfort. But still a gift. Anna called it "being good with her hands." What it really was, Miryam knew, was understanding how things fit together. But it was not something to talk about, with Priscilla or anyone else.

They had the wagon loaded in less than half an hour. While Josephus showed Priscilla how ridiculous she'd looked tossing wood while making sure that her flower crown stayed in place and Zebdi bent to remove the stones that had wedged the cart into place, Miryam checked the load one last time. Satisfied that it was secure, she climbed onto the top of the wagon's side and, after making sure that neither boy was looking, prepared to jump.

What none of them had counted on was the oxen. As Miryam flexed her knees, one of them stomped, the wagon rocked in response, and the pair realized nothing was holding them back from their dinner. They picked up their heads and started for home.

Oxen don't move quickly, and Miryam was light on her feet. Any other day she could have absorbed the lurch and made the jump. But she was tired, and her reactions were dulled. She felt herself begin to tip, threw out her hands to catch the edge of the wagon, brushed the wood but couldn't find a hold, and pitched head-first toward the stony ground. She only had time to snap her eyes closed and think *this is really going to hurt*.

Hands like iron bands seized her arms, then her cheek and upper body slammed so hard into someone's chest the breath was knocked out of her. She hung there for a moment, fighting for breath as her feet flailed, searching for the ground. She heard an *oof* as they connected with her rescuer's shins. The arms around her tightened, then lowered her the last few inches to the ground and let her go.

Miryam didn't have time to be frightened. She was fighting too hard to breathe. Then, gradually, as the shock faded, her body relaxed into remembering how to let go, the breath she'd been holding on to so tightly loosened and floated off, and another one came to take its place. She sucked in the air, opening herself to it like a heedless fool.

Because what she breathed in was Josephus. She tasted him at the back of her mouth—the all-too-familiar combination of sweat, parchment, ink, expensive oil, and something sharp and impatient and driven that was all his own. She knew that smell, knew that man, knew him in a way she'd never allowed herself to suspect or acknowledge. Until now.

She didn't want this kind of knowing. It was too much. Too big. It was an invasion, of her self as much as his, and it wasn't right. She couldn't, she didn't...

She opened her eyes, hoping to distract herself. But there he was, looking down at her, eyes unguarded. Josephus, who was *never* unguarded.

She stepped back, and he let go of her at once.

“Thank you,” she said, flustered—she, Miryam, who was *never* flustered. She patted at her tunic and hair. “That was certainly unexpected,” she babbled. “What a good thing you were there.”

“Yes,” he said, folding his arms over his chest. “It was.”

There was something in his voice she didn’t understand. She stopped fussing with her clothes and worrying about herself, and tried to read his face.

But he wouldn’t let her. And then Priscilla was there, finally shaken out of the self-possession that had taken Miryam so unaware, pale as fresh parchment as she fumbled for the vial of perfume she wore at her throat.

Miryam waved her off, but gently. “No, no, don’t waste that on me,” she said. “That’s very sweet of you, but I’m fine, I promise. *Please* don’t make a fuss.” She gave a tiny nod to where Zebdi was straightening with difficulty after replacing the stones that anchored the wheels of the heavy cart. Priscilla took the hint and backed off.

Zebdi glanced up and saw them watching. “My mother warned me about the way you Jerusalem girls fling yourselves at fellows,” he said in an awkward attempt to dispel the tension. “Guess it’s a good thing Josephus knew how to catch you.”

“It’s nothing to joke about,” Josephus snapped. “She could have been badly hurt, you idiot.”

“I know,” Zebdi said. “I should have been more careful.”

He said it straight on, meaning what he said but making no effort to invite or dispel any particular response from Josephus.

Which of course only made Josephus madder. “Next time, see that you are!” he said loudly. He bent for the bundle they’d made of their tools, slung it over his shoulder, snatched up the water jug, and stomped off for the farm without a backward look.

“Well, well, well,” Priscilla said, watching her brother go. Her interested little face turned to Miryam.

Which is when Zebdi won Miryam’s heart forever. “Come on, princess,” he said to Priscilla. “I need someone to help me steer.”

“Really?” Priscilla said, eyes very wide. With a pang, Miryam realized the little girl had probably never been this close to an ox in her life.

Thank you, she mouthed to Zebdi as Priscilla ran to him.

He grinned and flicked his hand—*it’s nothing*—and swung Priscilla up on his shoulders. He clicked at the oxen, then said to Priscilla, “I’m starving. What do you think we’re having for dinner?”

Gratefully, Miryam trailed after them, too tired to think of anything at all.

Some hours later, a scrubbed and tidied Salome informed Uncle Zakharya that, between the temple maidens and the girls from the village, there would be twenty-four dancers in all. Uncle Zakharya, slumped on one of the benches in the courtyard, did his best to appear interested. Miryam, still half-asleep, rubbed at her wet hair, feeling sorry for her uncle, who had spent his day scurrying around after Annas, smoothing the ruffled feelings of one insulted village elder after another.

“Twenty-four. An auspicious number,” Uncle Zakharya said, rousing himself with an effort. “Admit it, Elisheva. I was right to invite them.”

But Aunt Elisheva was too preoccupied with her cardamom cakes to respond. She’d invited all the girls to prepare for the dance and have supper at the farm, and she and the overseer’s wife Beulah were trying to finish up the baking before the rest of the maidens returned from bathing in the near-by stream.

Zakharya shrugged and turned back to the girls. “I hear you were the heroine of the day,” he said to Miryam. “Elisheva and Salome say Tolomei had a narrow escape.”

Miryam had been so fuddled with sleep, and so sure the news was bad, she hadn’t even asked. “He’ll be able to keep his hand after all?”

“It’s too soon to tell for sure,” Salome said, getting up from the table where she had been husking pomegranates and piling their seeds in a serving bowl. “But the

wound looked pretty clean considering.” She stripped off the towel she’d used to protect her tunic and headed to the cistern to wash the sticky red juice from her hands. Miryam put down her towel, moved to the table to cover the dish of seeds, and began to gather up the discarded husks.

“Sounds like the stake missed everything important,” Zakharya added. “Didn’t break any bones, and his fingers all still work. So that’s a blessing.”

“That’s no blessing,” Aunt Elisheva said, carrying her platter of hot cakes to the table and setting it down with a thump. “That’s a miracle.” She swatted at Zakharya’s arm, which was wandering toward the sweetmeats in his sash. “Don’t ruin your appetite,” she scolded. “Beulah’s gone to fetch the girls from their bath and they’ll be here any minute. Why don’t you make yourself useful?” She looked around to see what needed doing. “Those benches...” she began.

But Zakharya was surging to his feet, so that Miryam, on her way to hang pomegranate rinds to dry in the weaving shed, had to swerve out of his way. “I’d rather make myself scarce than useful,” he said.

Elisheva snorted. “As if that’s news to anyone here.” Her quick hands, tucking sprigs of mint amongst the cakes, paused as she considered. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea. The girls would be more comfortable without a man here. Why don’t you go clean up some more of Annas’s messes? You can eat with the boys.”

Uncle Zakharya started to protest, changed his mind, and contented himself with sadly wagging his big jowly head. “If only the Sanhedrin could hear what I have to put up with in my own household,” he sighed. “No one appreciates me.”

“If you see them, send them on by,” Elisheva said crisply. “There are a few things I’ve been wanting to tell them for a good long while, and this is as good a time as any.”

“Now that’s something I’d like to see,” said Uncle Zakharya, perking up.

Elisheva gave him a long, level look.

“But not tonight,” he added hastily. He stretched, and scratched his belly. “All right, all right. I’m off to flatter those who need flattering. Save me some cakes. I’ll need

them. Miryam, my...Oh," as she handed him his cloak. "Thank you, my dear." And off he went, humming a psalm.

Aunt Elisheva covered the platter of cakes, set it next to Salome's dish of pomegranate seeds and the bread, cheese, and salads she and Beulah had arranged earlier, and went to the gate, shading her eyes as she looked toward the village. "Perfect timing," she said with satisfaction as the first faint sounds of excited voices wafted in. "You girls run up to the roof and give those mats a good shaking. We're going to have a little visit up there while we wait for the village girls to join us for supper."

She turned back to the door and held out her arms. "Zippora, darling, all nice and clean? It's a wonderful feeling, isn't it? Rahel, you look lovely, my dear."

The mats had scarcely touched the ground before their friends were spilling out onto the roof. The girls were radiant, the deepening gold of the evening sun gilding their damp skin and hair and picking out the brightness of a hair ribbon here, an embroidered girdle there as they hugged and chattered and moved among themselves, a garden of loveliness waving in the evening breeze.

Miryam stepped out of the way, the better to take all the beauty of the moment inside her. Love for the maidens rose thick in her throat. They'd reminded her of a garden from the first time she'd seen them. (Or their older sisters and cousins—hard to believe she had graduated to Head Girl). She'd never imagined that she and Salome would be able to find a place among them, that they'd find a way to reconcile the truths of their village-born souls with the confident grace of those perfect maidens.

She glanced down at the fire of Imma's girdle at her waist. Impossible to believe she was wearing it at last. She'd wished for this day, longed for it, done her best to prepare herself for it. And yet, now that it was here, part of her wanted to shrink back and return to the little girl she'd been.

She let memories of her first days at the temple sweep over her. The fear and pain of the journey. The relief of Abba's rescue, and the *berit* they had cut together. Steeling herself to join in the household of the stern uncle who had admonished her three-year-old self that little girls were not supposed to jump in the temple. The gush of gratitude when that forbidding specter had resolved into Uncle Zakharya and she'd realized she was coming home to a place some part of her already knew. The shock and

despair of Uncle Josef's expulsion from Leonotopolis. The strength and hope with which the adults had received the crushing news.

Now she'd be the one who had to have the strength. That's what her beautiful girdle signified. The circle of friends and teachers that had born her up as she grew was about to fade away. Something new was coming. She'd known it for months, felt it in the empty waiting place in her chest. But it wasn't until tonight, not until this minute, that her heart accepted what it so far had refused to see. That every new beginning requires space to grow roots of its own. And the only way to find that space was to leave the protection of the garden she already knew.

"We're so glad to have you here," came her aunt's familiar voice, calling the girls to order.

Miryam looked around for a place to sit. Salome and Zippora were waving at her so enthusiastically they looked as though they might topple right over. She grinned at them, grateful to be, for a few more precious weeks, just a girl, and not a woman. She picked her way towards them. She'd barely had time to twitch the hem of her tunic out of the dust and safely onto the mat when Salome was butting up next to her like a friendly cat. She put her arms around her sister's shoulders and settled down to listen.

Aunt Elisheva sat on the bench by the door. The light fell sharply on the bottom half of her face, highlighting the fine wrinkles around her lips and the beginning of whiskers on her chin, which waggled faintly. *It's not just Uncle Zakharya who's getting old*, Miryam realized with a pang.

"You know, there's nothing I love more than dancing," Aunt Elisheva began. She shook her head ruefully, her earrings swinging against her soft cheeks, and went on as though she had heard Miryam's thoughts. "But I'm an old woman now, and my dancing days are through. You'd think that would make me sad. And sometimes it does. My body can't do everything it used to. I get tired, bits of me suddenly decide to start hurting or stop working, and when I lost my little hand mirror a few years ago, I decided not to bother replacing it. What it showed me was just too depressing." She made a face and the girls laughed.

"It's not that I didn't know it was going to happen. Everyone gets old. I've known, ever since I married Zakharya, that we could only serve in the temple until he turned

fifty. It's just that knowing it now, when he's forty-nine, is a much bigger and more complicated kind of knowing than it was thirty years ago. Then I imagined that I would be ready for it, that somehow the girl I was then would have become transformed into the woman I would need to be, that I would feel prepared for this new chapter in my life. But that doesn't seem to be the way it works. Although I may seem old and even wise on the outside, on the inside I'm still the same green girl I've always been—and most of the time, she has no idea of what she'd doing!"

Her aunt was describing exactly what Miryam had been trying to put into words a few minutes ago. She leaned forward, interested in where this was going.

"I've come to believe," Elisheva went on, "that that is what it is to be a woman. Men's lives seem more straightforward than ours, more predictable, marching, like the sun in a straight line from one side of the sky to the other. We women, however, are more like the moon. We are reflectors of light, cycling around the needs and gifts of others, clothed in bodies whose abilities change from day to day as we spin through our monthly cycles. It seems that it's all we can do to maintain any kind of balance at all. I know that sometimes, as I've bent my heart to the sorrows and rejoicings of others, I have wondered if I will ever get a turn of my own, to do things that I want to do in the way I want to do them. Sometimes I have even wondered if it meant that I mattered less to God than a man, because he has been given choices I will never be offered. It can be hard to watch others striding forward, while you are left behind to tend the children and do the dishes."

Now it wasn't just Miryam who was listening. You could have heard a pin drop on that roof.

"I've thought a lot about what the Lord wants from me as a woman," Aunt Elisheva went on. "And how that might be the same or different from what He wants of my husband or my brother as a man. I've concluded that the similarities far outweigh the differences. The Lord wants us all to love and remember Him, to keep His commandments, and to love and bless each other. None of those things are surprising. We talk about them all the time. But I think there's another thing the Lord wants of us that we don't talk about quite as much. The Lord wants us to be creators. And that, I think, may be where my job as a woman and Zakharya's as a man may take different

paths, although to the same destination.” She looked at all the faces upturned to hers.

“This might be easiest to understand if we start with an example.”

She turned to Zippora. “Zippora, dear. When were you created?”

“In my mother’s womb,” Zippora answered.

“That’s certainly part of the answer,” Aunt Elisheva said, nodding. She turned to Salome. “When was the Zippora *you* know created?”

Salome hesitated. “The day after Shavuot, three years ago,” she decided. “Our first morning in the temple.”

Everyone laughed.

“I didn’t ask that question well,” Aunt Elisheva said. “What I meant was, is the Zippora you know the same as the one that was created in her mother’s womb?”

“No,” Salome said. “Not at all. Well, I guess, at all. But I’m friends with the girl, not the baby.”

“And what created her?”

Salome knit her brows together, fierce in her concentration. “Her family,” she said. “The things they did. The food they gave her. The protection and teaching they provided. And you. And Anna. And the temple. And me and the other girls. We all helped. But I think most of it was Zippora herself. What she decided to pay attention to. What she thought was important, and worth doing. And her determination to do it.”

“Exactly right,” said Aunt Elisheva. “The Zippora that we love did indeed begin in her mother’s womb. But that was only a beginning. It will take her the rest of her life and all those she serves and who serve her to finish creating the Zippora the Lord means her to be, the Zippora worthy and prepared to join Him in the perfect day of eternal life. Women help the Lord at the beginning of that process. We give life as we introduce souls to the physical world and awaken them to its joys. The responsibility of our brothers is to help Him with its end, by organizing and safeguarding the public structures—the schools, the communities, the temples—that supports each new being as it grows toward the Lord. The women, in other words, are the roots.”

She extended one arm and waggled her hand so that its fingers pointed down. Then she took her other arm, wound it around the first, and pointed that hand toward the sun. "And the men are the branches. Together, they form the Tree of Life."

She looked around the roof, making eye contact with each girl, one by one. "So the first thing I hope you'll remember is that no one can really grow or create something new by herself. You have needed each person here to help you grow into the person you have become, and they have needed you. When you join hands tonight, I want you to notice the power and the joy that comes from working together with other people. It requires discipline, sometimes even sacrifice. It is not easy to learn to match your steps to another's. But now that you have, I hope you will pay attention to the power that comes from clasping hands with the people around you and moving through time and space together."

She dropped her arms and folded her hands in her lap. "Now for the second thing. Some of you are about to embark on an adventure that you may feel your life at the temple has not prepared you for at all: becoming wives and mothers."

Elisheva's face sobered. "These roles are the source of a woman's greatest joy, but also her greatest sorrow. No matter how fortunate you may be in your husband, men and women are different by design. In his heart of hearts, a man measures himself by his mastery of the physical world—the power of his hands, the speed of his legs and his mind, the strength and integrity of his labor. I like to think of men as arrows, shooting straight and true through the mists of life. Anna prefers to think of them as the warp, working to strengthen the cloth of the world we weave together, and ensuring it hangs true."

She pulled off the scarf she wore over her shoulders, shaking it so that its long silk fringe hung free. "But for all their strength, men without women are like the tassels on this fringe: separate and unanchored." She shook the shawl so they could see what happened to the way the fringe flapped and tangled. "We women are the woof. We're the ones that anchor the men we love in the softness and colors of this world. As we receive them, as we wrap our way around them, we become their anchor, and they become our strength and our guides, helping us rise out of the puddle of wishes and dreams that women find it too easy to become. *Both* are necessary. We are the ones who

anchor them in this world. They are the ones who give us the structure and direction we need to rise above it. So as you take your first steps into the world you and your husband will create together, carry that knowledge in your heart. Do not be afraid of his strength and his difference. You are, in your own way, as strong and mysterious to him as he may sometimes seem to you. Don't flee from your differences, or use them to belittle or judge each other. Instead, receive each other as fully as you can. The closer you come together, the stronger and more beautiful the cloth you will weave together."

She shook out her scarf one last time, and returned it to her shoulders. "So that's the second thing I want you to practice as you dance together tonight. At first you will think of yourselves, of how you are to move, of how the breeze feels on your skin, of what the night means to you. That is natural and proper. But once you have done that, once you are sure of your steps, I want you to try a little experiment. I want you to practice receiving. I want you to take the things you see and hear into yourselves, and tuck them away, like seeds planted deep under the earth. Leave them alone, and one day, when you are not expecting it, they will begin to bloom, lending color and fragrance to your life that was not there before. Men create by doing; women by receiving, which is its own kind of multiplication."

She looked at the girls, her face softening with affection. "Finally," she said, "I hope you understand that the excitement and, I hope, the romance of the next few years is only a beginning. As it flies by, don't make the mistake of trying to hold on to it, or the lovely young woman you are. I hope that each of you goes to bed tonight stuffed full of memories that are so sweet that they will be a shade and a refuge for you as long as you live. But when they are over, I want you to remember one thing: No matter how much fun you have, I will have more."

She laughed at the disbelief on their faces. "I will," she insisted. "And this is why. Because you will be dancing from inside yourselves, and that will be a joy. But my joy will be multiplied, because I will be dancing it with each of you. And with the girl I was. And with the friends I had, and the students I've taught, and the sister I loved. And if there's any more room in my big old heart, I'll be filling it with dreams of *your* daughters, and the joy their dancing will one day bring you, and on and on and on."

“Now *that*,” Elisheva said with satisfaction, “Is what I call a *dance*. Moving together through time with those we love in a rhythm so deep and true that there is a place for every gift, and every giver.”

She touched her earrings, adjusted her necklace and head cloth, and finally stood., grinning at them with an expression that was not old at all. “Now, enough of that. Let’s do your hair, and then we’ll eat.”

Miryam found herself surrounded by a small crowd of girls, talking and holding out combs and ribbons. She hesitated, calculating how many heads she’d have time for and wondering how to decide which ones to accept.

None of them, it turned out. She smelled jasmine and roses, and there was her aunt. “I’m sorry, girls,” Elisheva said with a smile. “But tonight Miryam’s mine. I’ll tell you what, though. If you go down into the courtyard and look beside the cistern, you will find the biggest and most beautiful bunch of flowers you have ever seen.”

The girls squealed their excitement and disappeared.

“You didn’t need to send *all* of them away,” Miryam protested.

“Yes,” Elisheva said firmly. “I did.”

She led Miryam to a bench. When they were both seated, she reached inside the neck of her tunic for a small pouch. “You’re not the only one who’s good with your hands,” she teased gently, extracting combs and small pot of scented oil. She applied a few drops to Miryam’s forehead and massaged it into the skin of her face and neck. “You have your mother’s lovely skin,” she said. “I did this for her, you know. Many, many years ago.” She stoppered the pot of oil, then reached for the combs, wiping what remained of the oil on their teeth and then beginning to comb the scent through Miryam’s dark sweep of hair.

“I also made a promise to your mother when she was expecting you,” she said. “My goodness, that was a hard pregnancy. She lost so much weight that your father came all the way to Jerusalem to fetch me to nurse her. I walked into your house, and there she was, lying on the bed, a pile of skin and bones. And before she said anything—thank you for coming, or how was the journey, she looked at me with those big gray

eyes of hers and said, cool as a cucumber, ‘I don’t know if I’ll survive childbed,” just like that.”

Her mother *had* been abrupt, Miryam remembered. You’d forget it, because of her warmth and kindness, and then suddenly it would surprise you. Salome was a little bit the same way.

“It took the wind right out of my sails. Here I was, the big wise older sister, come to comfort and sustain, but there she was, lying on that bed, fragile and tiny as the girl she had been when we lost our mother, and I just broke right down.” She tipped her head forward to meet Miryam’s eyes. “*Not* my finest moment,” she admitted, then resumed the long, soothing strokes of the comb. “She paid no attention to my antics, I’m glad to say, and just plunged right on. ‘I want you to promise me two things if I die but the baby survives,” she said. ‘First, promise me that you and Zakharya will take the baby to the temple and raise it the way your raised me until Eliakim remarries.”

Elisheva laid the combs aside and began dividing Miryam’s hair into sections. “I tried to talk her out of it,” she said. “Not because I didn’t want to do it—of course I did. But we were so sure you would be a boy. The late pregnancy to a barren woman—we thought, well, we *hoped* that this child might be the Messiah.”

She must have felt Miryam’s start, but she ignored it. No one had ever said it right out loud before, but of course Miryam had wondered.

Elisheva just kept talking, the tug of her fingers in Miryam’s hair curiously soothing. “And if the baby *were* the Messiah, the temple would be the first place Herod would look. So I thought it wasn’t safe. But your mother insisted. “This baby needs to be raised in the temple,” she kept saying. ‘Eliakim and I have talked about it, and we know it’s the right thing.” So in the end I promised.”

She was silent for a few minutes. “What was the second thing you promised,” Miryam prompted, thinking she’d forgotten.

“One moment, my pet. I’m nearly done,” her aunt said. “There. Don’t move.”

Miryam froze obediently. There was no sound on the roof except the sound of her aunt’s retreating footsteps. There was a brief pause, and the footsteps got louder. A basin of white flowers appeared at Miryam’s feet, and then a towel was being spread on

her shoulders. "So the water from the flowers won't drizzle on you," Elisheva explained. "Now, where was I?"

"The second promise," Miryam reminded her.

"Ah, yes, the lovely second promise," her aunt said. She rested her hands on Miryam's shoulders for a moment. "The lovely, lovely second promise."

The hands lifted. "Well, as I said, the whole family was convinced you would be a boy," she continued. "But your mother wasn't so sure. 'There's a sweetness about this baby,' she told me. 'A modesty. I know what everyone's hoping, and I don't blame them for hoping it, but Elisheva, I just know she's a girl.'" And suddenly a warm, loving feeling just spread right through me, and I knew she was right. I had never felt such joy, such assurance in my life, that everything would be fine, that the Messiah was coming, that this was all part of the plan."

Something sparked in Miryam's chest, as it had that first night when she had seen the temple.

Her aunt seemed to be waiting for Miryam to respond. But Miryam didn't know if she should. She felt something. But she didn't understand it yet. And she didn't want to speak carelessly about holy things. "I think I know," she finally whispered.

"Yes," Elisheva said. "I thought you might. Turn around, dear, so I can see the front of your hair."

Miryam did. Elisheva began fussing with the side of her head, leaning so close that her mouth was right in front of Miryam's eyes. "The second promise," she said, "was that if the baby were a girl, and if Hannah weren't here to do it for herself, that I would be her hands when it was time to dress you for your dance. And it has been my great privilege," she said, then had to stop, because her lips and her chin were going all trembly again. "My great privilege to do so," she finished. She sat back, and pulled one last thing from her pouch. A small bronze mirror.

"You found it!" Miryam said.

“So I did,” Elisheva said. She handed it to Miryam. “Tonight, you are a queen,” she said. And when she leaned forward to hug her, Miryam felt more than one pair of arms wind themselves around her shoulders.

Chapter 12: The Dance

Zippora and I were discussing how hungry we were and congratulating ourselves for our amazing discipline in not having dived into all that luscious food yet, when I realized she'd stopped paying attention and was staring at something over my shoulder. Maybe Aunt Elisheva was finally going to let us eat, I thought, twisting around to see for myself. And yes, Aunt Elisheva was there, and yes, she was saying something about the food, and then she and all the other girls were heading to the tables, but I wasn't paying attention to any of it. I was staring at Miryam, who had hung back behind my aunt and now was walking slowly toward us.

She was so beautiful it hurt my heart. Her hair—I'd never seen anything like it. It was braided and glossy with fragrant white flowers spangling it like stars. She held herself like a queen, but her fingers kept sneaking out to touch the brightness of Imma's girdle, which wound once around her slender waist, and once underneath her breasts. Breasts that I had never let myself see before, but which pressed out unmistakably from beneath the fine linen weave of her tunic. She was a woman, and it scared me.

"Shut your mouth, Salome," she said. "You look like a fish."

Zippora giggled, and I wanted to smack her.

"Did Aunt Elisheva do your hair?" was the only stupid thing I could think to say.

Her hand lifted up to touch it. "Yes," she said. "Is it too much?"

I wanted to tell her it was, hoping that might punch a hole through the shell of perfection that seemed to have suddenly inserted itself between us. "No," I finally admitted, knowing that I sounded grudging and telling myself I didn't care. "You're perfect."

"Totally and completely perfect," Zippora added fervently from my elbow.

I glowered at her. It was just Miryam, after all. "Took you long enough," I said. "We all thought we'd die from hunger. Let's go eat."

In the beginning, we all danced, even Aunt Elisheva, who wanted to make sure that those of us who were doing it for the first time remembered the steps. Then she stopped, and after a few more songs made the rest of us who were too young for betrothal stop, too. Priscilla hadn't recognized the signal that it was time for us to sit down, so Aunt Elisheva had to go fetch her out of the line herself, which had of course mortified Priscilla, who was a lot better than she had been in the beginning but still got more embarrassed faster and stayed that way longer than anyone I knew. Normally it was Miryam that calmed her down, but since she was still dancing, Zippora was the one to take her by the hand and sit her in her lap and do all kinds of nice things for her until the worst of her blushes and trembles subsided.

It *was* strange, I realized, thinking of the things Elisheva had said. Girls and boys really were different. I mean, Priscilla's own brother was standing right there next to the new boy, Jonas's quiet brother, but she didn't go to him, nor did it seem to occur to him to go to her. Didn't Josephus notice how upset Priscilla was about her mistake? I looked at him doubtfully. His eyes were glued, and I mean *glued*, to the dancers. He *must* have seen what happened.

I started to ask Zippora what she thought—did she think he saw but didn't realize what he was seeing? Or maybe saw but decided that it wasn't his job to do anything about it? but there was Priscilla getting dandled in her lap, so I couldn't. Which made me feel as grumpy as the sight of Miryam in all her finery.

Annas was clopping up to Josephus with the awkward, gangly gait of the goat he was. Zebdi backed quickly away. At least *he* had some sense, I thought approvingly, letting my eyes move on. There were my cousins, Alphaeus, Simon, and Tolomei, squatting together like they always did. My gaze whipped back. Tolomei! What was he doing here? He looked absolutely terrible, like he might collapse at any moment. I caught Alphaeus' eye and scowled. He got the message, but just shrugged, a disgusted look on his face. Not because of me. Because of Tolomei, who we both knew should be home in bed.

Why wasn't he? I wondered. Then I got it. Tolomei must *like* someone. I scanned the circle of dancing girls, wondering who it was. It took me a while to realize that it wasn't the dancers that he was watching. It was us. Us? I caught Alphaeus's eye again.

He had obviously figured out what I was doing, because he was laughing so hard I thought he'd tip over. Even Simon, usually so sober, had a little half-grin on his face. But Tolomei was too intent on whomever he was looking at to notice.

I knew it wasn't me. Tolomei and I got along fine, but nothing like that. Besides, if it had been me, he'd have figured out all this by-play between me and his brothers and one of them would have a black eye by now, injured hand or no injured hand. I glanced sideways to see if anyone had joined us, but no one had. Priscilla, then? Oh, dear. That would not be good. Her parents would never... I glanced back at Alphaeus and Simeon who were shaking their heads no, laughing so hard they practically had to hold each other up. Not Priscilla, then. But the only one left was—*Zippora?*

"Close your mouth, Salome," said a rumbly voice in my ear. "You look like a fish. You don't have to look so surprised, you know. She's a lovely girl, with a heart of gold. Tolomei would be a fool not to notice her."

I practically jumped out of my skin, which did absolutely nothing to help my grumpiness. Zebdi had plonked himself down next to me as if he had every right to be there, sticking his nose into my private business. He was as bad as Jonas. "You remind me of your brother," I said frostily.

"Thank you."

"I didn't *mean* it as a *compliment*."

"I know you didn't. But I'm going to take it as one all the same. He sends you his regards, by the way. Says to tell you he thinks of you every time he brings in the catch."

I stared at him blankly.

"All those open mouths," he said, and showed me.

It had been a long and upsetting day, and that was one swipe too many. To my horror, I realized I was going to cry. "Excuse me," I said, hustling to my feet and making sure to keep my face averted. "There's something I... What I mean is... Tell them I went home," I managed to choke out in Zippora's direction. Then I ran away from the firelight, wanting only to bury myself in the darkness.

He came right after me, which I suppose I should have expected, him being Jonas's brother and all, but I wasn't exactly thinking clearly.

"Leave me alone," I sobbed. "Just leave me alone."

"All right," he said.

But he didn't stop. I was crying too hard to hear his footsteps, but I could tell because he had a torch, and the light didn't go away.

I whirled around. "You *said* you would leave me alone."

"I am," he protested.

"But you're still here!"

"Look. Salome. I'm really sorry I hurt your feelings."

"I don't care about that!" I bellowed. "I just want you to go!"

"I can't," he said.

I stared at him, then realized my mouth was hanging open. I closed it with a snap. "You just promised you would!" I said furiously. "Twice!"

"No, I didn't. I said I'd leave you alone. And that's exactly what I'm trying to do, so if you'd just stop talking..."

"You know what I mean!"

"Yes," he admitted. "Yes, I do know what you mean. You mean you want me to let you go running off in the darkness by yourself, but I can't. It wouldn't be safe or proper—not that this is all that proper either, the two of us unchaperoned like this, but it's better than the alternative. So, yes, I can and will leave you alone, in the sense that I will not try to talk to you or interfere with your thoughts. But I can't leave you. Here's what I will do. I'll walk behind you. I can't walk *too* far behind, because of the torch—or, here, you take it."

He thrust it at me, but it spat and burned me.

"Ouch!" I scowled at him and rubbed at the burn.

"Or maybe I should just, you know, keep it..."

Like I said, it had been a long day, and I had used up my pitifully small store of self-control a long time ago. “What’s *wrong* with you?” I wanted to know. “You’re acting like you’re afraid of me or something.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” he snapped right back, showing more backbone than I thought he had. “It’s just—well, I haven’t been around girls very much, and I don’t usually talk a whole lot, and I was just trying to be friendly because Jonas used to talk about you when he first got home, and I thought you sounded interesting, but then I put my foot in my mouth back there with the stupid thing about looking like a fish...”

He didn’t fit. The parts of him didn’t fit. One second he was confident, even wise, and the next he was young and foolish and it was all very confusing. Like I said, I was tired, and feeling vulnerable, and I couldn’t make sense of all the different parts of this person. And he had a quality that’s hard to describe. Jonas wore his light on the outside, but Zebdi—it’s like he was trying to hide his. Mix him up with a dozen other boys his age, and he’s the one you’d notice last. Zebdi was... private. So I had no business doing what I did. No business at all.

But I did it anyway. I looked at him, really looked at him, from the inside out, the way I used to look at people when I was a little girl and didn’t know any better. And the colors I saw gathered in his heart were so beautiful, so pure and so true, that there was nothing I could do but love him.

It happened just like that, a bolt of lightning cleaving me right down the middle. And it was infuriating. He had no *right* to do that to me. To just walk up and get inside me like that without even asking permission. Before I could decide what to do next, we were interrupted.

“Salome! Salome! Is that you?”

I looked around to see who it could be, and made out a pale figure running up the hillside that eventually turned into Miryam. “Salome,” she panted. “I was so worried. Are you all right? What happened? Why did you leave?” Her face was flushed, and some of her flowers looked like they might be getting ready to fall out, but I didn’t push them back in.

“I was tired, and decided to come home,” I said with what dignity I could muster. “Zippora was supposed to tell you.”

“And I saw her go, and I thought it would be better if she had someone with her,” Zebdi explained without any dignity at all, shifting from foot to foot and looking guilty as a dog who had just swallowed your bread.

Miryam’s gaze sharpened and her hands went to her hips.

Oh, for pity’s sake.

“It was my fault, not his,” I said quickly. “My feelings got hurt, and I ran off, and he was too much of a gentleman to let me go crashing off by myself, although,” I turned to him as it occurred to me, “It *is* a full moon, and *Miryam* made it here just fine, so like I told you...”

“Hey!” came a sharp voice. A darker figure was running up the field toward us, making much better time than Miryam had. It turned out to be Josephus. “Just what do you think you’re doing?” he asked Zebdi as he caught up with us, breathless but still menacing. He got right in Zebdi’s face. “You’ve been in the middle of several problems today, haven’t you?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Zebdi said, taking a step closer to show he didn’t much care for Josephus’s implication.

“It was all my fault, Josephus, really,” I said again. “Don’t blame him. I was tired, and decided to go home, and apparently Zebdi convinced himself I’d be attacked by an armed gang of robbers or something, so he followed me, even though there’s a full moon outside and *Miryam* was fine, so I probably would have been too,” then, recollecting myself, “and then Miryam saw I was gone, so she came to find me—although,” I said, turning to her. “I *did* tell them to tell you that I was fine and not to worry.”

“And why exactly are *you* here?” Zebdi demanded. He was shorter than Josephus by a couple of inches, but it didn’t seem to bother him.

“If you must know,” Josephus said down his nose, just like Joanna and Priscilla did sometimes when they were mad, “I happened to notice Miryam seemed upset by something, and just wanted to make sure she was all right.”

“Yes, well, thank you, Josephus,” said Miryam. “That was very thoughtful of you, but as you can see, I’m fine. And if Salome is going to bed, then perhaps I will, too. It’s been a long day.”

To tell the truth, I’d been sort of enjoying all the back and forth and everything up til then. But Miryam sounded strange. Didn’t she?

I shot a glance at Zebdi to see if he’d noticed. He was watching Josephus and Miryam with an interested expression that for some reason made me even madder.

But all he said was, “It *has* been a long day. Think I’ll turn in as well. What about you, Josephus? You want to come with me, or are you going back to the dance?”

“In a minute,” said Josephus said, his eyes on Miryam.

He hadn’t really answered Zebdi’s question, but Zebdi didn’t seem to mind. “All right,” he said. He prodded at me with his foot. “Come on, Salome, I’ll walk you home. It’s right on my way.”

I checked with Miryam to see what she wanted to do, but she was staring at Josephus like she’d never seen him before.

I opened my mouth to call to her, but Zebdi shushed me before I could.

“I think she and Josephus have something they need to discuss,” he said quietly.

“I can wait.”

“Something private.”

“Not from me. I’m her *sister*.”

“Salome, it’s time for you to go.” His voice was still quiet, but the words rumbled with such power I could feel them in my stomach.

I gaped at him.

He must have seen how much he had startled me because when he spoke again he sounded like his calm, ordinary self. “It’ll be all right,” he promised, then took my arm. “But it’s time for us to go.”

I shook him off. “You may not know this, being new, but the rules about the maidens and the Levites are very strict, even stricter than they are in the villages.”

His lips got all stiff and twisty, like he was trying not to laugh. “I know all about the rules,” he assured me. “And I work very hard to obey them. But sometimes friends need a minute to talk things out between themselves. Now, come on.”

I hate it when people laugh at me. And even more when they pretend they aren’t. I didn’t budge.

He got down right in my face. I tried not to look at him, but he put his big rough fisherman hands on my head and held it still so I could see that he meant what he said. I was so shocked he was touching me that I let him. “I promise you, Salome, that if your aunt and uncle were here they would tell you the same thing.”

I searched his face. He let his eyes go naked, and I knew he was telling me the truth.

I started to wriggle, and he let me go. I wanted to scrub at the place his hands had been, but that would have been rude, so I didn’t. “Promise?” I said, my voice higher and shakier than I wanted it to be.

“Promise,” he said.

I let him take me home.

Zebdi was right about one thing. Miryam didn’t take long. By the time I’d said good night to Beulah (who was still tidying up after our feast) and sent her off to bed, changed out of my gown and into my tunic, unbraided my hair and combed all the flowers out and put it back into its ordinary single braid, brushed my gown and folded it away, washed my face, cleaned my teeth, said my prayers, gotten comfortable in bed, and had time to worry, the gate to the compound was creaking cautiously open. My body relaxed more comfortably on the mat. She was back.

She said something, and someone rumbled a reply.

I sat bolt upright. Was that *Josephus*?

I heard footsteps on the stairs. “Let me just make sure she’s asleep.”

I slumped down against the pillows, doing my best to breathe slow and deep. She came creeping in, the rustle of her special tunic different enough for me to notice the sound. I got a whiff of flowers and burning oil, saw the darkness behind my eyelids lighten and go red as she held her lamp up to my face, then felt then quick brush of her lips on my forehead. She straightened the covers—which needed it, since I’d more or less collapsed where I was—smoothed my hair away from my face, and was gone.

I heard the rumble again.

“Dead to the world,” Miryam answered.

“You’re sure?” he asked, so emphatically that I recognized Zakharya’s voice. My whole body sagged in relief. Not that I could imagine Miryam doing anything really wrong, but still.

Down in the courtyard, someone was bumping the benches closer to the table. A third voice—Elisheva’s by the sound of it—asked a quiet question, and I realized they were getting ready to talk about something they didn’t want me to hear. Twigs crackled as someone made a small fire for tea and a platter clinked. Probably the cakes we’d saved for Zakharya. As quietly as I could, I dragged my mat to the doorway, propped some cushions against the corner, and settled in to listen.

“He said the Sanhedrin believes that King Herod is the only one who cares enough about the Messiah prophecy to be a threat, and he’s so old and in such poor health he’ll probably be dead long before we’d be having children,” Miryam was telling the others. “They say that since Herod’s sons all grew up in Rome, they may not even know that such a thing as a promised Messiah is supposed to exist, and even if they do, they’ll dismiss it as nothing more than the kind of superstitious legend that all conquered peoples tell each other. And since Josephus’ father is a well-known Sadducee, and his great-grandfather is Hillel, and they know that you, Uncle Zakharya, are the last of the Aaronic line and have the support of the common people—well, the Sanhedrin believes that the Romans would see our marriage as a strategic and stabilizing alliance.”

There was a pause. “I didn’t see that coming,” said Zakharya. “Did you, Elisheva?”

Her aunt murmured something.

“Although I suspect the real motivation here,” he went on, “at least as far as the Sanhedrin is concerned—has more to do with keeping their friends close and their enemies closer. What else did he say?”

Miryam hesitated, and Aunt Elisheva hurried to add, “That you think we should know about.”

“He says he’s had invitations, lots of them, from all over the world—Damascus, Athens, Alexandria, even Rome, but that he’s been waiting. For me,” Miryam said, sounding pleased and a little shy. “But his mother’s illness is getting worse, and she told Gamaliel that her mind won’t be at ease until both Josephus and Priscilla are provided for.”

“What about Annas?” Elisheva asked.

I had assumed she was talking to Miryam, but it was Uncle Zakharya who answered. “Apparently he sent for Eliakim ten days ago. Said it was time and past for the decision to be made, and that if he isn’t there by the time we get back tomorrow, the Sanhedrin will make the decision for him. So much for our hope that they’d let you stay with us until my retirement this winter.” I heard raspy noises, and knew he was scratching his beard. “Annas is more dangerous than the rest because he *does* believe in the prophecies. He’s willing to accept Josephus because the boy’s close enough to the center of power to be trusted, but I think what matters more to him is just to get the whole question settled one way or another.”

“Will he be there?” Miryam asked, her voice sharp and excited.

“Will who be there, darling?” Aunt Elisheva asked.

“Abba. Do you think he’ll be there at the temple when we get there tomorrow?”

It had been getting harder and harder to stay awake, but that woke me right up.

There was a brief silence. “Perhaps,” Uncle Zakharya said. “I hope so. But then I thought he’d be here for the dancing, so I can’t say for certain. I think we have to prepare ourselves for what happens if he isn’t.”

“What about you, Miryam?” Elisheva asked. “Would it please you to be Josephus’s wife?”

I could hear Miryam get up and start to pace. I risked poking my head out just the slightest bit, and saw her jerking the flowers from her hair. “I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know. I didn’t suspect, didn’t want to let myself believe—and then the things he said...”

She was crying! Miryam was *crying*. Aunt Elisheva and Uncle Zakharya exchanged a glance. Elisheva got up, put an arm around her, and led her back to the table. She sat her down, produced a comb, and began to gently unraid Miryam’s fancy hair.

I was getting tired. I rearranged my cushions a little more comfortably and burrowed in, careful to leave my ears uncovered.

“I really do care for him, and I think he cares for me,” Miryam said eventually.

“No question of that,” Elisheva agreed.

“But I don’t know if it’s right. What do you think?”

“Doesn’t matter what we think,” Zakharya said. “We’re not the ones marrying him.”

“Isn’t there a plan?” Miryam said.

My eyelids were scratchy and heavy. I spit on my finger and drew it across them, but it didn’t help much.

“A plan?” asked Elisheva.

“About who I’m supposed to marry. Or what I’m supposed to do.”

“If there is,” said Zakharya with a chuckle, “no one’s told us about it. No, sweetie, I think these are the kinds of decisions the Lord wants us to make for ourselves.”

“Oh,” said Miryam.

No one said anything for a long time, and by then I was asleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night, needing to relieve myself. Which I did. But Miryam had not been snuggled next to me, so on my way back I detoured up to the roof to see if she had decided to sleep up there where it was cooler. She was there, but she wasn’t asleep. She was watching the night sky, her eyes big pools of darkness.

“How come you aren’t in bed?” I whispered, so as not to disturb the household.

She jumped.

“Sorry,” I said, tip toeing over to join her. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

She opened up her blanket so her arms looked like wings, and I nestled inside, her little Salome-chick.

Her cheek came down on the top of my hair. “Too many things to think about,” she said.

“I heard,” I confessed.

I felt her stiffen, but then she relaxed and when she spoke, her voice had a smile in it. “Of course you did. How much?”

I thought back, trying to remember. “They were asking you about what you thought about Josephus. You asked them what they thought, and they said it was up to you.” I yawned. “I thought you’d be happy. Josephus is a real catch.”

Miryam laughed, but it came out kind of choked. “I *am* happy,” she said. “I think. I never thought it would be a possibility, so it’s a lot to take in.”

“You sure seem to like each other,” I said.

She sighed, ruffling the top of my hair. She started to say something, bit it off, then said it anyway. “He says the two of us understand things that other people don’t see, and I guess that’s sort of right. I know I feel more alive when he’s around. And I think he’s a nicer person when he’s around me. But it never seemed like a realistic possibility, so I didn’t think about it.” She bit her lip, then practically wailed, “Salome, I’m not *prepared*.”

“Of course you’re not,” I said, liking that for once I got to be the wise older sister. “You’ve spent all these years preparing yourself not to be disappointed when this is over and we have to go back to the village. And now it turns out it might be the exact opposite of what you thought, that you might be a great lady, living with the people we’ve always thought we had to be careful of. It’s a lot to try to make sense of all at once. Plus you’ve never exactly been very social. So the thought of maybe living a public life must feel very...” I searched for the word, and found it. “Daunting.”

Her arms tightened around me. “How did you get so wise?”

“I just pay attention. That’s all.”

“Oh, that’s all,” she said, pretending to make a friendly little joke, but I could tell her heart wasn’t in it. I was quiet, and let her think.

It was a lovely night. The full moon was low in the southern sky, smaller than it would be during the High Holy Days in the fall, but very bright, with the stars behind spangling the velvet sky as they had since the beginning of time. I could smell jasmine, and the roses Uncle Zakharya loved, and the sharp scent of some animal—a deer, I thought. Some doves called sleepily from the dovecote, and for an instant it was as though the world was holding its breath, waiting with me to hear what Miryam would say.

“It’s just,” she said suddenly, sitting up and pushing back a little from me. “It’s just I thought there was a plan.”

I twisted around to face her. Her face looked strained, even severe, in the moonlight.

“I thought my job was to be obedient, and that everything would turn out right. I didn’t expect to have a real choice. I didn’t think that was, well, *allowed*, if you know what I mean. I was supposed to find out what the Lord wanted me to do, and then do it. When Elisheva and Zakharya turned to me and asked me what I *wanted*, when they said there wasn’t a plan, I just felt—well, *naked*. And disoriented. And scared. What if I get it wrong? I mean, this isn’t just for me. It’s for Josephus and our whole family and my children. And I’m just a girl. What do I know?”

“Enough,” I heard myself say. “You know enough.” The words just came, and I let them. “The Lord won’t ask you to do more than you can. You only have to figure it out as best you can, and then if you’re wrong He’ll tell you.” I closed my mouth, knowing that if I added anything else, the words would be broken and untrue. They would be *my* words, not Wisdom’s. And tonight, Miryam needed Wisdom.

Miryam put her hands to her face and started to weep. “The thing is, Salome, that I love him. I really love him. There isn’t anyone else. There never has been. I love Josephus. And he’s better when I’m with him. I know he is. But it doesn’t feel right. I

don't know why. If I had more time, I could figure out why it feels wrong. Maybe it's not wrong. Maybe it's happened so fast that my feelings haven't caught up with things the way they really are. I don't know. But they need me to tell them right now. And what if I make a mistake? What if I say no and wish—in a month or a year—that I had said yes? And you should have seen his face—it was so open. He's never like that. What if I say no and it hurts him so much that he can never be open again?"

I'd started out sympathetic, but those last few sentences were too much. "I *hate* it when you do that."

"What?" she asked, surprised as if I'd punched her.

"When you get all smug and start acting like you know what's best for everyone in the whole world. You don't. And even if you did, they're not your responsibility. Let them live their own lives, for heaven's sake."

"*What?*" she said. But she was asking. Really asking. So I told her.

"What makes you think the rules are different for you than they are for everyone else? You're not perfect. Get used to it. Sometimes you're going to make mistakes, just like everyone else, even when you're trying the best you can not to. Sometimes, the world just doesn't make sense. Do you think it made sense to Imma when she realized she was sick? Do you think it made sense to Uncle Josef as he brought the cousins to the temple so they could be maimed? Do you think it makes sense to Zakharya and Elisheva that the priesthood is ending because they can't have any children? There's no perfect way, Miryam. To believe that you have some special responsibility that none of the rest of us do to get it absolutely right all the time, not only for yourself but for everyone else too—well, if that's not prideful, I don't know what is."

Her face was scarlet, even in the washed-out light of the moon. "I didn't mean," she started. Soundless tears slid down her face, silver and glistening in the moonlight.

"We never do," I said. "We never do." And this time I was the mother bird and she was the Miryam-chick.

We all slept late the next morning, but it didn't help. We were the biggest bunch of grumps you ever saw, and it took forever to pack things up and put the house to rights. Part of it was being tired from the party. But part of it was dread for what waited for us in Jerusalem.

The light had passed through gold to pink by the time we walked through the temple gate and into Anna's waiting arms.

There was still no word from my father.

Chapter 13: Piercings

Someone was shaking her shoulder. Miryam started, then sat bolt upright in the darkness, her heart in her throat. It was Elisheva, looking like she'd just gotten up out of bed, wearing nothing but her tunic and a shawl with her hair in a single braid. She held a small oil lantern in one hand and shielded it with her other. *Shh!* she mouthed, and tipped her head for Miryam to follow.

Cautiously, Miryam extricated her arm from underneath Salome's sleeping head. Salome grumbled something and turned over, but her breathing evened out quickly, so Miryam rose silently to her feet and padded after the faint glow of her aunt's lamp.

They slipped down the stairs and paused in the arcade leading to the Shambles long enough for a round patch of darkness to resolve itself into Zakharya. "The guards all seem to have fallen asleep, Lord be praised," he breathed. "Do you understand what will happen if we're caught?"

Caught doing what? Miryam wasn't sure. Something the Temple Guards wouldn't be happy about. But she trusted her aunt and uncle, so she nodded.

"All right, then. Follow me," he whispered, taking the lamp from his wife. "Elisheva will stand watch."

Keeping to the shadows, he led her between the Brazen Sea and the Great Altar, apparently heading for the temple itself. But that didn't make any sense. Only the most senior priests were allowed inside the Hekal, the Holy Place. And no one at all went into the Holy of Holies except the High Priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement.

When he got to the forecourt of the temple, Zakharya kept right on going, passing between the two great pillars that marked its entrance. When he got to the great doors, he turned and gestured that she was to come help him open them.

Miryam didn't know what to do. This simply could not be happening. Was she having a nightmare? She pinched the back of her hand so hard that a bolt of pain thrilled nearly to her elbow. No, it wasn't a nightmare. But it felt like one. What reason could Zakharya possibly have for bringing her here? And then asking her to *touch* it.

She was a *woman*, or nearly as good as. And she hadn't bathed in a mikveh or made an offering or anything. Her touch would defile it, and then the Lord would strike her down, as he had struck down Uzziah when he had reached out to steady the ark.

The competing realities of what she knew of her uncle and all she had been taught about the temple tore at her until the very sinews of her body seemed to be unraveling. Soon the web that held her together would be gone, and there would be no order, no boundaries—only chaos.

Zakharya's hand gripped her shoulder, shaking her out of the relentless tread of those unanswerable questions. *We have to choose, not knowing*. Salome had said that. Salome, who was such a little girl, except when she wasn't. So that's what Miryam did. She chose. Her hand reached out, closed around the cold and massive metal knob, and tugged, until the door opened.

Something sailed past Miryam's head from behind, flying so close she felt the beat of its wings brush her cheek like a kiss. She choked back a scream as Uncle Zakharya bobbed their lamp, sending the visible world plunging in a shriek of fire and smoke.

It was only a dove. She couldn't see it, but she could hear it coo in the darkness. They followed it inside and secured the great doors behind them.

"The rest is for you," Uncle Zakharya said gravely, nodding his head toward the curtain leading to the Holy Place. Then, when she didn't move, "You needn't worry. I'll be right here if you need me." She gaped at him, but he merely dropped a kiss on her forehead and lifted a corner of the heavy embroidered veil.

He didn't offer her the lamp. When she stepped through the veil, she was walking into darkness. With a swoosh! the heavy fabric dropped behind her, and the blackness was complete. *This must be what it's like to be a baby in its mother's womb*, Miryam thought. It was a curiously steadying thought. The baby might not know or understand where it was going, but it was held safe and nourished just the same.

Darkness and silence pulsed around her, larger and more menacing than any womb. Miryam's heart rose so high in her throat she could barely breathe. Where was she supposed to go? What was she supposed to do?

Silence.

She knew what she wanted to do—turn away. From all of it. Sink down and make a little bed for herself and just drift away from all the fear and confusion and responsibility. The weight of her ignorance and her presumption pressed down so heavily that there was no space for anything else.

One low note, then three higher thrummed through the air, reminding Miryam that she was not alone, that the dove had flown in before her. The call entered in her ear, vibrating so deeply in her body that it broke and dissolved the grip of her despair. One note, then three higher. And again—one note, and three higher. Higher. She could go higher.

Miryam turned up her head, and began to pray. *Father, I am in thy house. But the task before me is too great for me. I need thy light. I need thy strength.*

The dove cooed again. Miryam automatically turned toward the sound, then called herself a fool. She couldn't see anything in this darkness.

But she could. There—the gleam of the dove's eyes, wide and bright and steady as Tabitha's. Then the light spread, running along the golden branches of the Menorah, and then leapt sparkling into the air as the veil to the Holy of Holies parted, and a Lady entered.

She was both woman and greater than woman, brighter than a thousand suns, so white and clear and terrible that Miryam could only fall to the ground half-swooning under the appalling weight of her earthiness.

"No need, little one," she said, her voice resonating through every bone and muscle in Miryam's body. "We are fellow servants, you and I. Awake and arise."

Making an immense effort, she raised her head. The Lady's feet were bare. "We are on Holy Ground," she told her, apparently reading her thoughts. Miryam remembered that she hadn't stopped to put on shoes, and was grateful for it.

She held out her right hand to help Miryam to her feet, and where the Lady touched her, she felt a hum that was music and fire and dancing and joy passing back

and forth between them. *This was what the dance was for, she realized. Twining, and giving, and receiving. Spiraling together into a growing circle of power.*

The memory of Elisheva and Anna cleaning and preparing her for her temple service broke over her, drenching her in warmth and love and security so specific and real that she wasn't surprised when she found it distilling on her flesh, bathing her in a sparkling dew of joy.

The Lady took a corner of the stole she wore over her robe and carefully wiped her hands and feet clean, her flaming eyes puckering a little with concentration. The homeliness of the service disarmed her. Some veil she hadn't realized she'd kept between her and the world fell away.

"You are clean, every whit, and a chosen vessel of the Lord," she told her, and once again Miryam felt the music leap to lively fire inside her.

The Lady led her to the table where the twelve loaves of shewbread lay ready for the priests. With an expression of distaste, she turned her back on them, and reached instead for the dove. Or rather for a loaf the dove held in its beak. She took it and tore it into a dish that lay next to a chalice and a cruse of oil on the incense altar. She took a fragment of the pierced bread and ate it, then offered the dish to Miryam. She ate it and was filled, aware of its goodness weaving itself into the fiber of her being.

The Lady reached for a goblet that Miryam had not noticed and drank of it. She handed Miryam the cup and she drank, and its wildness leaped through her body, awakening her like a liquid trumpet. She lowered the cup, and handed it back, her body feeling lithe and strong and free. There was plenty left, both wine and bread, and her fingers imagined closing round the chalice and the dish and the weight of them as she took them to share with Zakharya, and Elisheva, and Salome and Josephus, and all the rest.

"They are heavier than they look," the Lady told her. "Neither are they your burden to carry. But all who hunger and thirst will be filled."

"All?" she asked him, wanting to be sure.

"Those who desire with a clean heart are always filled," she said. "Kneel, daughter of God."

She did.

The lady raised the vial of oil and poured it on Miryam's head. The golden liquid streamed over her head and shoulders, washing her in a shine of light that dissolved the earthiness that had distressed and bound her.

Then she felt the weight of the Lady's hands on her head, and she was blessing her, the truth of the words winding around and through her, bearing her up and preparing her for whatever must be borne. She spoke of the pain and promise of piercings that opened new channels of love and light and joy. She warned her that the power that surged through such channels could bring destruction as well as illumination, and told her she should not speak of such things without the command and protection of the Spirit of the Lord. She reminded Miryam of the covenant the Lord had made to protect and provide for His obedient children. And she prophesied of paths ever opening before her feet as she drank deeply of the living water that was Wisdom.

"For even the Promised Messiah must pass through the waters of mortal creation. *Now set your heart and your soul to seek the Lord your God,*" she quoted from Chronicles. *"Arise therefore, and build ye the sanctuary of the Lord God, to bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and the holy vessels of God, into the house that is to be built to the name of the Lord."*

The Lady sealed the blessing and helped her to her feet. "Doubt not," she told her gently. "Fear not. Peace to thee, my Beloved, forever and ever."

Miryam might have stayed there until morning, sorting through and making room for what the Lady had told her, but as she withdrew, she took her light with her. Miryam had just enough presence of mind to make her way back to the curtain leading to the vestibule and Uncle Zakharya in the few seconds before the light had completely faded away. He said nothing, just held his lamp to her face and nodded as if satisfied. He blew his nose, then gently took her arm and led her back to Elisheva, who equally silently, took her upstairs and helped her into bed.

Someone was shaking her shoulder. *No!* she recoiled. *Not yet. I haven't had time.*

"Miryam. Miryam, darling. You have to get up right now." It was Elisheva, and something in her voice roused Miryam despite herself.

She had to work to open her eyes, and when she did, she couldn't focus. It was broad daylight. The other girls were up and gone. "What?" was all she could manage, her tongue thick and clumsy in her mouth. "Why?" She made an enormous effort. "Who?"

"Last night?" her aunt said, and there was a smile in her voice although her face was haggard with exhaustion and strain. "We were praying for you, and your uncle was told to take you into the temple. I think we'd better leave it at that for now. The Sanhedrin is calling for you."

Miryam sat up so quickly the room tilted, and she had to put out a hand to support herself. "Did he come?"

"Your father?"

Miryam nodded as she pulled herself to her feet.

"Still no word," her aunt said, helping Miryam out of her tunic and into her best temple gown. "From him or my brother Josef. I sent for him last night, hoping he might stand in your father's place. But apparently he and Sarah are from home."

Miryam stumbled and had to clutch at her aunt to keep from falling. "You'll feel better after you've had some food," Elisheva said, looking worried.

"I don't know why I'm so tired," Miryam said, barely able to form the words.

"Don't you?" her aunt said, a smile breaking through the worry. "It will be better soon." She put her arm around Miryam and began to help her from the room.

"My bedroll!" Miryam protested.

"I'll send Anna," her aunt said. "Shall I come in with you while you wash, or can you manage?"

"I can manage," Miryam said, hoping she could.

"Then I'll run down and fetch you a morsel. I should have thought to bring it with me, but they were so adamant about seeing you right away..."

Miryam was tired, not hungry, but there was a problem she was anxious to work out before her aunt noticed and could make a fuss. "That sounds good," she said. And didn't budge until her aunt was safely gone.

The problem was that she seemed to have forgotten how to be in her body, which seemed lighter than it had before, and harder to balance. She didn't know exactly what had changed, just that movements she hadn't had to think about since babyhood suddenly required her full concentration. Moving carefully, she stumbled toward the washing closet, hoping that whatever was making her a stranger to herself was temporary, like a leg that had fallen asleep, and that the more she moved, the faster whatever it was would work itself out. It took her twice as long as usual to dress and wash (she dropped her loofah twice and had to grab on to the stone basin several times to save herself from tipping over), but she did it.

Back at her bedroll, she sank to her knees. She felt even more fragile than she had when she started. When she tried to pray, she found she could not. Her mind was in tangles. Half-formed questions jostled at her, each more urgent than the last—Where was Abba? Couldn't she do more good married to Josephus than if she were tucked away in some anonymous village? Had Uncle Zakharya really taken her inside the temple last night? Had she really seen an angel? An angel that was a woman?

She couldn't stay with any of the thoughts for more than a second or two. Her mind had splintered, and now the boundary between what was her and what was the rest of the world seemed frighteningly porous. How could she possibly face the Sanhedrin like this—utterly naked and fragmented, no longer belonging even to herself? Panic, raw and acrid, gurgled in her throat and she was almost glad of it, because where the fear was, she knew she was, too.

But the Lady had told her not to fear. And she had promised her peace.

At that moment, she felt the vibration of her aunt's quick step on the stairs. A moment later her rose and jasmine scent wafted in. Together, these seemed portents, witnesses to the truth and possibility of the Lady's command. Miryam turned away from her fears. As she did so, she seemed to settle more securely into her skin. The breakfast her aunt had brought—a hot, fragrant circle of bread wrapped around a bit of salty cheese and a few swallows of watered wine—did the rest. Cobwebs banished, or at least held at bay, Miryam held up her face for inspection.

Elisheva brushed a crumb off her chin. "Perfect," her aunt judged. "As you always have been and always will be." She dropped a quick kiss on her niece's forehead. "Now," she said, drawing Miryam's arm in hers, "Let's go beard the lions in their den."

"Roar," said Miryam, although it came out as a squeak.

The Chamber of Hewn Stone was down the stairs and across the way from the Chamber of the Veil. Although the priests met there every morning to recite the Shema and cast lots for their daily assignments, between the morning and evening sacrifices the room belonged to the Sanhedrin, the governing council of the Jews. Part inside and part outside the temple precincts, it was the Temple Mount's grandest room. Two stories tall, it was ornamented with the inlaid stonework that gave it its name and furnished with elaborately carved and cushioned Hellenistic furniture imported all the way from Alexandria.

There were supposed to be seventy members of the Council, although since they were drawn from the highest ranks of priestly, official, and merchant life, the actual number in attendance was usually a fraction of that. And indeed, when Miryam peered through the doorway, fewer than half of the semi-circle of seats—or, perhaps more accurately, thrones—on the dais at the far end of the room were occupied.

The Visitor's Gallery opposite, however, was stuffed fuller than a barrel of sardines. Hundreds of men and boys were crammed onto the benches between Miryam and the waist-high screen dividing the Sanhedrin from their public. More squatted in the aisles or stood pressed against the walls, and the surging knot of people by the Chamber's second entrance to Miryam's right—the one that led directly from the city for convenience of those who had business with Council but preferred to avoid the lengthy rituals required to pass through the temple precinct—told her that more were on their way.

She hadn't counted on an audience. In her imagination, the meeting was to have been private, away from the curious gaze of idle passers-by. But perhaps they weren't passers-by. Perhaps they were here on business of their own. Probably they'd all be gone by the time it was her turn to be heard. She couldn't

believe the High Priest would wish to put one of his temple maidens on public display before several hundred strange men.

The Doorkeeper was gesturing for her to hurry. Elisheva only had time to whisper, "I'll be right here if you need me," before Miryam found herself being hustled through the door. She twisted her head around in alarm—wasn't Elisheva coming with her? But then the crowd was on her, and there was no time to think of anything else.

Men and boys pressed in on every side so close she could feel the heat of their breath. She'd forgotten how thick country smells of smoke and unwashed bodies became in the city, and how quickly a crowd without women could turn menacing. Some of the younger men were calling to her as if she were no more than a strumpet, their high voices punctuated by ululations of excitement. A few of the bolder ones reached out to finger her hair and clothing.

Miryam shrank as close as she dared to the broad back of the Doorkeeper as he shouldered their way through the crowd. She kept her head down and her eyes averted, as women were expected to do, projecting as best she could the dignity and composure she had learned from Elisheva's example.

All the confusion and disorientation she'd struggled to overcome while her aunt fetched breakfast came sweeping back. What was happening? Respectable young women were *never* paraded through a crowd of men in this fashion, especially not temple maidens. She'd never have thought gentle old Hillel would have treated her in this fashion. Fear snapped at her heels, and it was all she could do to keep herself from breaking into a run.

Fear not, the Lady had said. And she'd called her *Beloved*, and she'd promised her peace. Hillel was her friend, she reminded. Hers and Uncle Zakharya's. He was a good and humble soul, the kind of man who volunteered for guard duty on High Holy Days and came to help her uncle teach when he could so he could get to know the Levites and the maidens. He would never shame or trick her on purpose. Her fear was not justified. It was just the natural result of too much emotion and not enough sleep.

The broad back of the Doorkeeper stopped. They'd gotten to a gate in the half-screen that separated the public from the Sanhedrin that opened to one side of the big central platform where Hillel and his assistant, the Av Beit Din, sat facing the semi-circle of the Council. The Doorkeeper pushed it open and jerked his chin toward the front of the platform. Miryam squared her shoulders and walked through.

As she came around to the front of the platform, she saw what the press of the crowd and the height of the platform had hidden from her. Gamaliel, Josephus's father, stood to the right, making conversation with a wealthy young man in Roman dress. She knew when he saw her, because his sculptured face—so oddly young underneath the silver hair—froze. His companion twisted to see what had happened.

Miryam's body recognized him one thudding heartbeat before her eyes did. That was no Roman. That was Josephus.

For a moment, he gazed at her with an expression uncannily similar to his father's, as cold and clinical as a hawk. Then he saw who she was, his stony visage cracked, and the boy she'd loved for so many years was grinning at her.

Almost the boy she'd loved.

He'd cut his hair. The irrepressible black curls were gone, replaced by the cropped and carefully oiled hair of a Roman official. Shorn of its exuberant covering, his face seemed bigger and oddly naked, making it harder to overlook strong new planes of cheek and jaw. His clothes were another thing. It was the first time she'd seen him in anything but temple robes. Today he was resplendent in the short cream-colored toga and flowing mantle of a Roman knight, a flash of gold on one hand and at his belt. Beneath the toga, sandals that laced half way up his calves did absolutely nothing to hide the fact that somewhere along the way, the thin gangly sticks she remembered had grown into the muscled and hairy legs of a man.

"Sweetmeat?" her uncle asked blandly.

Miryam jumped. She'd been concentrating so hard on Josephus that she hadn't even noticed Zakharya standing on her side of the platform. She'd practically walked right into him. Her embarrassment at being caught out was swallowed up by the relief that swept over her at the sight of his placid, familiar face. "Am I glad to see you," she said.

His eye crinkled. "Where else would I be?"

She wasn't alone, Miryam reminded herself. She had friends. Like Uncle Zakharya and Nasi Hillel. She turned toward the chief seat on the platform, a smile ready on her lips to greet her kindly friend.

But he wasn't there. Shammai, the Sanhedrin's inflexible and vinegary second-in-command, scowled at her from one seat, while—no, it couldn't be. Her eyes must be playing tricks on her.

"Is that *Annas*?"

"Yes, indeed it is," her uncle said. "Hillel's wife's sick, so Shammai is acting president. He has the authority to choose whomever he wishes as his acting assistant, and I imagine Annas was quick to volunteer."

Stricken. That was the name for what she was feeling. Stricken. And scared.

Zakharya must have seen it on her face. "Now, now, none of that," he said, patting her hand. "We're here on the Lord's errand, Miryam. He will provide."

Something heavy banged down hard on the stone platform. Then again. And again. It wasn't until all the voices died away that Miryam put it all together: Shammai was using his heavy staff of office to call the court of the Sanhedrin to order.

"Miryam Bat Eliakim," he said, not bothering to stand, and not needing to, since every eye in the place was on him. "You have been called before the Sanhedrin to resolve the issue of your tardy betrothal."

He had an unfortunate voice, and the stone walls sent its nasal timbre echoing unpleasantly around the chamber. One or two of the council members could not quite conceal a wince.

When the last echo had finally died away, Shammai nodded to Annas. His assistant spread out a sheaf of documents on the platform's great desk, weighing down each corner with polished stones from the pouch he wore at his waist.

Shammai watched, absorbed, lower jaw thrust forward, looking so much like an ox to Annas's goat that, as his tongue flicked out and licked his heavy lips, Miryam had to dig her fingernails into her palms to keep herself from laughing.

Shammai straightened his back and turned to Miryam, almost as if he had read her mind, which of course was impossible. "One would imagine that your father would have wished to be here for this," he mused just loud enough for everyone to hear, in a voice several tones lower than the one he had used before. Miryam must not have been the only one to catch those wincings. "After the great fuss he made when you were born. It's always surprising, isn't it, to discover which fathers are capable of true affection, and which are not? Disappointing, really, especially with all the tragedies that have visited your unfortunate family these last few years. But I suppose we are what we are."

Miryam refused to acknowledge any emotion except gratitude that Salome and her all-too-easily-aroused outrage were nowhere in sight. The rest could wait.

Shammai surged to his feet, his chair scraping heavily across the polished stone. In the artificially resonant statesman's voice of a moment ago, he proclaimed, "Miryam Bat Eliakim Bat Matthai, I have the honor of presenting an offer of betrothal to you, on behalf of Josephus ben Gamaliel ben Hillel."

Josephus and Gamaliel looked straight ahead, their faces impassive in the Roman style. Which made it easier for Miryam to say what she somehow knew she must.

“I thank you and the Gamaliel family for the great honor of such an offer,” she said in a loud, clear voice. “It is with the greatest possible regret, however, that I must refuse it.”

Peace settled on her, light and warm as Aunt Elisheva’s finest cashmere shawl, a thin shadow of last night’s joy and assurance, but sufficient nonetheless. She had made the right decision. She didn’t know why she should refuse Josephus, or what such a refusal might lead to, didn’t understand any of it, really. But when she’d needed it, peace had come. She sent a prayer of gratitude heavenward, because she certainly could not have borne the sight of Josephus’s frozen face without it. Nor stood unmoved as Gamaliel spat invective in the ear of the boy who understood parts of her better than anyone else she’d ever met, the boy who could not now bear to look at her.

Slowly, deliberately, Shammai set down his quill on the documents Annas had prepared with such care. The younger man was trying to hiss something in his ear, but Shammai waved him away as though he were an insect.

“You...*refuse* him?” he asked her. “You wish to refuse Josephus?”

“It is certainly not my *wish*,” said Miryam carefully. “But it is my decision.”

The crowd murmured, and Annas could contain himself no longer. “This is all your fault, you meddling old fool,” he barked at Zakharya, who, Miryam realized, had not yet said a single word.

“My uncle did not advise me,” Miryam told him.

Annas didn’t so much as glance at her. “Why not?” he sputtered at Zakharya. “She’s a girl. She has no business making—in fact, she doesn’t even have the capacity for making a decision this important. It was both your right and your duty...”

“Legally,” Miryam pointed out, “the decision is mine. Mine and my father’s.”

“Which is exactly why your father’s failure to appear is so serious,” Shammai said. He sat back in his chair, considering her. “The question is, what are we to do with you now? Your twelfth birthday was months ago. It’s time and past for you to leave the temple before you defile it. You are not welcome here. I don’t know how much plainer we can say it. Yet neither you, nor your father, nor even your uncle, a senior member of the temple priesthood, seems willing or able to grasp this simple fact. Instead, you have the effrontery to refuse a marriage offer from one of Jerusalem’s most respected families. I can only imagine you must have some kind of alternative in mind, although what it might be I cannot begin to guess. So please, enlighten us. What are your plans?”

Miryam met his eyes. She was empty. But not frightened. Just... waiting.

Shammai exhaled loudly through his nostrils. His ox might not be as quick or sure-footed as Annas’s goat, but it was very, very determined.

“You leave me no choice,” he snapped, forgetting all about his statesman’s voice so that he sounded like an infuriated hive of bees. “If you and your father refuse to act, then the Sanhedrin must. Miryam Bat Eliakim, I hereby proclaim you a ward of the Council. As such, the Council will...”

“What about me?” Zakharya asked.

The attention of everyone in the courtroom—Miryam included—shifted to her uncle with a snap.

He looked perfectly relaxed, and his voice was calm, even conversational. Even so, he spoke with a kind of authority that Annas and even Shammai could only dream of.

The two officials exchanged a glance. “What about you?” Shammai finally asked.

“Why not name me as the girl’s guardian? She is my niece, and has been living in my home these four years. Surely I am a more natural choice than the Sanhedrin.”

Shammai's eyes narrowed. "And so we might, if we were sure that you would move quickly."

Miryam became aware of a commotion in the gallery. From where she stood, the platform blocked her view of whatever was happening.

Shammai and Annas began to turn around to see for themselves, but her uncle spoke out so strongly that they turned back to him. "Make me her guardian, and I pledge neither of us will leave this room until she is betrothed."

"It is a reasonable request," came a voice from the semi-circle of the Sanhedrin. A richly dressed merchant that Miryam didn't recognize leaned forward in his seat. "My vote is yes."

Annas glowered at him.

"Mine, too," said a priest from the other end. Miryam didn't know his name, but sometimes he liked to share a cup of tea with Anna after the temple gate was closed.

"No vote has been specified," Annas snapped.

"Then specify one!" the merchant said irritably. "We have spent too long on the business already. There are other matters to discuss."

Shammai pursed his lips, considering. Annas tugged at his arm, trying to say something, but once again Shammai waved him off with an impatient flick of his wrist. "I suppose it can do no harm," he admitted grudgingly. "What really matters is that she leave this place, and does so as rapidly as possible. Members of the council, what say you? Shall Miryam Bat Eliakim be named a ward of Zakharya Ben Zebdi, with the understanding that he will arrange for her immediate betrothal?"

There was a murmur of assent.

Shammai rapped his staff. "Then let it so be."

The commotion was becoming impossible to ignore. Shammai shoved his chair back for a second time, and sprang to his feet. "Doorkeeper!" he roared. "We are in session! We must have order!"

“That’s what I keep telling him,” the Doorkeeper said, exasperated, and not caring who knew it. “But he’s bigger than me, and he’s got a staff!”

There was a roar of laughter from the Visitor’s Gallery. When Uncle Zakharya stepped forward to see what was going on, Miryam did, too.

Her eyes went right to the staff, as if they had heard it calling. It was tall and heavy, made of the finest ash, crowned with a quartered metal circle to help you find your way. Her heart leapt as her eyes dropped to the man who held it.

He was not her father. His eyes were too clear. His back was too straight. This man was no more than thirty. And although she had the feeling she had seen him before, she didn’t bother trying to place him. Because something was breaking inside her. Something important.

Her father never allowed anyone to hold his staff. Not even her. So she didn’t care who the stranger was, because she already knew what he had come to tell her. Abba was dead.

She couldn’t remember much after that. Just snatches. Something about robbers and a terrible beating. Something else about her family, and a betrothal, and sad eyes that looked like Cleo’s but weren’t, and the swirl of Josephus’s cloak as he and his father stormed out of the room. And out of her life.

And then they were telling her something about her cousin Yusuf, and Nazareth, and Aunt Esther waiting outside with the children. But Miryam couldn’t make heads or tails of whatever all those loud voices were saying.

Something flew past her, so close that the beat of its wings was like a kiss on her cheek. It was a dove, and it landed on top of her father’s staff, that now belonged to her Cousin Yusuf, like she did, because she was going to marry him, and he was going to take her away, back to Nazareth where she belonged.

The dove called to her, as it had last night, its trill piercing her cloud of grief and confusion to let her know that, yes, this was real. All of it. And there truly was no reason to fear.

Part III: Planting the Seed

Chapter 14: First Shoots

“My name is Abigail,” the little girl muttered, keeping her eyes fixed on the slop of the water in the heavy jug. Abba was coming home today and he would be thirsty, so she couldn’t let it spill. She made herself go carefully, even though it slowed her down.

The boy with the runny nose spat, and she flinched despite herself.

“I didn’t ask you your name, you stupid goat,” he said. “I asked about your demon.”

Way back in the spring, when Abba and Safta Esther decided she was old enough to fetch water by herself, Abigail might have tried to answer his question. But now that she was almost five, she knew he didn’t really want an answer. What he wanted was to make her cry.

“My name is Abigail,” she muttered, a little louder this time.

“Demon got your tongue?” he jeered. He got closer, so she could smell the dust of him. “Is there any girl left in there? Or is it all demon? You and your cross-eyes and your monkey walk. No wonder your mother died when you were born. It would kill me, too, to know my child was a demon.”

“Am not!” At least, that’s what she meant to say, but people couldn’t always tell. Her lip began to tremble and then her eyes began to leak, but those things weren’t important. What mattered was the water. And it was still in the jar.

“Are so!” he pounced. “You and your mother both! The whole village knows it.”

Why had she answered him? When she talked, it only made things worse.

“My name is Abigail,” she reminded herself.

A pebble bounced off her shoulder. But since it missed the jar, she didn’t really mind. Another hit behind her knee, and she almost went down. But she didn’t. And she could still see water winking up at her inside the jug

“Matthias!” came an angry voice. “You leave that little girl alone!”

That little girl. That’s what they always called her, like she didn’t have a name. But she did. “My name is Abigail,” she whispered.

With a last vicious kick that sent a spray of pebbles bouncing into her eyes and pinging off the jug, the boy ran off. But the jug hadn’t broken, or even cracked, so as long as she made it up the last hill it wouldn’t matter what he had said. Or thought. Because there was still water left in the jug for her father when he came. And it would taste so good to him that for a little while her legs that hurt and her eyes that ached and her hands that didn’t know how to do things wouldn’t matter.

Her Aunt Naomi was waiting by the gate with Baby Symeon. Except he wasn’t really a baby anymore, so now she was supposed to call him just Symeon, but usually she forgot.

“Everything all right?” she called.

Abigail didn’t bother answering.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Aunt Naomi said when she saw, crouching right down in the dust even though the baby in her tummy was getting really big and it would be hard for her to get up. She brushed some of the dust and tears from Abigail’s face with a corner of her headcloth. “Don’t move a step,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Abigail held up the jug.

“All right. I’ll take it and put it in that secret place Symeon doesn’t know about yet,” her aunt promised.

She was back a minute later with a tiny jug of sweet-smelling oil, which she used to dress the welts on Abigail’s hands and face.

“Is that better?” she asked.

Abigail nodded.

“Honey, why don’t you let us come with you?” Aunt Naomi asked. “We’re happy to do it.”

Because if they came, her gift wouldn't be as precious. And it had to be, because of the name her father gave her.

"Tell me about my name," Abigail whispered against her aunt's shoulder.

Her aunt sighed, like she was sad, but it wasn't sad. It was the loveliest thing Abigail knew.

"Your abba named you Abigail because when you were born, he loved you so much and you were so precious to him that he wanted everyone who said your name to remind you that you are *beloved of your father*." Aunt Naomi pressed a kiss to Abigail's forehead, then struggled to her feet. Once she was up, she held out her hand. "Let's go clean you up, so that when your cousin Miryam comes she will see at once that your father made a terrible mistake. She'll say that what he should have called you was Abi-Safti-Naomi-Cleo-Yacov-Yoses-Simeon-Judah-Symeon Miryam-gail, but since that would be much too hard for Baby Symeon to remember, we can still call you Abigail for short."

Abigail's lips twitched. She couldn't help it. Aunt Naomi could say the silliest things sometimes. But not her. She was always too busy being a good helper. Even Safta Esther had noticed. "Abigail," she had said one night when the boys were running around playing a loud noisy game that made Baby Symeon practically laugh his head off, "There's not a silly bone in your body, is there? Mine either. They all got that from your poor old Sabba Jacob. My goodness, he was a tease. For years and years, your father and I were the only sensible ones in this madhouse. It's a big fat relief to have at least one grandchild who would rather be a good helper than a silly."

Abigail had never thought of herself as a good helper before. But when Safta Esther had said that, it was like a little lamp went on in her middle. She might not be able to do all the things that other girls did. She probably even had a demon, though none of the grown-ups would admit it. But she could still be a good helper.

Today she was going to help by keeping watch. Although you could never be really sure about how long a trip to Jerusalem would take, especially now that Safta was getting old and couldn't go as fast as she used to. But today was the day Abba had said they should start looking for them, so that's what she was going to do. She let Symeon help, because he was getting good pretty good at running and it made Aunt Naomi tired to catch him. She took him up to the shady part of the roof and helped him build towers

from broken-off stalks of flax. If his mama had been here, he would have cried and kept trying to get down and go chase things, but he never did that with Abigail. Aunt Naomi said it was because he liked Abigail better, but that wasn't true. He just liked it that when she played with him, she paid attention and wasn't trying to do other things at the same time.

They kept watch all afternoon. Baby Symeon fell asleep for a little while, but she didn't. Then he woke up, and the shadows got longer, and the smell of onions and lentils and lemon and fresh bread was starting to make their stomachs growl.

Abigail picked up Symeon to help her look one last time. While she was still straining to get her eyes to focus, his little body went rigid and he started yelling "Yods! Yods! Yods!" which was the name he used for all her brothers, and when she looked where he was she could see them coming fast, running along the side of the hill. There was someone running with them, someone with hair the color of the moon and feet as fleet as a mountain goat's, and it was another girl like her, except older and prettier and happier, and then Abigail didn't want to see any more. She called really loud for Aunt Naomi, but she was fussing with dinner so Uncle Cleo came instead, and he took Symeon in one arm and her in the other and took them down the ladder, and as soon as her feet touched down Abigail ran for the jug, because her father would be thirsty, and he always said that nothing tasted as good as the cold, clear water from their very own well.



After all the fireworks with the Sanhedrin, everyone thinks it's best for me to go home to Nazareth with Miryam and Yusuf. Zakharya and Elisheva only have a few months of temple service left before they retire to their old house in the desert near Hebron, which Aunt Elisheva says makes Nazareth seem as exciting as Alexandria by comparison. Besides, Yusuf is our guardian now, not them, and it will make it easier for Miryam if I'm there to keep her company. I know they're not telling me the real reason, which is that the faster and farther we get from Jerusalem and the plottings of the priests, the better off everyone will be.

The hardest thing is saying goodbye to Zippora. Fortunately, everyone is in such a hurry to get going that it's over before we have a chance to get too worked up. Besides, it wasn't like we hadn't known we were going to go our separate ways; it's just happening a little sooner than we planned. And the expression on Tolomei's face that night at the dance had secretly convinced me that it's only a matter of time until we are officially family.

The first two days of the journey are almost creepily quiet. Yusuf spends most of his time talking with one or another of his boys, preparing them as best he can, Miryam and I suppose, for the way we're going to change everyone's lives. I try to imagine Abba bringing home a new wife after Imma died, but the whole idea is so upsetting I have to shove it aside, after promising myself I will be as nice to them as I possibly can.

Yusuf's mother, our normally feisty Aunt Esther, is too tired to say much. It's a lot of walking for a woman of her age, going all the way up to Jerusalem and back, but she says to stop fussing, that Miryam and I needed a chaperone and that was that, and why don't we run off and play.

That startles us both. It's been a long time since anyone's treated us like children, and I take a minute to decide whether I'm going to feel insulted—for Miryam's sake (who is already wearing the headcloth that signifies she is a betrothed woman), if not my own. I end up shrugging it off, though, because, frankly, it's such a relief to be able to grieve for our father on our own.

Not that we've seen him much since Imma died. Or all that much before, since he was a merchant, and merchants traveled. And, although this isn't something we say out loud, it's not like we weren't already considering the possibility, when he didn't come, that he never would. And since we hadn't lived with him for a long time, we didn't keep rubbing up against new reminders of what we were missing—the scent of the oil he used in his beard, say, or a meal with one of his favorite foods—like we had with Imma.

Finally, and I know this sounds awful, but it's the truth—when he died, our lives got easier, not harder. It was a dream come true to be able to walk away from the whole big mess of Messiah this and Josephus that and holding up the standards of the temple and on and on and know we were going home to people who loved and understood us.

Not that we knew Yusuf—well, Miryam did, a little—but we knew his family, and they were great. And besides, we would have each other.

What I couldn't set aside, however, was the idea that someone had murdered my father. That they had laid hands on his aging flesh, and struck him, and beat him, and made him bleed. And all for *money*. He was so much more than that. That there were people in the world so evil or desperate that they would inflict a violent, solitary death on a man as good as my father—well, that was the horror that I had to make a place for, in both my mind and heart, because until I did, its stain was everywhere—poisoning the food I could not eat, transforming my rest to gruesome nightmares, and darkening my eyes with suspicion each time a stranger crossed our path.

In an odd way, it helps that this has happened before. When my mother died, all goodness and safety seemed to go with her. And although nothing has been the same since—not me, not Miryam, not our family or our home—the Lord sent new gifts to fill the space she left. So we grieve, but we don't despair.

Our routine is simple. We start early, as soon as we can see the path ahead of us, to take advantage of the relatively cool morning hours. Sometime around the sixth hour, we find a shady place to shake out our mats and make a temporary camp. Aunt Esther falls asleep within minutes, but the rest of us have a simple meal—a handful of olives, some bread we'd bought from one of the villages we'd passed through that morning, and whatever edible plants Miryam and I have spotted on the way. Then we nap until the worst of the heat is past, finish off the scraps from our earlier meal, and plod on until the light us gone.

On the third morning, Aunt Esther's feet are so bad that she begins to cry. So we stop earlier than usual so she can rest, while Yusuf and the two little boys go on to find bread.

Yusuf leaves the two older boys, Yakov and Yoses, in charge of our safety. After assuring us that they fully understand the magnitude of their responsibility, they withdraw to the top of closest ridge, assume positions at either side, and begin their watch.

Apparently, however, scanning desert waste in the heat of the day is not as much fun as you'd think. By the time Miryam and I have set out everything but the bread, our

guards have mostly abandoned us. Every once in a while, a small dark head pops up long enough to make sure no ferocious nomads threaten, then disappears back to what sounds like a contest to see who can get the most rocks through the opening of a cave half way up the hill.

We'd walked all morning and I'm hot and tired, but every time I settle down, images I don't want to see splash themselves across my brain. When I've adjusted my position for about the thirtieth time, Miryam suggests I go play with the boys.

I stare at her. "I can't do that!"

She lifts an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"I'll get all dirty. Besides, temple maidens aren't supposed to..."

"Salome," she says, with heavy patience. "We're not temple maidens any more. We don't have to worry about keeping our clothes nice, or setting the proper example. We're just ordinary girls again. Go. Have a good time. And let me have a few minutes of peace!"

Hearing those words come out of my sister's mouth, feeling their sense penetrate my heart and body, is one of the happiest moments of my life. A huge weight I'd forgotten I was carrying suddenly detaches itself from me and floats away. I throw my arms around her, plant a big wet kiss on her forehead, and instantly forgive her for the implied insult of wanting to be free of me. Then, with a whoop, I am scampering up the hillside toward the boys.

The trip is a lot easier for everyone after that, especially because Yusuf and the little boys come back with a donkey Yusuf had managed to borrow from someone he knew in the village. I'm not finished with my grief, but I'm learning I can put it down when I need to, and it will still be waiting for me when I return. Sometimes I walk with Miryam or keep Aunt Esther and her donkey company. Sometimes I cry by myself. And other times the boys and I play with the desert: hunting snakes and scorpions, throwing stones or bits of broken pottery for target practice, or acting out scenes from the Bible, which, as Jude, the youngest, confides to me one night, is a lot more fun now that I'm here to be the girl so he doesn't have to.

I've never had younger boy cousins to play with before. I'm glad I didn't know what I've been missing, because they are really fun. Yakov, the oldest, is the most serious and responsible, kind of like Miryam. But that doesn't seem to impress the others much, especially Simeon, the third one, who likes to stir him up. Simeon is the strongest and the bravest, although when he got tired he was also the snuggliest. Yoses, the second one, is the smartest and funniest. Jude, the youngest one, is more complicated. Miryam and I agree that he is the sweetest, but was also the most competitive—probably because he doesn't like being younger than the others.

I know they have a younger sister, Abigail, but they don't say a word about her. I get more and more curious until, one night when we're sitting around the campfire sucking on the bones of some quail Yusuf and Yakov had snared that afternoon, I blurt out, "How come no one ever talks about Abigail?" Then, when the silence became obvious, and remembering a calf that had once been born at Ein Kerem, "Does she have two heads or something?"

I know it's a mistake as soon as the words are out of my mouth. Every bit of noise is sucked out of the night. The boys all shut their faces up really tight. Except for Yoses, who gulps something that might be a strangled laugh. His brothers stare at him, and then, following some kind of secret signal I miss completely, launch themselves at him, kicking and hitting and biting and gouging.

I sit frozen. I haven't seen violence like this since the village. I'd forgotten that this was part of the world I was returning to—quarrels and fighting, abused animals. Murdered merchants. I close my eyes, but that's a mistake. Now each blow is falling on my father. I shove myself backwards, getting as far as I can from the grunts and the punches and the wheezing, but since we camped up against the mountain that isn't far at all. So I roll myself up in a ball and wrap my arms around my ears.

Then, as quickly as it started, it ends. I peek out from under my arm and see Yusuf has rescued Yoses. But although Yakov and Simeon calm down right away, Jude is sobbing too hard to understand what is happening and doesn't stop kicking and biting until Yusuf puts Yoses down and picks Jude up and tucks him up against his shoulder, the way Abba used to tuck me, and rubs his back and says quiet, soothing things. It's hard to watch, the way it reminds me of Abba, but although I want to look away, I can't.

When Jude is better, Yusuf sits him down next to his brothers. “Yoses wasn’t laughing at your sister,” he tells them in his slow, deep voice. “Salome’s question surprised him, and sometimes surprises make us laugh. It didn’t mean that he thought that what she said was funny. Deep down, I think you probably all knew that.”

I have started to uncurl, but to hear Yusuf say my name like that is too much. We haven’t even talked yet. He doesn’t even know me. But he knows that I did this. I wish I could disappear.

But there’s a clank of bracelets and a creaking sound and I realize Aunt Esther is lowering herself onto a big flat stone at my elbow. “I’m ashamed of you boys,” she says, wagging a finger at them. “Salome doesn’t know about Abigail. That’s all. And you’ve scared her half to death. So now we’ll explain to Salome why you all went crazy, and maybe she’ll forgive you. I hope so, because now she’s your sister, too. And we want her to be comfortable in her new home.”

The boys hang their heads, sneaking glances at their father and Miryam and me.

“Safta Esther is right,” he says. “There are things that Miryam and Salome don’t know about us, just like there are things we don’t know about them. We don’t want them to be embarrassed about what they don’t know, just like they don’t want us to be embarrassed about what we don’t know. So why don’t I answer Salome’s question, and then maybe she’ll answer one of yours. Would that be all right, Salome?”

I nod.

“Here’s the answer to your question. Abigail had a hard time being born.”

So hard her mother had died. That much I knew.

“She was a beautiful little baby, wasn’t she, boys?”

They nod.

“And we all loved her very much. But as she got older, her body didn’t develop the way it should, especially her legs. They hurt her, and it’s hard for her to get them to do what she wants them to. It’s also hard for her to hold things, and one of her eyes doesn’t work as well as the other, so it’s hard for her to judge where things are. On the inside, she’s just like you and me. On the outside, though, she’s not. That can make other

people feel uncomfortable, and sometimes when people are uncomfortable—like the boys were a minute ago—they can be unkind.”

“They call her a monkey,” Yakov said, his eyes on the burned bit of stick he kept jabbing into the ground, over and over. “They say she walks like a monkey, and eats like one, and smells like one...”

“Yakov,” Yusuf says quietly.

Yakov folds his mouth up tight, jabbing the stick so hard it breaks.

“Now, Salome, does that answer your question?”

“Yes,” I say in a very little voice. “Thank you.”

“And now is it all right if the boys ask you something?”

I nod.

The boys exchange a couple of furtive glances, which is apparently their way of choosing a spokesman. Yakov stands up, like he’s in school or something, takes a deep breath, and asks his question. “Do you really know how to write?”

Do I really know how to *write*? What kind of question is that? I slide my eyes around to Yusuf and Aunt Esther in case either of them wants to give me a signal, but they don’t. “Yes?” I finally say, drawing it out and making it a question in case I’m making a mistake.

The boys look at each other, eyes open wide, like I’ve just told them I’m serving gilded fish for dinner or something.

“Really?” says Yoses. “No fooling?”

I slide my eyes around again, but no one seems to be crying or having hurt feelings or anything, and I begin to relax. “Really.”

“Where did you learn to do *that*?” Simeon asks, fists clenched so that I’ll know he’s no fool and I better be telling the truth.

“At the temple school. We had lessons with the Levite choir and the beginning scribes.”

“But you’re a girl.”

“So what?” I bristle. “You just finished telling me that Abigail is the same on the inside as everyone else. Don’t you think girls have brains just like boys?”

They share a skeptical look. “What do you think, Abba?”

Yusuf’s mouth quirks. “I think you boys have a lot to learn,” he says in his slow, deep voice. “And how grateful we should all be that Salome and Miryam are here to teach it.” Then he gives me a kind of sparkly wink, and I know it’s going to be all right.

It takes us a whole week to get to Nazareth. That’s long enough for us to get comfortable with each other, although I’m still a little nervous about what Abigail will think of us. The boys tell me over and over about how important it is for her to bring a cup of water to their father, and how I shouldn’t think it’s for me, because that will embarrass her, until I finally ask Yusuf to make them understand that, yes, I understand, and no, I won’t grab or spill or otherwise interfere with this tradition. After that, they’re careful not to mention it. But there are lots of times they want to.

Abigail turns out to be a little bit of quicksilver, with fly away hair and beautiful, copper-colored eyes even if the left one can’t always keep up with the right. She’s one of those shimmering people who hasn’t learned to hide her light. I wonder if that’s one of the reasons the other children bully her, because of the way her light calls to them even though her strange and jerky body pushes them away. I want to understand how she does this, how she can love so purely even though the world has been cruel to her, but, although she cuddles right up to Miryam, she looks right through me. I tell myself it’s because I play with her brothers in a way she can’t, but it still hurts my feelings.

The way I feel about Abigail is kind of the same as the way I feel about our whole return to Nazareth. On the one hand, it’s my home. The food tastes right. The people feel right. I belong here in a way I never did at the temple. But there are differences, too. Yusuf and his family and Cleo and his family all live in Aunt Esther and Uncle Jacob’s house next door. Since Miryam and I can’t live in our house by ourselves, Aunt Esther has moved in to Imma and Abba’s old room. It’s feels strange to be living in our own house and have someone else in charge, even if she is our aunt.

We don't spend all that much time there, actually. We spend most of every day on the roof of Yusuf and Cleo's house, weaving the things Miryam will need for her trousseau—tunics and blankets and head clothes and even mats, since the ones my mother made when she and Abba got married have gotten old and shabby. There's a big tree and some latticework for shade, so we sit and talk and get to know each other. Naomi has her baby, a little girl they name Hafzbah in honor of the boys' mother, so that's fun, too. It's been a long time since I've had a baby to cuddle. Sometimes the cousins come, and I teach them their letters, and sometimes the other woman tell me they want to talk to Miryam about woman things, and I'm free to follow the cousins on their adventures.

It's a good life. A happy, peaceful life. Then one day I look over and see Miryam and Abigail cooing over little Hafzbah together, and I realize with a shock that Miryam doesn't belong to me anymore. She belongs to her new family—to Aunt Esther, who will be her mother; and to Yusuf, with whom she is making plans for things they can do to make our old house more comfortable and convenient for a family; and even to the cousins, who might be my playmates but who Miryam has begun tucking in at night.

I stand up, because this makes me feel restless. I look around for somewhere to go, and catch a flash of Simeon's new rust-colored tunic up above the village. "I think I'll go milk the goats," I say. It's a little earlier than usual, but no one objects as I climb off the roof, fetch the milking pot, and walk out of the gate. I stop at home long enough to pick a couple of late pomegranates off the tree by our door and then strike off up the mountain.

The boys' voices are so high and piercing that it's not hard to find them. They're building lizard traps, and have already caught two. I make a deal with them that I'll bring the herds in and give them a treat to share if they let them go, and they happily agree, since there's really not a lot you can do with a lizard once you've got him.

I send them off with one of the pomegranates, crack open the other one and tuck it in my skirt where I'll have easy access, position the pot, and lean comfortably against the first nanny's flank, and begin to strip the milk from her teats.

I can smell the smoke from the village's cooking fires. The birds are quiet in the heat of the late afternoon, but the insects are buzzing full blast. I consider being

homesick for the temple where there are no insects on account of the incense, but can't talk myself into it. Not now that I'm back in the arms of the land.

Except I'm not. Not in the same way, at least. I lean my head against the goat's withers, trying to find my way back into the living pattern of Nazareth. But we stay separate. I can feel the wool against my cheek, and the strength of her bones and muscles beyond that, I smell her goat smell, and hear the light pant of her goat breath. But I cannot find a way in. Just like I can't find my way back into this Nazareth that is and isn't my home.

Miryam has. I see it in the way she breathes in the smell of Naomi's baby, in the curve of her arm around Abigail. I see it in the way she loses herself in her weaving, thinking about things that I can't see. I see it in the way she drinks up everything Aunt Esther or Naomi or Cleopas says, the way people do when they have found where they belong.

But there's no way in for me. I kept telling myself there would be, that it was only a matter of time and a small adjustment here, more careful listening there, and I would be back, cradled and nourished in Nazareth's living web.

But it's been weeks. Months, now, and I'm still as separate as I was at the temple.

That one's done. I get up and stretch, and hear sandals scraping on the path. Probably Miryam, come to make sure I'm all right. Instead of making me feel safe, her concern weighs on me, like a veil thrown over a bird ready to take wing. I school my face to as much welcome as I can manage, and turn to greet her.

But it's not Miryam at all. It's Zebdi. And the expression on his dear, dear face says that I've found the place I belong.

Chapter 15: Trumpets

The peddler from Capernaum had been so pleased to be the one to give them the good news. Salome was pregnant.

Pregnant. Something that, at this rate, Miryam would never be. She was fourteen. Almost fourteen and a half. And still she hadn't bled.

She'd smiled as wide as she could, given the man a celebratory cup of wine and bought some of his dried fish, then gathered every last stitch of clothes and bedding she could find and told everyone she was behind on the washing. But instead of heading down to the village spring, she'd gone up the mountain to the creek her mother had sometimes used, even though it was broad summer and the stupid thing was probably little more than a mud puddle, because she had to be alone, and neither Esther nor Abigail nor Naomi and her children could manage the steep and rocky path.

It was Abigail who had asked the question all those months ago, at Salome and Zebdi's wedding. Miryam hadn't meant to eavesdrop; she'd gone to fetch another wineskin from the storage room and was just about to step into the brightness of the courtyard when she'd heard Abigail's scratchy little voice: "Were you and Imma comfortable the way Salome and Zebdi are? Or were you shy, like you and Miryam?"

The question must have shocked Yusuf as much as it had Miryam, because it had taken him a long time to reply.

"In the beginning, your Imma and I were very much like Salome and Zebdi. You know how wonderful your Aunt Naomi is. Well, I thought your Imma was even better. She was kind, like you, and generous, and her face was always as bright and welcoming as the sun. But after her accident, we had to be more...careful, because she'd been hurt so badly."

Miryam had waited for him to go on. Waited for him to say something about her. But he didn't. Not a word. And eventually she'd had to take the wineskin out and hug Salome for the hundredth time and tell her how beautiful she looked, how much like Imma, and do her best to ignore the way Salome kept thinking of things she had to tell

Zebdi so that he would bend his head close to hers, and the way Zebdi made sure to stand close enough so that parts of them—the sides of their feet, or the little fingers of their hands—were almost touching, while her heart broke for what must be the thousandth time.

And now Salome was pregnant. And she, Miryam, the girl who had been visited by an angel, the royal maiden whose marriage had been so important the Sanhedrin itself had stepped in to arrange it, was lost and forgotten in Nazareth. She'd heard nothing from Elisheva or Zakharya since they'd left the temple. Or from her other cousins, except that Tolomei and Zippora were married. It's what was safest. They'd all decided.

But she hadn't realized how very alone she would be here in Nazareth. She'd thought, somehow, that it would be different. That she would belong, the way she'd belonged in her family and at the temple. And maybe even a little more. That Zakharya taking her into the temple had meant that the prophecies were real; that her family's sufferings had mattered; that *she* mattered, that her struggles and sacrifices were special in some way, that they would make a difference..

Which of course they would, in exactly the same way that everyone else's always did: by approximation, helping in some ways, hurting in others. Just because Abigail resented as well as loved her, for example, didn't mean that Miryam wasn't a blessing to her. And that should be enough. Why she should imagine that she was owed anything more than anyone else—she, who had been so blessed already—well, that was nothing but pride.

The toe-curling shame of it was dust in her mouth. It wasn't easy caring for a mother-in-law descending into infirmity; five children whose father did his job so well they had little need of her, who, when they thought of her at all, thought of her as the boring one, the sister who wasn't Salome; and a husband who never looked at her, much less touched her. She was hardly the first woman to find herself in such a situation. Nor, she told herself, forcing herself to form the words, was she the first to have a body that would not bleed.

Immediately the question clutched at her, the question that someday she would find a way not to ask. Would Yusuf honor their betrothal without the blood that

guaranteed both her virtue and her readiness to bear children? It had already been two years. Two long years of whispers and sideways looks. She thought he probably would in the end, since he already had children, but what if he did not? What would she do? Where would she go? Her throat and lungs felt so tight she could hardly breathe.

But here, at last, was the creek. It was smaller than she remembered, little more than a damp, muddy ribbon that petered out beneath some rocks. The day was hot and the bundle of laundry unwieldy, but something rose up in Miryam, something wild and fierce she hadn't felt for a long time. She wanted a bath. A cool, clean bath to loosen and lift the bitterness of her envy. She wanted water to hold her up, to touch her skin and fill the empty places and reflect her own face back to her, to remind her that she *was*. So she would follow this ribbon to its source, and if that didn't work, she'd find another. If it took her a week of wandering, she was going to find the living water she needed to wash herself clean.

She looked around. She was on an escarpment littered with broken rock and bare of any plants that might tempt a scavenging dog or goat. The laundry would be safe enough here as long as it was out of sight. She picked her way across the sharp edges and unsteady surface of the rock fall until she found a cleft space big enough to accommodate her bundle. She stared at the place long enough to memorize it, then set her feet on the path. Cloth might be precious, but she was not about to cart it all over the mountain.

She followed the ribbon of earth and water up the side of the mountain, up and up and up, long enough for the trickle to grow, to acquire first scent and then sound; to fur its banks with brown, then green; and finally lead her to its source, a spring trickling down the back wall of a shallow limestone cave. The drip of the water had worn away a girl-sized sinkhole where the waters gathered briefly before beginning their journey down the mountainside. Murmuring a prayer of gratitude, Miryam slipped out of her clothes and braced herself for the bone-ache of frigid water.

But the water she stepped into wasn't cold at all. It lapped against her, warm and soft as fresh milk, a thermal spring bearing healing salts from the belly of the earth. Now that she was in it and her breathing was returning to normal, she could smell the tell-tale whiff of rotten eggs.

She looked around, wishing for a stand of dried flowers she could use to perfume the water. Or hyssop. That was what she really should have brought. Nothing scoured you cleaner than hyssop. She'd seen some on the trail, even, but hadn't stopped to think, too intent on getting to water to recognize the help she was being offered.

Miryam took a deep breath, and willed herself to let it go. Let it all go—her sweat and stink, her confusion and tears, her reproaches and disappointments. She relaxed her heart, her lungs, her mind, her skin, holding nothing back, allowing all of it leach into the water that cradled her in its swaying arms, living water that could carry it all away, emptying herself to God.

She didn't know how long she floated there, suspended between dark and light, between cave and mountain. Long enough for all worry and distraction to drip silently from her body. Long enough to find the question she had come here to ask.

After a long time, she reached for her tunic and headcloth. She washed them, slowly, methodically, in no particular hurry. When she was done, she wrung them out, tugged the damp folds of the tunic over her head, and went outside.

The harsh sun struck at her like a blow. Eyes squinted nearly shut, she clambered up to a wide ledge above the cave and spread her headcloth out to dry. Then she lay herself down next to it and opened herself as completely as she could to receive.

Do you see me, Lord? Do you see that I am offering my whole self? That there is no secret corner that I would hide from You?

Did what happened in the temple really happen, or is it something that I dreamed? You said to tell no one and I haven't, but a memory without form or witness—even such a memory as that—thins and fades, dissolving far too easily into the stuff of dreams and nightmares. Was it real? Did you promise me paths opening before me and holy things to build? Believe me when I say I have searched for them. I have opened my mouth to the dust, hoping to find a drop of Wisdom's waters hidden there. But I am empty, all of me—heart, belly, hands. I have nothing left to offer. I have nowhere left to go. I offer myself to You as the poorest of Your 'anawim. What is it I have forgotten, or failed to see? Help me find and accept the shape of the life You would have me live.

And then she waited. She waited a long time, long enough for her hair and gown to dry, long enough for the desert wind to bake every tear, every hope, and every dream from her body, long enough for her to find the truth of her being, and see it for the dry and sterile husk it was.

She got up slowly, stiffly, her mouth tasting of dust. Too late now to do laundry. They'd be coming home, now, hungry for the dinner she hadn't prepared. Well, it wouldn't kill any of them to have to wait the extra minute it would take for her to go rinse out her mouth at the spring. She ducked back into the cool darkness, and bent to drink.

And smelled flowers. The citron flowers she had woven into the sunshine of Salome's hair in the last sweet hour of her childhood. It was impossible. There was no citron tree here, and even if there had been, the last of its blossoms would have withered months ago. And yet the scent was as real as the slippery rocks beneath her bare feet.

Then she felt her mother's quick fingers, brushing back her hair, and the solid comfort of Salome's backbone pressing steadily against her own as they slept. Light broke into her body, piercing every crevice, every organ, sweeping all darkness and confusion before it, making way for the glory of the Lord.

She opened her eyes and the fire of his glory had a shape, and the shape of it was a Being, and his name was Gabriel. Gabriel, who was Noah, he who had abided the waters laboring to bring forth a world made new.

Hail, thou that art highly favoured.

It was a greeting for a queen. If she'd dared, Miryam would have laughed. She wasn't favored. Not by Yusuf, who wouldn't look at her. Not by his children, whom he raised so well and loved so truly they had no need of her. Not by Salome, who had left her for Zebdi and now carried his child.

The Lord is with thee.

They were small words, quiet words, but their ripple broke and reformed the breath of her life. The Lord was with her. He was with her, now and always. And if that were true, nothing else really mattered. Could it be true? Miryam stopped, fumbling for

the deepest, truest part of herself, the part that lay beyond time, beyond fear, beyond calculation of any sort. And when she found it, the Spirit of the Lord was there. As it always had been, she realized as light and warmth gathered around her. She knew the Lord. She knew the fragrance and goodness, the glow and the gentleness of His Spirit. It was part of her. It always had been. And every good thing she had ever seen, every good thing she had ever done had woven that Spirit more firmly into her flesh, into her bones, into her marrow and heart and mind. *Thank you. Oh, thank you. This is so much more than I needed. Thank you thank you thank you.*

There was no end. She tried and tried, but each wave she sent out to empty her heart returned bearing more love, more joy. Her heart swelled, pressing so insistently against her chest that she could actually imagine the bliss of giving way, of surrendering the fabric of her being to the current of light and love pouring back and forth through her weak and foolish body.

But something drew her back. Something just as true, just as real as the delight, but rougher and more urgent. Something unfinished. Something only she could do. A promise? A purpose? She wasn't sure. But she knew it mattered, and not only to her. And once glimpsed, it couldn't be unseen. Not amidst the brilliance of eternal light.

So, a bit reluctantly, she came back to her world from wherever she had been. Came back to the weight and constriction of it, the unyielding effort of muscle and bone, the maddening confusion imposed by singularities of time and perspective. She whimpered a little as her eyelids lifted.

The Messenger was still there. She blinked as though he were a dream to be cleared away, but he wasn't. He was as real and as solid as the body she had returned to, as real and solid as the ground on which she stood. She laughed, actually laughed with the surprise and pleasure of his being. Someone had come to help her. Someone had come to tell her what she needed to know. Someone with eyes as golden and knowing as the Lord's.

Her smile died away as she felt the truth of those words. Gabriel was not the Lord. He was only His messenger. But as he looked at her, she knew that he had united himself so fully to the Lord and the Lord to him that it was as if the Lord Himself were gazing upon her. She felt the light of those dear eyes as they gently, insistently drove

deep beyond the joy of her gratitude, piercing the darkness of her suffering, illuminating every corner of fear and confusion and weakness.

This is the price of honesty, Miryam told herself fiercely. This is what it costs to be known. She stood her ground, determined not to compromise the soundness of the relationship they were building for the sake of something as cheap and fleeting as her own embarrassment.

When Gabriel spoke at last, the tenderness of his words transformed the pain of her weakness into an offering as beautiful as that of her gratitude.

Blessed art thou among women. Fear not, Miryam: for thou hast found favor with God.

She wanted him to say it again, over and over again until she had found a place to keep his words, those precious, precious words that were already weaving their way through her soul, gathering each thread, each frayed and broken shaving into the wholeness she'd yearned for since the last time she'd been cradled in her mother's arms. A fullness. That was what he had given her from the Lord. A fullness of joy and healing.

But still he continued, so that the emptiness she'd thought was too deep to ever fill was brimful.

And, Look! Thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son.

The waters she had lost, the waters she had believed to be stripped from her forever, came gushing through her, filling her breasts and belly, pulsing out from her heart and then rushing back, sap rising in the Tree of Life. She couldn't have borne the joy of it alone, but she didn't have to. Her family was there—generations of them, stretching back to the beginning of time, Imma and Abba and her grandparents, Ephraim and Joseph and Judah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And the matriarchs, too—Sarah and Hannah, Rachel and Rebecca, Ruth and Miryam and Zipporah and Eve, a great rejoicing chorus delighting in the contribution each had made to the body that was their legacy to her.

...and shalt call his name Yeshua, Joshua, the Rescue of God. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of

his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Stop! Miryam wanted to cry. Stop! But she remembered the other times when the wildness of this knowing had begun to sprout within her, and how anything less than an embrace killed it dead, so she let him go, praying that she would remember, covenanting that she would remember, that she would come back and back to the words until she had found the shape of them, until she *was* the shape of them, until her body and her spirit found a way to carry the holiness that was Judah's king, until she found a way to keep him clean and safe as she wove the flesh that would clothe him, that would veil him from the world as he grew into his power, until he revealed himself as the Messiah, the Lion of Judah, the Hope and Redeemer of Israel.

Gabriel repeated what the Lady had said that night in the temple—that this revelation was given to show her the end of the beginnings that she must now prepare herself to make. That it was from God, and as such, too sacred to be spoken of without the express permission and command of the Spirit. And then he bade her farewell, and she was stumbling back down the steep path.

She woke to the weight of Naomi's hand on her shoulder. She blinked up at her sister-in-law's concerned face, illuminated by the glow of a small oil lamp.

Naomi was saying something Miryam didn't have room to understand. She just waited for a pause so she could say she was fine, not to worry, she'd be up in the morning.

Then, "Yusuf," said Naomi.

The sound of her betrothed's name woke Miryam at last. "What?"

"Yusuf is quite concerned," Naomi repeated patiently. "What should I tell him?"

NO!

The warning came before Miryam even had time to make sense of her sister-in-law's question, with such power that if she'd been standing it would have knocked her to the ground. Nothing. She was to tell Yusuf nothing.

So again Miryam did the unthinkable—she turned away and closed her eyes.

She could feel her sister-in-law's hurt. But right now it couldn't be helped. Right now, it was taking all Miryam's strength simply to contain what she'd thought she'd been told. Because she must have misunderstood. Because even though she could still feel the reverberations of the warning, it couldn't possibly mean what it seemed to say. She clung to the solidness of the floor that held her up until her sister-in-law had gone, and the light was coming back.

Gabriel repeated all he had told her the first time, and since she'd heard it before, this time she knew how to listen, and so she could hear who wasn't there and should have been. Yusuf. Yusuf, the worthiest and best father she knew.

As Gabriel repeated his warning, the question that had started this, the awful, fearful question that had sent her to the spring began to vibrate inside her, faster and deeper until the frailty that was her body could no longer contain it.

How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

And he answered, slowly, so that she had time to hear every word. *The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.*

He was telling her she would be protected. That the Comforter would bear her up and be a shield and a protection to her, guarding her from the overwhelming power of the Lord's Creation.

Gabriel left her then, but Miryam hardly noticed. Of course the Messiah would be His son. She hadn't thought before, hadn't really considered, but now that Gabriel had told her, she realized she should have known it all along. Only God's own Son had the wisdom, and the power, and the purity, and the strength to redeem Israel. And yet the broken and sinful world she knew could not possibly withstand the glory of Divinity. So the power of the Lord must be contained and restricted in time and space, and that meant being housed in a mortal body.

That much she could understand. She could even understand why she—or at least someone like her, a descendent of kings and priests who had been educated in the temple—should be the one to carry the child. It was the *how* that she couldn't even

begin to comprehend. Not physically—the Lord had promised her she would be protected, and that was all she needed to know—but socially, in the context of the world in which she lived.

She was betrothed to Yusuf, but the Lord had made it clear she was not to speak of this to him. Although even if she had, she doubted he'd believe her, especially after the pain of his first wife's rape during their betrothal. But he was going to find out sooner or later. And when he did, she wouldn't blame him if he withdrew his protection from her, as was his legal right.

At best, he'd divorce her. Her son would be a *mamzer*, a bastard, and both she and he would be ostracized. And how she could rear him and prepare him to become the Messiah—something she didn't know how to do under the best of circumstances—she had no idea.

At worst, he would give her up to the village, standing by while the people she had known all her life, the girls she had played with, the elders who had scolded, the ones like Matthias whom she had broken her heart to love, pushed her off a cliff and rained stones down upon her broken body until they were quite, quite sure that she and her unborn son were dead.

The Lord had promised to protect her. She clung to that promise, but the effort of doing so, of closing her mind to the possibilities her own life experience had taught her to expect, was so severe she began to wonder if her body would shake itself to pieces.

"I believe," she prayed. "Help Thou my unbelief."

For the third time, light gathered above her head and descended, shedding peace and comfort in its wake. Gabriel repeated his message, then sealed it with the two sentences that would become the anchor to Miryam's soul during the difficult months to come:

And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible.

After that, Miryam knew there was only one thing to say.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.

Miryam was sitting in a tree, weaving. She wondered why she hadn't tried it sooner. The scorching winds of the summer scirocco had parched every bit of life from the world. Here, however, a screen of fluttering green leaves held the worst of the heat at bay, and she could relax her guard.

She sank more fully into the embrace of the tree. She felt the texture of the bark, and the strength of the wood, and swam with the pulse of the sap that brought it life. She was in the leaves as they received the light and danced it into the world, weaving it into their own selves while pouring out the freshness that was their joy, singing it into her lungs.

She had danced this way before, she knew. She had shared in the ancient song of creation, rejoicing in the pain and power as smallness broke open into the promise of grandeur. But it had never beat against her so insistently, never taken root in her heart, never stretched and pressed, unfurling through her veins and bidding her to do...what? She tried to stop, tried to make room so she could understand, but as she withdrew, so did the music. It was up to her, she realized. It was waiting for her.

Yes, she said. Yes, you may.

It seized her. It broke her, blasting apart limb and sinew. She'd known it would change her, but not like this. Her edges were gone. All defenses, all identity, all order ripped away.

Not like this. This couldn't possibly be right. *Is there no other way?*

There is no other way. But the choice will always be yours.

She let it take her, whatever it was.

The tree was still there. It held her, its strength a match for her weight and more. Again, she became aware of the greening sap within it, the source and liveliness of that great tree's power. It seemed so fixed, seemed so strong, and yet the strength of its form and fixity depended on its willingness to make room for the new.

She felt it, then. The fire and itch of spirit eager to be made manifest. Her heart fizzed, her fingers tingled, and she took up her shuttle and began to weave the thread of

the song. Red from the blood of life in her veins, white from the power of heaven, weaving together a garment fit for a King, a shape to hold the new song that must be born into the world.

Miryam sat up, breathing heavily. Her tunic was soaked through and clung unpleasantly to her breasts, and her hair lay in damp tangles against her neck. It was no wonder; sunlight heavy as gold streamed in through the window. She must have slept right through to late afternoon.

She tried to think, tried to make sense, but her head was thick and her eyes ached. So, just for a moment, she sank back down on her mat and let everything go.

You don't have to make sense of it all at once.

Of course she didn't. She couldn't, even if she wanted to. She was mortal. Which, if she had understood correctly, was more or less the point. She could honor the limitations and rhythms of her animal body without shame or judgment. *Thank you*, she responded, and waited in case there was more. But there wasn't, so after a moment she got up, washed herself and tidied away her sleeping mat. She was on her way to the courtyard to find something to eat before she remembered.

The laundry. She'd left the laundry on the mountain. The household's most valuable items were out lying in the open, practically begging to be stolen or damaged.

Mindful, even amidst her alarm, of her body's new responsibilities, she forced herself to wait long enough to snatch up a mostly-empty wineskin, a round of bread and a handful of olives before lighting out for the rocky path up the mountain. She couldn't remember the last time she'd run flat out like this, as completely and unselfconsciously as a little girl, and, despite the worry, she had to admit it felt good. She was aware of the power of her muscles, the grace and balance of her movement, the replenishment offered by each breath. And the hundreds of ways her body connected her to the physical world—the scents, the sounds, the textures and temperatures and forces that helped her know what was her, and what was the world, and the joy of being true to both. *Thank you, thank you, thank you*, she wanted to sing, or dance, or *something*. *Thank you for my body. Thank you that it works so well. Thank you for what it lets me do, and for the person that lets me become*. She stretched out her arms like they were wings, and sailed up and up.

She was at the escarpment before she knew it. She rocked to a stop, her throat tightening as she was called back to the purpose of her journey. If anything had happened to the bundle, it would be her fault. Not that anyone was likely to scold her. But the thought of Yusuf's tired, patient eyes...

Miryam blinked the image away. There was little point worrying about how Yusuf might or might not react. That wasn't up to her. Finding out what had happened to the clothing and then deciding what to do about it was. She squared her shoulders, twitching them a little to shake the linen of her gown free, and picked her way toward the crevice.

She needn't have worried. Her bundle was right where she had left it. A little dustier, a little hotter than before, but otherwise unharmed. She turned and squinted at the position of the sun. It was lower in the sky than she would have liked, but still strong. If she hurried, she thought there was a pretty good chance it would all be dry by nightfall.

She bounded back down the path, as fleet and sure-footed as a gazelle, plotting out what should be washed first, and trying to decide if it was worth a quick stop at the house for soap or whether a good scouring would be sufficient.

She almost ran right by them. They were squatting so patiently in the shadows of the oak tree that marked the track to Nazareth village that they seemed part of the landscape. When they saw her, though, they began to struggle to their feet. Their awkward, painful movements, punctuated by bitten-off gasps and sharp puffs of breath, abruptly punctured the expansive pleasure Miryam had been taking in her body.

She was a guilty fool. How could she be so insensitive, so *selfish* as to rejoice in her strength when so many others could not do the same?

She started to drop the clothes where she stood, but realized that would distress them both, so took the time to lay them carefully on a clean stone before offering her help. Abigail was up by then, her face shining with her greeting, but Esther was having a harder time. Miryam wrapped her arm around the old woman's waist, which seemed nothing but skin and bones, and lifted her to her feet.

“Whew!” Esther said, once she had gotten her balance. “That used to be easier! Never thought, all those years ago when I dandled you on my knee, that someday you’d be dandling me on yours!”

Her deep voice had gotten fainter and scratchier over the last couple of years, and now that she’d lost most of her teeth it was sometimes hard to understand her. But this time Miryam got every word.

She smiled uncomfortably, then looked away.

“No need to be embarrassed,” Esther said with some of her old asperity. “I was young and beautiful once myself, you know. Enjoyed every minute of it. Foolish not to. But youth is not life’s only blessing.”

Miryam flushed. “I didn’t mean...”

“No, you didn’t,” Esther agreed. “You just didn’t know. Haven’t lived long enough to have figured out what to do about differences that seem unfair. Well, I’ll tell you. Don’t hide from them. Both advantage and disadvantage have things to teach you, and it all evens out in the end. I need your arm to get up, and you need my wisdom, and Abigail needs—what do you need, Abby-girl?”

Abigail’s bright eyes startled wide and her narrow shoulders twitched under the combined weight of the two women’s gazes. She swallowed and bobbed a glance at Miryam and then away, her head as jerky on its thin neck as that of a newly-hatched bird, her absurd, dusty hair sticking out like so many mismatched feathers. “To know that Miryam is all right,” she croaked. Underneath her eyelids, her eyes slipped furtively toward Esther’s for reassurance, just the way Salome’s used to when she wasn’t sure what was expected of her. “Isn’t that the reason we came?”

Something cracked across Miryam’s body—a charge, a bolt, some surge of energy she’d never felt before. Then it was gone, and Miryam realized it had taken her skin with it. She felt so naked, so defenseless in her love and concern and gratitude for these women, that she actually raised an arm to make sure her skin was still there. It was.

She stared at the familiar smooth, olive expanse of her forearm. It looked like it always had, but that had to be a mistake, because she could feel the way all the love, all the knowing, all the truth with which she had presented herself to Gabriel was

compounding, rushing in on her until the weight of it made her stagger. It was too big. It was too much. She was losing herself under the burden of her love for and understanding not only of Abigail, not only for Esther, but now Yusuf and the boys—and Salome and Zebdi—and all those who had gathered with her to rejoice in Gabriel’s message—and Matthias, the boy with the runny nose, and Anna, and Josephus, and Annas, and the great tree that was lending them shade, and ancient stones of the mountains, and the wings of the kestrels... Her knees were buckling, her bones giving way under the weight, the terrible weight of all that love and beauty and pain.

Let it go.

The command was crisp and sure.

But they need...she managed.

I know them, for they are mine.

The words cut her to the quick. They were not angry. But they were white-hot with truth. The Lord *knew*. He knew them all as well as he knew her—what they were now, what they could become, and the steepness of the path that lay between.

She felt a quirk of humor she was beginning to recognize, and saw herself in the temple, the day Jonas and Josephus had argued about the Jubilee. She heard the words she had said then: *He has never asked us to do more than we could, just what we must.* She didn’t know Abigail’s path, or Esther’s either. It wasn’t her place to know. Wherever they went, and however they got there—that was between them and the Lord. If He needed her help, He would ask her. Until then—

You have work enough to do.

Miryam felt her lips tug into a reluctant grin. The words had been delivered with such an exact imitation of Salome at her most self-satisfied that she couldn’t help it.

That bit of humor—not to mention the burden she had relinquished—was enough to get Miryam through the night. But that was all.

She woke to a world that seemed too brilliant, too loud, too real to abide. She spent the morning lurching around feeling like a mole plucked from its comfortable, dark den by the claw of an eagle winging directly into the unfathomable brilliance of the

sun: removed from all that had grounded her; too dazzled to see clearly; in the grip of an unsuspected and incomprehensible power. In short, she was a character in a story she couldn't understand and was forbidden to tell.

That was the worst. The not telling. Especially the not telling Yusuf, who in the midst of his own personal tragedy had saved and protected her, and who she would now repay with a bitter second serving of undeserved pain.

That couldn't be right. It just couldn't. She searched desperately for the words she had missed, must have missed. And found them—though not where she had expected. It was what Esther had said. *Don't hide from things that seem difficult or unfair. Don't hide.* But that still wasn't quite enough, so she kept looking, and found words from her dream, words straight from the Lord. *The choice will always be yours.* Until gradually they ran together. *Don't hide from difficulty. You always have a choice.*

But she *didn't* have a choice. That was the problem. She couldn't tell anyone what had happened to her, and even if she could, how could they possibly understand?

There's no one who can understand?

Relief broke over her, as sweet, refreshing, and unexpected as rain in summer. There was someone who would understand. Not because Miryam told her, but because she was living through it herself. Someone who had had time to find the right words to contain and give form to everything that was changing. Elisheva.

The journey from Nazareth to Juttah was difficult at the best of times. To go now, in the heat of the summer, made no sense at all. But when she went to talk to Yusuf about it in his workshop, the clang of his tools against the stone storage jar he was shaping didn't waver. If she wished to visit her aunt, he told her from underneath the fold of the keffiyeh he'd pulled over his face to protect it from the chips of flying stone, then that's what she must do. He'd be done with this job by mid-afternoon, and would have plenty of time to deliver it and make what arrangements were necessary before the end of the day. They'd leave at first light. The good news was that since the grape harvest had ended and the olive harvest was still at least six weeks away, it shouldn't be too difficult to find a wagon to carry his mother.

“We can’t possibly bring your mother,” Miryam said, aghast. “She’d never survive. You know she wouldn’t.”

The rhythmic movement of Yusuf’s arm and powerful shoulder faltered for a moment, then resumed. He didn’t look at her. “I had thought to leave Cleo and Naomi here to mind the farm,” he said carefully. “I suppose we could ask them to chaperone instead, but then my mother would be here all alone for at least two weeks, probably closer to three.”

“No, no, we can’t ask them,” Miryam said. “Not with a toddler and an infant.” She took a deep breath. “We’d have the children with us, and we *are* betrothed. Don’t you think, just this once...”

Yusuf put down his hammer, picked up the huge stone jar as if it weighed no more than a dish, stepped to the edge of the stone shelf on which he’d built his workshop, and emptied the jar into the wadi below. He tapped it gently against the wooden curb he’d set into the mountainside for that purpose, so that the breeze coming down the wadi blew the last of the stone dust away from them both. Then, moving as economically as a cat, he swung the jar onto the shelf where three other vessels waited for final polishing and turned to lift the broom from its hook.

But Miryam had gotten there a moment sooner. She jerked her chin toward the water jar, telling him she would do the sweeping for him. He hesitated, his long brown hand still outstretched, then dropped his eyes, nodded his thanks, and stepped past her on his way to the water jar, unwinding his keffiyeh as he went.

Miryam closed her eyes briefly, the better to smell the combined scent of sun, sweat, and new wood that was Yusuf. Then she realized what she was doing and was so embarrassed she nearly dropped the broom. She had no business thinking of Yusuf that way, none at all. He’d made it abundantly clear that he thought of her more as a niece than a companion.

Then she remembered the angel, and the baby, and the Lord, and her ears were buzzing so loudly with her shame that she didn’t realize Yusuf was talking to her until the broom disappeared from her hands.

“Are you all right?” he was saying, his face as gentle and concerned as if she were Abigail, or a broken butterfly, or a wounded lamb. He was so close she could see drops of water twinkling in his beard and eyebrows, and the white lines at the corner of his eyes from years of squinting in the sun. He was looking at her, really looking at her, and it was funny, really, because that’s all she’d wanted for two years now, but now that he finally was, it was in the wrong way, for the wrong reason. He was looking at her like a father, not a... No. She wouldn’t think it. It was just as well he had never seen her in that way, she told herself. Because breaking her own heart was bad enough. She couldn’t have borne it if she’d had to break his, too.

“Yes,” she said to his sandals. But his feet were so long and brown and strong, so she had to look around for something else. “Yes, of course I’m fine. But I need to see Elisheva. I can’t... It wouldn’t...” She was twisting her hands, needing to feel them, needing to feel her edges. but her brain just wouldn’t work anymore and now her stupid eyes were leaking stupid tears no matter how hard she blinked. “I just really need to see Elisheva,” she gulped.

“Then we’ll find a way,” he said, as matter-of-factly as though he were sending one of the boys on an errand. “You go take care of that laundry you’ve been carrying around all week so you have something clean to wear, and leave the transportation to me. If it’s that important to you, I’m sure the Lord will provide.”

Yes, He would. She was on His errand. Bless Yusuf for reminding her. Bless him for his understanding, for his goodness, for his faith. For being there. For showing her she was not, after all, as completely alone as she had thought. She tried to thank him, but she was crying too hard, like the little girl he thought her to be, and she could feel him wanting to comfort her, and she wanted to let him, even though she knew that what she wanted and what he was offering were not really the same thing, and it would be a dangerous lie to imagine that they were—even if she had the right, which she no longer did.

Because she had said yes to the Lord. She’d received His Word into her body, so the surge and ebb of her lifeblood could weave around and through the straight lines of its truth, cradling it in nourishment and warmth, rocking it into the rhythm and pattern

of life of the world it—He—had come to save. That was her purpose now. Her only purpose.

Knowing that, remembering that, dried her tears. She found she could, after all, look Yusuf in the face and thank him with simple dignity, one servant of the Lord to another. Then she went to find the laundry, and Abigail and Esther, who would miss her when she was gone.



Miryam tucked the last sprig of gardenia into the dry silk of Abigail's hair, and patted the little girl's thigh. "All done. Go and see if it's what you had in mind." Abigail gripped Miryam's shoulder with the crooked little twigs that were her fingers and levered herself up. She lurched quickly towards the reservoir beneath the spring, olive face flushed with excitement as she prepared to see herself in all her glory.

Miryam sat back, twitching her shoulder and arching her back so that her sweat-dampened tunic didn't cling quite so unpleasantly, and shared a smile with Esther. "Thank you," the old woman mouthed to her, then clapped her hands and called, "You really are a princess. Come stand in the light so I can see you properly."

Miryam's stomach tightened. It was true that both they and the spring were in the shade at this time of day, but Abigail was scarcely three long paces away. She'd known that Esther's sight was dimming, but not this quickly.

That was not her worry, she reminded herself. Her responsibility was to the child she carried, not Esther. But the languorous contentment of the afternoon was gone. "I'll just check the tunics," she said, getting to her feet.

They were dry. Well, that was one blessing of this terrible heat, she supposed. She turned to relay the news to Esther, and caught the old woman struggling to her feet to come help. "No, no, stay there," she called, hurrying to bundle it all together. "I'll bring it to you. It's too hot to fold it out here in the sun."

Esther gave her a look that said she wasn't fooled, but obediently settled back onto her haunches.

“I don’t know what you were thinking, agreeing to keep me company out here in the heat,” Miryam went on, handing Esther some of the smaller items that could she could fold without getting up. “Listen—not a creature is stirring.”

It was true. Not a bird, not a locust, not a child, not the distant ring of Yusuf’s hammer, only the muffled splash of the water. Abigail had frozen and was listening, too, her dark brows scrunching over her brilliant brown eyes and her mouth hanging a little open with concentration. “There’s something...” she said. “What is it? I can’t quite...”

Then Miryam heard it too. A jingle. What was it? Not a sheep’s bell.

“There! Look there!” Abigail suddenly called, pointing toward the northern road that lay behind Miryam’s shoulder. “Someone’s coming!”

Miryam went to stand with her, putting one arm around the little girl’s shoulder to steady her and lifting her other hand to shade her eyes. Sure enough, a small party was straggling towards them along the dusty road from Tzippori.

“A family,” Abigail reported to Esther. “A family with a donkey coming from Tzippori.”

Esther tsk-tsked. “Don’t know what the poor fools are thinking,” she grumped. She struggled to her feet, the small pile of linens she’d been given already neatly folded at her side. “Come on, missies. Shake a leg. They’ll be wanting a cool drink when they get here, whoever they are.”

They had time to put the laundry away, rouse the sleeping house, squeeze the lemon, crush the mint, and even set out a dish of bread and another one of olives before Abigail, who’d been keeping watch from the roof, clattered down the stairs to say that they were here, in the village, two men and two women and two donkeys, and should she go find them and tell them they were welcome.

Affection for the brave little girl, who hated, just *hated* meeting strangers, swept over Miryam. But before she could answer, the jingle they’d heard across the valley sounded again, just outside the door. There were footsteps, a woman’s voice raised in a question, a man’s rumble, and a knock on their gate.

"I'll get it," Yusuf said, appearing at the door of the upstairs room. Miryam had assumed he was asleep, but he was wearing his prayer shawl, which he removed as he strode down the steps. He met her eyes. "Although I imagine they're really here for you," he said with a half-smile, and opened the door to her cousin Alphaeus and a young woman with a baby who must be his wife Sophia, and behind them Simon and *his* wife Rachel, Miryam's dearest friend from the temple.

Miryam couldn't move. Or speak. Or even breathe. She was trying too hard not to be swept right off her feet by the tears rising in her throat. Rachel had her in her arms, then Simon, then Alphaeus was presenting his wife Sophia and their chubby little Levi, his face beaming with pride.

"What are you *doing* here?" Miryam finally managed. Then, collecting herself, "No, that can wait. We have some drinks for you. And a morsel to hold you over until supper. Come get off your feet. I don't know what you were thinking off, traveling in the heat of the day like that." She helped Rachel and Sophia remove their headcloths, while Abigail called to the boys to hurry up, they had company, come and see and the guests shook hands with Yusuf and hugged Esther and fussed over her.

The boys appeared at the top of the stairway, their faces flushed with sleep and heat and their hair sticking every which way, and they were so dear to her and she was so proud to show them off Miryam had to concentrate to keep her balance as she shook out the headcloths and hung them up.

When the greetings were done and the lemon and mint had been drunk and Sophia had taken the baby off for a nap, Simon, who Miryam remembered had never much liked talking, nodded to his wife to explain why they had come. Rachel colored slightly and gave him a pleading look, obviously reluctant. "It's all right," he told her, folding his hand over hers. "We're all family here, and you'll say it more easily than Alphaeus or me."

After a brief hesitation, she nodded. The tenderness of the look they exchanged made Miryam look down at her hands in confusion.

Yusuf was sitting next to her. They weren't touching, of course. They never did. But now, to her surprise, he moved his hand an inch closer to hers. As if he... Confused, she glanced at his face. He was watching her. Patiently watching her. Waiting for her to

see and understand his invitation. Miryam looked down to where his hand lay next to hers. She looked up at him again. His eyes gazed back, unembarrassed, just...waiting.

She didn't know what to do. She wanted to. Oh, she wanted to. But was it proper? Did she have the right?

He is your betrothed husband. It is your right, and his.

Slowly, so he would have time to move away if she had misunderstood, she moved her hand closer, so the small fingers of their hands brushed against each other. She sat very still, hardly daring to breathe, but he didn't move away.

Rachel was saying something about Alphaeus—who after his marriage to Sophia had gone to work for his father-in-law, a Greek merchant from Magdala who was one of Uncle Josef's business partners—and business in Rama, and the way poor Aunt Sarah was beginning to fail, and how they were eager for her to see little Levi before she went. And how Rachel and Simon, now working as a scribe, had been planning a pilgrimage to the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron to pray for a baby of their own and to check on Elisheva and Zakharya, since Juttah was only a few miles from Hebron and no one had heard a peep from either one of them since their retirement last winter. And how Salome had urged them to go now, and take Miryam with them.

Rachel was talking about barrenness. Her own and, by implication, Miryam's. These were not matters easily spoken of, especially in mixed company. No wonder Simon had pressed his wife to be the one to say it. And no wonder that, now that she had done so, Rachel's cheeks were as bright as two pomegranate flowers and none of the adults in the room seemed able to meet anyone else's eyes.

But Miryam wasn't embarrassed. She was grateful. So grateful she had to pinch her lips together as hard as she could so that her gratitude didn't pour out in a ridiculous paeon of joy, the joy of the 23rd Psalm, the joy her mother had tried to share with her as she lay dying: *my cup runneth over*.

Salome had known. She'd *known* what Miryam would feel when she heard about her pregnancy. And so, as she always did, her little sister had set about in her determined way to make things better. And so she had, setting in motion a whole chain of events made possible by the goodness of one person after another.

It was a miracle, Miryam knew. And an answer to prayer. A prayer said by a husband for his betrothed wife. The wife, it turned out, that he'd seen all along. The wife for whom he had been waiting.

Chapter 16: The Way of the Mothers

They left well before sunrise and kept a good pace. The baby, Levi, an eatable little chunk with his Greek mother's flaxen hair, rode contentedly enough in the sling Sophia wore across her chest, and the rest of them were young and strong, with no children or elderly parents to slow them down.

"We thought we'd take the Way of the Patriarchs along the ridge," Alphaeus, who was in the lead, called back towards Miryam. "That is, if you don't have any objection to traveling through Samaria. The Jordan Valley is just too hot this time of year."

"That would be wonderful!" Miryam said. "I've never gone that way before."

"Me, either," Sophia confessed. She raised her voice, so that Simon and Rachel at the back could hear them. "And Simon *promised* that if I left him alone the rest of the time, we could stop at all the old sites and he'd recite for us. Isn't that right, Simon?"

Simon nodded, doing his best to look grudging but not quite succeeding. His memory for scripture was nearly as good as Josephus's, and although he wasn't the sort of person to bring it up, he liked it when people noticed.

"I'm so glad you could come with us," Sophia said. "We are going to have such fun together." She executed a happy little skip, the sling bounced, the baby cried, and everyone laughed, even Simon.

Miryam had forgotten about fun, especially the kind of fun you had with people your own age. She'd forgotten the comfort of shared history; the buoyancy of laughter; the joy of striding along side-by-side with others who wanted nothing from her but her company. Her lungs expanded, drinking in the smell and taste of water and sun and growing things, and her skin softened, until it seemed the world was in her and she was in it, carried along on eagles' wings.

They made it all the way across the Jezreel Valley before Alphaeus called a halt for food and the midday rest. They found a shaded place far enough from the path into the foothills to avoid notice, unrolled a tent from one of the donkeys, made a small fire for tea, and sat their weary selves down. Except for Sophia who, after handing the baby

to Rachel to tend, made sure Simon was served first and prodded Alphaeus to help her tie up the side of the tent that faced Mount Tabor, so they could have a proper view of it while they ate. Alphaeus grumbled that he didn't see why that was necessary, since they'd spent the whole morning walking past it, but Sophia just smiled and moved the wineskin within easy reach of Simon, retrieved Levi, and sat down, looking expectant.

Miryam and Rachel exchanged an amused look. Simon, as usual, had been too lost in his own thoughts to notice any of these careful preparations. Rachel poked at him with her foot, but he thought she was telling him she needed more room, and scooted back a foot. "Simon," she prompted.

"Hmmm?"

"Sophia is waiting."

He looked around to find what she might be waiting for, caught sight of the wineskin, and proffered it towards his sister-in-law. "No, sweetheart," Rachel said. "For the story."

"Story? What story?"

Rachel bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing and hurting her husband's feelings. No one saw, probably, except for Miryam, who was doing the same thing.

Sophia had waited as long as she could. "About Deborah. And Mt. Tabor. Remember?"

Bewildered, Simon glanced at Rachel for help.

"You promised," said Sophia, "that if I left you in peace the rest of the time, you'd tell us about each site when we got to it. And now here's Mt. Tabor. So now you're going to tell us about Deborah."

"Ah," said Simon, remembering now. "Deborah. Well, Mt. Tabor is named for Deborah, who inspired Israel to achieve their final victory over the Canaanites there."

"I don't want you to *explain* it," Sophia broke in. "I just want you to *recite* it."

Simon did. He rehearsed the plight of the Tribes of Israel, helpless before the horses and chariots of Sisera's Canaanite army. "*Warriors deserted,*" he intoned, "*in Israel they failed to assist, until the arising of Deborah, the arising of a Mother in Israel!*"

The words seemed to explode in Miryam's head, summoning her abruptly back to the truth of her new center. The *Lord* had called Deborah. It was He who called her to rise; He who had shown her she could become the mother Israel needed. Miryam pressed her hand against her belly as gratitude burst through her body. She was not alone. Deborah had also been asked to do something new, something extraordinary, something for which there were no rules or traditions. And she had. With His help, she had.

And if Deborah had, so could she.

Miryam listened, more fiercely and completely than at any time in her life, to hear *how*. There was wisdom here. Wisdom she had never thought to look for. The wisdom of the Mothers, woven in and through the wisdom of the Fathers. She listened for it with all her might, sucking every drop of nourishment Deborah, the honey-tongued "Bee," had to give her. Deborah, the Lady of the Torches who sat under her palm tree and judged Israel. Deborah, summoning her children to battle, promising them that God would provide the strength they needed, reminding them of the miracles He had worked for their fathers. Deborah, assigning each worker to his part, requiring the obedience and sacrifice that were the price of divine aid, standing midwife to the birth of an independent Israel amidst the rush of mighty waters.

Simon coughed, his throat dry. He reached for wine as Sophia gave an impatient bounce. "You can't stop there! The best is still to come!"

Simon choked, spraying wine everywhere. "You mean Jael? You can't be serious," he managed at last, regarding Sophia in the manner of a mouse glimpsing an owl.

"Can't I?" Sophia said demurely.

Simon was so shocked he literally didn't know what to say. He finally turned to Alphaeus, trying to make a joke of it. "I don't know how you sleep at night, my brother. Did you know this about her before you married her?"

Alphaeus snorted. “Oh, this is a recent acquisition. Since the birth of the boy, when my sweet little lark suddenly transformed herself into a lioness.”

Sophia dropped a kiss on the fuzzy head at her breast. “Just one of the many gifts of motherhood,” she agreed.

Miryam felt Rachel wince. “I know the rest,” she said quickly, before the prick could become a stab, and, closing her eyes, took up the recitation:

“Most blessed among women is Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite.” The words passed before her, seemingly edged in white fire, calling to her to stop and pay attention. But the others were waiting, so Miryam kept going, her voice now soft, now loud as she sang of Jael, the “Goat Who Is Savior.” Jael, a woman of the tents; descendent of Jethro, not Jacob; unbound by formal ties of tribal obligation but smart enough to know a bad man when she saw him. Jael, courageous enough to do the unthinkable: invite the fleeing Canaanite general Sisera into her tent without the protection of husband or clan. Who claimed the right of mothers everywhere to minister to those who need protecting, who gave her guest milk and tucked him into bed—and then drove a tent stake through his unconscious head.

Miryam could have stopped there. She wanted to stop, not only because now it was her mouth that dry, or because her body was heavy with sleep, but mostly because the fate of the third mother, Sisera’s mother, waiting at the window with her deluded soothsayers for the son who would never come, was as disturbing to her as Jael’s violence had been to Simon. But she kept on, because that was important to remember, too—the cost of choosing to see only a part, of turning your face from the strong truth of things as they really are. Until, finally, the promise that God and his people could only fulfill together: *“And the land was at peace for forty years.”*

It was done. The others, too tired to comment, nodded their thanks lay themselves down, and pulled their headcloths over their faces for sleep. Although she lay down, Miryam did her best to keep sleep at bay long enough to revisit the words that had shone out at her, *most blessed of women*, but they wavered in the heat and then silently slipped away.

When they took up their journey a few hours later, Miryam waited until Rachel and Simon were talking quietly together before hastening on to catch up with Sophia. “I

wanted to ask you about what you said before,” she said. “About how being a mother changed you.”

Sophia shot a quick look back toward Rachel, chewed on her lip, then called to Alphaeus, who was in the front. “Alphaeus, take the baby, will you? My shoulder’s getting tired.”

Alphaeus stopped and waited for them, rolling his eyes. “After five minutes? So much for my wife, the lioness.” But his hands were already reaching for his son.

“Miryam has some mommy questions,” Sophia explained quietly, putting up her arms to help him as he lifted the sling over her head, twisting to support the sleeping baby as Alphaeus slipped the burden over his own broad shoulders.

He adjusted the sling so that it fit more comfortably while Miryam tried her best to hide her amusement at the sight of a man with a baby sling. And apparently failed.

“If you breathe a word of this to my father,” he threatened, “I *will* hunt you down.”

“You are my hero,” said Sophia. It was mostly a joke, but not entirely, and Alphaeus went a little pink.

“Off with you then,” he said gruffly, “before I change my mind.”

They started up a long, winding hill, moving too quickly for speech until the others were out of sight and earshot. Just as Miryam’s body was reminding her of how far they’d already come and how little she’d had to eat, Sophia resumed a more comfortable pace. “Wouldn’t do to get *too* far ahead,” she said.

Miryam nodded. Although it was unlikely any robbers would bestir themselves to go after any but the richest prey in this heat, you never knew.

“Although it *was* nice not to have to hold back,” Sophia confessed, tucking a lock of her flaxen hair behind a flushed, damp ear. “That’s one thing I didn’t expect about motherhood—the way it forces you to slow down and be prudent. When you’re a girl, if you’re doing something you care about, you can afford to fall into it and let the rest of the world go by without you for a while. But mothers can’t afford to be too...*absorbed*, I guess is the word I’m looking for. Or maybe *out of balance*. Because your baby needs you

all the time, and if you're caught short, you don't have a chance to go back and fill in later. So you have to get to bed on time, or else you won't make it through the following day. You have to eat properly, so your milk supply doesn't fail. You can't concentrate on anything too hard, because if you do, you will miss seeing or hearing something your baby needs."

Sophia drew breath, about to go on, then widened her eyes and clapped her hands over her mouth. "Like me right now, too busy telling you what I think you ought to know to listen to what it is you really want to ask."

"No," said Miryam. "No, that's really interesting. I hadn't thought about it that way before. The way mothers have to learn how to take the long view and understand how each thing affects everything else, in keeping the *proportions* right. Like Wisdom in the book of Proverbs dwelling with prudence so that your happiness doesn't interfere with anyone else's, and theirs doesn't interfere with yours."

"Exactly," Sophia said with satisfaction. "You learn very quickly what it is you really need, because if you take too much, your baby doesn't get what he needs. But if you don't take enough, he ends up suffering, too, because sooner or later you'll collapse and get all grouchy and pathetic. Which is why I think Deborah had that title—the Mother of Israel. Climbing up Mt. Tabor so she could see to direct the battle was really just the physical expression of what she'd already done in her mind and her heart. She'd thought of Israel as a whole, in terms of what every tribe needed, not just hers; and not only at that moment, but into the future."

"Yes!," said Miryam, waving a bug away from her sweaty neck. "That's exactly what a mother does. She teaches you to how to get outside what you feel like at the moment and do the things that will make the most sense in the long run." Energized by her new discovery, she quickened her pace and began to gesture.

"Like that it's better to get out of bed and go to work even when you don't feel like it than it is to lie around and be comfortable because even though you can't see it, winter is coming and if you're not prepared, you and your family will starve. Which is exactly Deborah's strategy. She reminds the Israelites of truths bigger than they can see at that one moment. That when bad things happen and you feel stuck, you always have more choices than you know, and that if you turn to Him, God will help you find them.

Which is why Jael is called ‘*most blessed among women*’—because the choice God helped her find was completely outrageous, but she trusted Him enough to make it anyway.”

“Which is another thing that mothers do,” Sophia added. “They don’t just show you what your choices really are, but teach you that you are capable of making them. I’m not saying it right, but it’s something I’ve thought a lot about since Levi. Being a mother is impossibly hard, like I said before. It just never stops. It’s absolutely too much to bear—except you remember that your mother did it for you. And her mother did it for her. And on and on. I think one of the things mothers do is teach us that we can do hard things. That change is possible.” Her voice became breathy as the path under their feet steepened. “I think that’s a big part of Deborah’s mothering. She showed the Israelites the heroism...they’d had...all along.”

At the crest of the hill, they turned to check on the progress of the others. They were nowhere to be seen. By unspoken agreement, the two women squatted down to wait. Miryam strained her ears as her breath returned to normal, but heard nothing beyond the drone of insects. Wait! What was that? The high, thin bleat sounded again. “What kind of animal is that, do you think?” she asked, unable to identify the sound.

It came again, louder and angrier than before.

“That,” Sophia said with mingled affection and exasperation, “is my son reminding me to think of things as they really are for everyone.” She stood and brushed off her skirt. “I’m sorry. I never did answer your question. It’s like I’ve lost my mind...I can’t keep a thought in my head for five seconds before the next thing...”

A head bobbed into view--Alphaeus, moving fast, with Levi a red-faced ball of outrage bouncing against his chest.

“Maybe later?” she threw over her shoulder as she ran towards her boys.

Miryam waved and shook her head, smiling. She’d already gotten what she needed.

They camped that night at Dothan, the meadow where, more than a thousand years ago, a young and tactless Joseph adorned with the garment of his father’s favor had come seeking his brothers. Miryam lay listening to Simon recite the familiar story. She’d heard it dozens, maybe hundreds of times before, often in the same evocative

setting. Wrapped in the darkness, watched over by the spangle of ancient stars while a crackling, hissing fire painted the storyteller's face now with gold, now with black.

But this was the first time she'd listened with a mother's ears, and it was almost more than she could bear. There were so many other stories tucked inside the one Simon thought he was telling—the gift of marriage and family from one sister to another, a gift so huge it distorted every life it touched; the clumsy pain of fractured souls throwing themselves against the unyielding rectitude of eternity; the terrible beauty and order of the story they did not know they were weaving together.

It was too big to grasp; too resonant to fit into the clumsy box of words. So she set it aside, and prepared herself for sleep. But lying there in the darkness, the story pressed all the more insistently against her, the story about the brother who told too much truth for his own good or anyone else's, who shone with such relentless light.

A light bright enough to burn away every crumb of pretense and distraction. A light bright enough to show you things as they really are, in all their imperfection and messiness. The same light that swallowed up Abraham's love of his sons and his wives before the necessity of sacrifice; that blinded Isaac and savaged Jacob; that pierced the hearts of the wives and mothers witnessing the fearful price holiness exacts from those who embrace it and those, equally beloved, who do not.

Neither she nor her son would be exempt from that price. To be awakened to the light was also to be awakened to one's own nakedness, one's own *creatureliness*; to the fearful price paid by temporal creatures confronting the absolutes of eternity.

She could feel the cold fingers of fear reaching up through the dirt she lay on—the dirt out of which she had been made, and the dirt from which she was weaving a vessel meant to house the Son of God. But she pushed it back. Because the Lord was with her. Gabriel had told her so. The Lord was with her. He knew her. Like a loving mother, he knew what she could do, better than she knew herself. And he would not ask her to do what she could not. She clung to that promise—that she was not alone. That she would be enough. And then, finally, she slept.

It wouldn't hurt them. She tried to explain to the others with her, tried to show them that such loving light consumed only what was already dead, but they were too frightened to understand, too ashamed to believe what their eyes and her words were

telling them as she entered into the light of her son, into the everlasting burnings that were the channel of power and life and joy.

Determined to douse the relentless truth of his light, they tore him from her. They stripped him of his father's garment, but the light still shone. They beat him and covered him in filth, but the light still shone.

They looked at her, and saw what she had never tried to hide, what she never could hide. That she was one of them. A creature. Dust gathered temporarily to life by the sacraments of blood and water and God's holy breath. But only for a while.

And what was true of the mother must also be true of the son.

So they seized him. Her wonderful, perfect son. They laid their filthy hands on him because now they understood that although his light could not be hid, the vessel that held it—the body she had made for him—was a thing of this world, not the next. It could be broken. It could die. And then they sacrificed him as they sacrificed so many others, tearing apart the living threads of her blood and his father's breath. And she saw what she so far had not: her gift of life was also the gift of death and terrible pain.

But the Lord was with her. With her as she actually was. He knew her, and he knew what she was not, and he understood exactly what her motherhood would cost his son. So it would be enough. Please, God, let it be enough.

Chapter 17: First Witness

The plan had been to follow the Way of the Patriarchs south to Rama, where they would rest and celebrate the Sabbath in Uncle Josef and Aunt Sarah's comfortable home before making the final push to Hebron. But when they arrived, so late that they had to rouse the household to unlock the gate, the Josef who greeted them was almost unrecognizable. His dark hair was suddenly gray, his proud carriage stooped, and when he embraced his sons, his body trembled like an old man's. Aunt Sarah, who had been in poor health ever since the shock of Leontopolis, was dying.

They listened in stunned silence, numbed by exhaustion and grief. Then they went to bed. What else could they do?

Miryam woke before dawn, anxious and unrefreshed. There would be no trip to Hebron now. For weeks at the very least, more probably months. First, they would nurse. Then they would mourn. Then there would be business to settle and social structures to adjust.

Well, it was what it was. At least they had gotten here in time. And Miryam's duty was clear: making Aunt Sarah as comfortable as she could and lending the rest of the family whatever love and support they needed while they grieved the elegant, warm-hearted woman who had tried so hard to carry on. That was the work of women; the work the matriarchs had drummed into her as she had followed their footsteps south along the old road, imagining her way into the lives of the mothers who had gone before: Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, Deborah and Hannah and Ruth; women who had counted their own certainties cheap when laid against the power and surprise, the wrenching transformation, the terrible, surging, expansive delight that marks the guardians of life.

Miryam pinned her mind to that vision. She stretched big and long, then curled on her side, husbanding her strength, reaching deep inside herself for patience.

But found only a tight, expanding block of urgency. She needed to get to Juttah. Right now.

Except she had no way to do it. Her mind flashed to the afternoon Zippora had told them her story, the first time Miryam had sensed the terror and shame of needing—not wanting, not wishing for, but really needing—more than you had. Although she had felt sorry for her new friend, Miryam realized with a stab of shame that her kindness had fallen short of true compassion. She hadn't allowed herself to consider that, notwithstanding her family's royal legacy and Elisheva and Zakharya's privileged positions, she, too, belonged to the tribe of *anawim*.

She knew it now. She had been given a task she couldn't begin to accomplish. For one thing, she was physically exhausted. For another, no respectable woman would expose herself by traveling such a distance alone. Not only would it invite the kind of violent attack that had killed her father, but even worse, the loss of her virtue, a loss too profound to be absorbed by the bonds of village society. And then where would she and her child be?

No. She couldn't go alone. Perhaps she could find someone willing to take her. Not her cousins, of course. A friend of the family? A trusted servant? But who would be trustworthy enough? And what other women could go with her? It was the dilemma she had faced in Nazareth, and she felt no closer to resolving it now than she had then. Perhaps it was a matter of waiting...

Now. You must go now.

The command was so direct it galvanized her into movement. She sat up, drew on her tunic, and made her way out of the sleeping room.

You'll need food and water.

She went to the kitchen area, found a half-full wineskin which she topped off with water from the rain barrel before slinging it across her shoulder, tied a couple of handfuls of roasted green wheat into her girdle, then went to relieve herself. When she was done, she turned back toward the house.

Now, she was commanded.

She stood stock-still. But the others...they would worry...

Now.

Perhaps there was a party passing through the village that she was to join. Without giving herself time to think, she almost ran toward the square in front of the spring. But when she got there, the pearly pre-dawn light showed nothing but an expanse of empty beaten earth beneath the great oak tree. The sleeping village was as silent as a tomb. She strained for a sign--the clink of bridle or hoof, a tell-tale cloud of dust on the horizon, the small rustle of an animal sent to show her the path she should take. But there was nothing. She hesitated, feeling foolish and uncertain.

Put one foot in front of the other.

I can't exactly walk there by myself, she grumped.

You are not by yourself, the voice reminded her. *Now, go.*

Go? Miryam didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Her feet were lumps of red meat. She was so exhausted she could barely hold herself upright, any reserves long since consumed by the physical and, yes, spiritual rigors of the last few days. Wherever they went, Simon's recitation followed, the words so clear and true that Miryam trembled newborn at their passing. After Dothan there had been Shechem, the place of choosing where Joshua stood Israel on the mountains of blessing and cursing; where Jacob wrestled a new being called "Israel" from the Lord and where, centuries later, the Ten Tribes had turned away from Judah and begun their long journey into exile. Next was Shiloh, where barren Hannah's prayers for a son to give the Lord had ended one priestly line and founded another. And finally, late yesterday afternoon, Rama itself, the place of the womb, where Rachel gave her life to bring forth the last of Israel's Twelve Tribes; where Deborah, under the welcoming arms of her green tree, showed the Twelve the common purpose that could make them One; where Hannah's son Samuel had filled the hand of their king with the righteousness that is deliverance; where Rachel wept and waited for the children her Lord had promised would return.

The journey had been long and hard with truth. And the nights had been no better.

They'd come to her one by one, the matriarchs whose steps she followed, holding her in soft old arms smelling of milk and garden vegetables as the stories Simon had begun unscrolled more fully before her, their unwavering gazes receiving it all—good and bad, strange and dear—without fear or prejudice. They came to teach her what

she'd been struggling toward ever since that afternoon she'd come upon Cleo's poor mangled lamb: that the price of new life was the death of the possibilities it replaced.

Now, swaying a little on her blistered, bloody feet, Miryam reached for strength and found only emptiness. Her mind felt pummeled, bruised, and disoriented. Her body seemed fragile and porous as a dried reed, sucked dry of the juices of life. For the first time in her life, the possibility of death seemed real.

With a last, convulsive effort, she cracked open her heart. *I believe. Help thou my unbelief.*

The answer came immediately. *When you are hungry, eat. When you are thirsty, drink. But you must go now.*

She took a swallow of wine. She ate a handful of wheat. She picked up one sore foot and put it down. She did it again. And again. It was so simple, really, now the decision had been made. All she had to do was keep going, keep moving along the path one step at a time, and when it was done, she would be with the people who loved her.

Because it was so simple, because she had only to endure—not consider another person or perspective, nor open her mind and heart to change, only put one foot in front of the other—Miryam allowed herself an unheard-of luxury. She turned her mind loose and let it play.

She drifted dreamily back and forth through time as the eastern horizon paled, warmed, and finally burst forth in an ecstasy of gold and saffron. The sun's rays raced toward her, transforming a dew-drenched spider's web at her elbow into a sparkling diadem of diamond and topaz, and she remembered Salome calling frantically to hurry and come help her put on the jeweled lace that she'd found in the garden. And her sister's utter devastation a moment later when the light moved on and her jeweled lace turned out to be nothing more than gray drifts of cobweb.

The sun rose higher. Miryam felt its hot tongue licking at her left shoulder and the crown of her head. Almost as soon as she'd noticed, though, a cloud passed over the sun. A dragonfly as blue as the brilliant sky darted past her cheek, and she remembered jumping off the tallest part of the stone terrace behind their house with Salome, the two

of them convinced that if they just jumped a little higher that sky would rub off on them like it had on the dragonflies, and they'd be flying, too.

Miryam's stomach growled so noisily that she forgot to watch where she was going. Her foot came down on something hard and round. She danced backward, but as she went whatever it was gave way with a loud *crack!* and skated out from under her off-balance leg. *Not a tortoise, please don't let me have killed a tortoise,* she prayed, flailing and swooping back and forth like a giant disoriented bat until her other foot smashed down on another crackly thing and *smack! thud!* she was down.

Miryam lay sprawled across the road, catching her breath and deciding whether or not she was hurt. She didn't think she was. Just surprised. And very, very tired. She lay there for a moment, surrendering the weight and responsibility of her body to the earth that held her.

Something blew by her cheek, buzzing angrily. Instinctively, she clapped a hand over her ear to block the echo vibrating so unpleasantly through her ear. More air. More buzzing. The next thing she knew, she was scrambling backward on all fours, desperate to get away from the wasp's nest she'd apparently stumbled over. When her vision cleared, however, what she saw was not the torn gray paper of a nest, but the dull red globes of...*pomegranates?* She blinked. What on earth were an armful of pomegranates doing strewn across the road out here in the middle of nowhere?

The wasps didn't answer, just bobbed in a happy daze amidst the heavy scent of fermenting juice. Foliage rustled, then—*thud!*

Miryam was on her feet, her hands rigid claws ready to attack by the time her brain assembled the pieces. It had not been a footstep, just another overripe fruit falling from the pomegranate tree she hadn't thought to look for but which, now she had the wit to look, was just a child-sized hop from the path. She felt like a fool. She'd been so busy protecting her poor, fragile little self that she'd missed the real truth of what was going on around her. Like how far she'd actually come. And how many hours she had left until dark.

Take. Eat.

What?

Take. Eat.

It occurred to Miryam that her mind was not working as well as it usually did.

Stand up.

She struggled to her feet. By the time she got there, she was panting and light-headed.

Walk over to the tree.

She stumbled toward it.

Pick a pomegranate.

She lifted her arm, but the air was so heavy she had to use her other arm to support it. Her fingers closed around the warm, round fruit. A heart. That's what it really was. A warm, red heart. She couldn't see it properly. Her head was spinning and she thought she might be sick. She pressed in against the leaves and scratchy branches of the tree and they held her up. She was still holding the fruit, so ripe it must have released into her hands without her even noticing.

Bite it open.

She did. Bitterness coated the inside of her mouth, polishing her teeth and butting hard against the muscles of her throat. She choked and her body twisted. The leathery clot of rind flew out of her mouth, but it seemed to take every last drop of spit with it. Her mouth felt as arid and sterile the desert itself.

The weight in her hands pulled her attention to the pomegranate she still held. Through the mouth-sized gap of missing rind, rows of sweet juicy seeds the color of blood winked in the afternoon sun. She bent her head, and took them in her mouth.

Tart, sweet, refreshing liquid burst across her tongue, teasing open her parched throat. She buried her head in the fruit, sucking up its fleshy seeds like a greedy animal, feeling their juice flow through her body, staining her tired, broken flesh with the flash and fire of life.

When the first one was done, she snatched another. Her fingers tore off its crown and peeled back the rind, and again she gorged, pausing only long enough to discard the

bitter white pith. By the time she'd finished her third, her mind had cleared enough to remember the grain in her sash and the swallow or two of water that remained in her gourd.

She looked around for somewhere to eat it. The path crested perhaps fifty feet ahead of her before turning abruptly to the right to avoid a steep outcropping of rock that perched like a huge stone table over the valley to her left. It was the perfect vantage point. Now all she had to do was get there. She tucked three more pomegranates into her sash for later, mumbled the prayer of thanksgiving she'd been too far gone to remember earlier, and then pointed herself toward the ledge where she would eat. Despite the pomegranates, her body was so depleted that she lurched rather than walked toward her goal. If it hadn't been for an obliging topple of rock fall that formed a rough sort of ladder, she wouldn't have had the strength to climb its vertical seams. As it was, when she finally managed to pull and swing and drag herself onto the flat ledge on top, she lay sprawled face down for several minutes waiting for the haze in her eyes and the pounding in her ears to recede before risking the extra effort of sitting up.

How on earth was she going to...NO! She quashed the thought. She didn't have to think about that. It wasn't her responsibility. All she had to do was obey the instructions she'd been given. She could leave the rest to the Lord.

It was the feather touch of some insect on her ankle that roused her from her stupor. She startled, heard the gourd she wore at her waist smack hard against the rock, and sat up, her heart in her mouth. Had she split it? Or knocked its stopper loose? Her eyes stung. It had been so hard to save those last few mouthfuls, and now if she had lost them...

But the gourd looked fine. What's more, it felt nearly full. She stared at the gourd in her pomegranate-stained hands and shook it again. It was full. She pulled the stopper out with her teeth. Water winked up at her. But she had drunk it. She had drunk nearly the whole thing. She knew she had. She raised it to her lips and tipped it ever so slightly. Water, cool and sweet, spilled into her mouth.

She stoppered it carefully and laid it carefully at her side. Her hands were shaking, but not from weakness. From joy. Even before she saw what the rocks had

hidden. Even before the miracle of Herod's white stone, wavering slightly in the heat, ten miles or maybe twelve to the *north*.

She was past Jerusalem. She'd walked right on by, and hadn't even known. She spun around, peering south. And saw Hebron, barely an hour's journey on. She had done it. Or the Lord had. Or his angels. She clapped her hands to her mouth. Her red hands, stained this time not with the pain of her mother's death, but with the promise of fruitfulness and strength. With the lifeblood of a fruit the dead land could not contain.

It rose from her toes to the crown of her head, the joy that must be shouted or sung or danced. She whirled and twirled like a curl of dust dancing toward the light, arms raised to the God who had brought her such marvelous gifts. Water and safety. Food and strength. The extravagant surprise of rescue, of clouds just big enough to shade her way, of transformation renewing the fraying threads of hope.

They were there, waiting for her. Miryam hadn't dared believe it before. And now she had no need to believe, because she knew. She saw. They were lifting their heads, feeling the call of a creature in need, bustling around to prepare for its coming, Elisheva hurrying to make a nourishing meal while Zakharya threw open the gate and prepared torches to light the way of their unexpected visitor. Except that, as she watched, the faces she knew became those of Sarah and Abraham, and their home the tent that became a tabernacle shaded by the cloud of heaven, open on every side, lit by the oil of purity, nourished by the bread of a mother's love.

That was the place she belonged. That was the place she needed to be. Forgetting her weariness, Miryam leapt from stone to stone as nimbly as a mountain goat, returning to the path that would bring her home. Her feet kissed packed earth, and she began to run.

She wouldn't be able to tell them why she had come. There could be no meaningful glance, no secret smile to calm the worry that her presence would bring them. But God would sustain them. As He had sustained her. There was no place for fear. Only the strength and power of faith, bearing her towards the people who loved her as straight and true as God's own arrow.

She knew she was there even before her eyes picked out the lines of the house snuggled beneath the light-spangled copse of trees. Peace, sweet as apricots and thick as

honey, swept toward her along the terracing that curved from the road to the little dwelling. She laughed aloud as she spied the first of Zakharya's torches, thrust out at an awkward angle between the rocks. The laughter thickened to tears as a shadow beneath the largest of the trees bulged and lengthened into a stout, gray-haired man rising heavily to his feet. He lifted an arm toward the open gate in a gesture of welcome, then stiffened, his forehead twisted in a scowl of concentration as he looked again. His face blazed with sudden joy as he recognized her, then they were both running, and she was being crushed against his soft old chest.

He didn't say anything, apparently too overcome by his emotions to speak.

"Is everything all right?" she finally asked. "Is Elisheva..."

He grinned at her, mopping at his eyes, took her arm, and escorted her formally through the gate and into the courtyard, where Miryam found herself greeted by the scent of hot cardamom seed. Her eyes filled. "Elisheva?" she called.

Uncle Zakharya took her gently by the shoulders, turned her toward the stairs leading to an upper chamber, and gave her a gentle push.

Miryam ran up them, as lightly as if she'd just woken from a deep and nourishing sleep. She paused at the threshold to give her eyes time to adjust to the darkness of the interior. "Elisheva?" she said again, more softly as she realized her aunt must be resting. "Peace be upon you." She heard herself add what she had not planned to say. "And upon the sacred fruit of your womb."

Cloth rustled as Elisheva sat up and pushed back the curtain that screened her sleeping quarters from the heat of the day. Light flooded in, picking out the round swell of her stomach.

Miryam had known her aunt was pregnant, as surely as she knew her own hands and feet. But the sight of that hard, round belly, the physical manifestation of her knowledge, filled her with greater joy and peace than she had ever known. She threw herself into her aunt's outstretched arms. "You good woman," she sobbed. "You good, good woman. How the Lord loves you. How grateful He is that you have made yourself a worthy vessel for the son you carry—the last son of the covenant." The words poured

out of her, words she hadn't known, but words as true and strong as the swell of Elizabeth's belly pressed against hers.

The belly jumped.

Elisheva laughed, her voice ringing out with a shout of the same joy that sang through Miryam. "And you," she said, her mouth making perfume of the power that raced back and forth between them. "*You are blessed.*"

Miryam had forgotten. She had actually forgotten her own secret in the face of her delight for Elisheva. She turned away, knowing as she did so that Elisheva would misinterpret the gesture, that it would shadow the joy she surely deserved, but it didn't matter, it could not be allowed to matter, because the Lord had forbidden her to tell.

She smelled the graceful, soothing scent of gardenia. Then Elisheva's hands were on her cheek, as soft and comforting as they had always been, and they were turning her to face her aunt's violet eyes. *Help me!* Miryam prayed. *Help me not to betray what I mustn't!*

"You are blessed," Elisheva said, the music of her voice as steady as the light that shone from her lovely eyes, "among all the women of the earth."

There was something about the way her aunt said it that drew special attention to her words. It took Miryam a moment to realize what it was. Elisheva was not speaking in the everyday tongue of Aramaic, but in Hebrew, the lovely poetic language of Scripture.

Only then did Miryam really hear the words. The words of Deborah's song to Jael, the song that had called her "*blessed among women,*" the song that had called to her, Miryam, from the peaks of Mt. Tabor where two women had once labored to deliver Israel from her enemies.

Time stopped. Everything stopped. Miryam clung to those words, wondering if she could dare to hope...

"And blessed," Elisheva continued deliberately, "is the fruit of thy womb."

She was quoting from the covenant blessings Moses promised to the obedient in Deuteronomy 28, the same blessings the tribes called to Shechem from Mt. Gerizim after

they crossed into the Promised Land. Except—hadn't Moses said *body*? The fruit of thy *body*?

But Elisheva had said *womb*.

The awful weight dropped away. Easy as that. With one word, by the shaping of one breath, relief had come.

And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

And after relief, joy. The baby Miryam carried, the baby for whose sake she had made this hard journey, the baby who was going to break Yusuf's heart—He was the *Lord*. And so it was all worth it. She'd known that. Or tried to. But to have someone else say it, right out loud—someone like Elisheva, whose love and truth shone out around her like one of Salome's auras...But there was more. Still, there was more.

For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

Elisheva was a prophetess, one filled with the Spirit of the Lord. As was her unborn son. And He of whom they prophesied was her son.

It hadn't even occurred to her that that would be one of the ways he was known: Jesus, son of Miryam. It was an awful realization. She had no right. It had all been a gift. She had done nothing of herself to deserve...

Elisheva broke into her thoughts again:

And blessed is she that believed: for the Lord will fulfill His words.

Elisheva was telling her it was going to be all right. Everything was going to work out the way the Lord had promised. But she was telling her more. That her burden was *real*. That the reassurance she'd secretly, guiltily yearned for was not a weakness, but a need. That what was important, what needed to be remembered about what was happening was not how hard it was for someone as weak and imperfect as she to be an instrument in the Lord's hand, but the strength of the love that had bent her to this task.

The joy came again, the joy she had felt on the rock when she had realized how far the Lord had brought her, the joy that had to be sung and danced. And, once again, they were with her, all of them—Imma and Sarah and Rachel, Rebekah and Asenath and

Hannah and Deborah, all the Mothers who had labored to bring forth God's children into the world and nourished and strengthened them with all the goodness God had helped them find, teaching her the new song of the joy they shared:

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
and my spirit has found gladness in God my Savior:
Because He has regarded the low estate of His handmaid--
For, look! Henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
Because He that is mighty has done great things for me,
and Holy is His name,
and His mercy is from generation to generation
on those who fear Him
He stretched out His mighty arm
and scattered the proud people with all their plans.
He brings down mighty kings from their thrones
and lifts up the lowly.
He fills the hungry with good things
and sends the rich away with empty hands.
He has helped His servant Israel
in remembrance of His mercy,
as He spoke unto our fathers,
to Abraham and his posterity forever.*

Chapter 18: Second Witnesses

I was lying down one beautiful afternoon a few weeks before the beginning of the fall festivals. The excuse I had ready, should anyone come calling, was that I was in my seventh month and needed the rest. But that was not the real reason I had stretched out on my mat. Our son was always especially active in the hour before evening prayer, and I loved watching for the bumps and waves that he made as he played in my stomach.

I was trying to decide whether or not it was time to tell Zebdi that we were going to have a boy—although he accepted that I saw colors in theory, he was squeamish about specific reports—when I heard the high voices of children. The voices grew louder. I heard steps outside our gate, a deep voice, and sudden, obedient silence. A sharp rap sounded on our door. Intrigued, I straightened my tunic, tied on my headcloth, and went to see who it could be.

My heart leaped when I saw Yusuf's four boys. I gave a screech of delight and threw my arms around them, and the comfortable babble resumed. They smelled of Nazareth, of sun and lizards and rock dust, and a wave of warm, liquid love gushed through me so I had to wipe at my eyes like some ridiculous old woman. "It's you! It's you! It's you!" I sang. "I can't believe you are here! I've missed you all so much!" I looked for Yusuf and found him standing to one side, holding the halter of a donkey with Abigail on top. I swooped her down and covered her with kisses. She giggled, twisting and straining against my belly as she tried to get away. The baby, getting into the spirit of things, gave a couple of hard kicks, and Abigail froze.

"Did I hurt it?" she whispered, terrified.

"Not at all," I reassured her as I set her on her feet. "That's just his way of saying hello to his favorite girl cousin."

"How can you tell it's a boy?" Jude wanted to know.

"You can't," Simeon scoffed. "Not til it's born."

Jude looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “Does Aunt Salome tell stories?” he whispered loudly to the brother next to him.

“She wasn’t really telling a story,” Yakov said. “It was more of a joke. Right, Salome?”

I thought it prudent to change the subject. “I don’t know where my manners are. Come in! Come in! I wish I’d known you were coming—I would have had a meal all ready. Look—there’s water there. You get yourselves cleaned up and I’ll just run down to the pier and tell Zebdi to come home and bring Jonas and Devorah, we have guests.”

“I’ll go,” Yusuf instantly. “There’s something I’d like to discuss with him and Jonas. And you should be resting.” He glanced sideways at my belly in an unconscious duplication of his son. “We shouldn’t have come. I’d forgotten...I mean, I wasn’t thinking...”

That vagueness was unlike Yusuf. I gave him a sharp look, and saw lines of pain and fatigue etched across his forehead and between his mouth and nose, and white threads in his beard and hair. He looked fifteen years older than he had at our wedding. “What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“Nothing,” he said. “Everything’s just fine.” But he couldn’t meet my eyes.

“Is it Miryam?” I said, fear hard in my throat.

He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he had himself under control. “The last I heard, she was happy and healthy and having a good visit with your Aunt Elisheva, as I’m sure you’ve heard from Alphaeus and Sophia.”

I nodded. “They told me all about it when they got home last week. Isn’t it lucky they decided to take Levi when they did? They would have been heartbroken if Aunt Sarah had died without meeting him.”

He nodded politely, but it was clear his mind was somewhere else. Then I remembered. Sometimes I was such a fool. “We were so sorry to hear of Esther’s passing,” I said. “She was a great lady. You must miss her very much.”

“Thank you. We miss her, of course, but she was ready to go so that makes it easier.” He looked past me to where the boys were gathered around the cistern. “Boys,

I'm going down to the lake to find your Uncle Zebdi and Uncle Jonas for evening prayers. Do you want to come?"

Apparently they did.

I felt a dry little hand sneak into mine. "Is it all right if I stay here with Aunt Salome?" Abigail asked.

"Of course it is," I said, putting an arm around her narrow little shoulders. "But only if you promise to help me get some supper on."

"I promise!" she said, her face shining. Abigail loved to cook.

"Well, that's all right then," I told Yusuf. "You and the boys go and have a good time, and we'll have some hot food waiting when you get back. Tell Jonas to come too, and to bring Devorah and the baby."

"Thank you, Salome," he said. "I am sorry to put you to all this trouble."

"Cooking with Abigail is never trouble," I said. "I'm just so grateful to have you all here. Now, hurry up, or you'll miss prayers."

Abigail and I watched them go. "All right," I said. "Bread first. Then I think there might be a chicken running around here somewhere."

Abigail helped me spread out the sheepskin underneath the hand mill. She was taller than when I'd seen her last, and I suddenly realized she was older now than I had been when we left Nazareth. Almost as old as Miriam had been.

We knelt across from each other and took turns pushing and pulling the wooden handle, forcing the top millstone to scrape heavily across its mate and grind the grain. I threw another handful of grain in the hole at the top as the ground flour spilled out on to the skin. "This is my least favorite chore," I said. "It's so nice to have someone to do it with."

Abigail ignored my small talk. "You really do know your baby is a boy, don't you?" she wanted to know.

The question surprised me. "Yes, I suppose I do," I said after a short pause.

She nodded. I could see little beads of sweat forming on her nose and the top of her flushed cheeks as her thin arms strained to turn the wheel. "Miryam told me about your colors," she said.

"She did?"

Abigail nodded. "She told me after I told her that sometimes, if I looked hard, I could see sparks coming out of other people. But that's not the same as seeing colors."

We pushed and pulled and heaved for a minute.

"I think I'm glad I don't," she said.

"See colors, you mean?"

She nodded, her eyes on the millstone. "I don't like keeping secrets."

"Why don't you throw in some more wheat?" I suggested.

It was her turn to look surprised. But she did as I asked, scooping up a handful of grain from the jar between us and throwing it at the hole in the top of the mill. Some of it went in.

"It must be really hard when you see things but you can't talk about them," she said.

I thought at first she was talking about her clumsy throw, and cast around for a not-too-heartily reassuring remark. But then I looked again at her pinched little face, and realized she was carrying a burden much heavier than a little scattered grain.

"Sometimes it is," I agreed. "But it's gotten easier as I've gotten older. Partly because I've taught myself not to look when it's really none of my business."

She nodded.

I threw some more grain in.

"Aunt Naomi and Uncle Cleo moved back to Bethlehem after Safta Esther died," she said.

This was news to me.

“They said it was because Aunt Naomi missed her family, and because Cleo wasn’t getting the right kind of jobs in Zippori.”

Cleo was both a talented builder of mosaics and an observant Jew. From time to time, the second got in the way of the first. Judging from the goings-on in Herod’s newest city, it was all too easy to imagine Cleo not finding the “right kind” of mosaic jobs there.

“That’s a lot of changes for your family,” I said.

She nodded.

“When did they go?”

“That’s where we’ve been,” she said. “Helping them move.”

“You’ve gone all the way to Bethlehem and back?” I asked, astonished. No wonder Yusuf looked like death warmed over.

She nodded.

We ground another handful of wheat.

“What I was wondering...” she said, still not looking at me. Then she stopped. Grinding as well as talking. She sat there staring down at her hands, red and angry-looking from all the milling.

I threw in another handful of grain, and milled it. Then another. And another.

I got to my feet, knocked the last of the flour from the mill, then gathered up the skin and transferred the flour to my kneading board. I added salt, water, honey, and the lump of dough I’d saved from the morning’s bread, pleased to see it was larger than I remembered. The dough probably wouldn’t have enough time to finish rising before the men came home, but the bigger the starter the more leaven could get to work. When it was as smooth and elastic as I could make it, I tossed a towel over the dough and scooped up one last handful of grain in the metal sifter Uncle Yosef had given us for our wedding.

“Do you want to help me catch the chicken?” I asked the back of the head and hunched shoulders that was all Abigail would let me see.

She shook her head.

Whatever it was, she would tell me when she was ready.

I went out to the yard, shaking the grain against the metal mesh until the chickens came running. I poured out the grain and eyed them as they ate. I'd been saving the chickens—all except the rooster and the best layer—for the celebration after our baby was born. But guests deserved something more than our usual supper of barley bread and sardines. And, really, which mattered more? To feed our hungry, battered guests? Or put on a good show for the neighborhood after the baby came?

I knew the answer. I chose my moment, then pounced on the hen that had stopped laying. The trick is to get them by their feet. Chickens get much quieter when they're upside down. I took it to Zebdi's workbench and slipped its head in a loop of old fishnet. The Law teaches us that animals should be sacrificed as quickly and painlessly as possible, by depriving them of the blood and breath of life. I picked up my hatchet and struck off its head, then tied its feet into the noose and hung it to drain, as the Torah explicitly forbids consuming the blood that provides life to beasts and fowls.

I had only planned to kill one chicken. But boys that age were hungry. *People matter more than plans*, I told myself as I waded back into the mess of chickens. The Lord would no doubt provide for the birth feast. And if He didn't—I grabbed the second-worst layer—well, then, He didn't. Life would go on.

I stirred up the fire and set a pot of water on to heat while the second bird drained. I scrubbed off the workbench, then, when the water was ready, picked up the carcasses by their feet and dipped them in the hot water one at a time, swishing them around to loosen their feathers. I carried the carcasses back to where Abigail huddled and set to work plucking them.

I had finished the first and was nearly done with the second when Abigail finally stirred.

"I want you to look at me," she said, pulling herself awkwardly to her feet.

"All right," I said. I set the chicken aside and gave her my full attention.

She stood with her legs spread apart and her arms stretched out to either side. He small body was so tense I wondered that her lungs had room to breathe. “Now, tell me exactly what you see,” she instructed.

“I see a very lovely young girl,” I said obediently.

“No! Not like that. I want you to *really look*.”

I looked harder.

“Now what do you see?”

“I see someone I love,” I said. “Someone with dry skin and muscles that don’t always work, who has the bravest, truest heart of anyone I know. I see someone...”

I hesitated.

“*Say it!*” she demanded. “All of it! Whatever you see!”

“I see someone who I think might be... lonely.” I folded my lips over that last word, as if that would dull the cut of its truth.

She nodded, a little impatiently. “What else?”

“What else?”

She stamped her foot. “What else do you *see*?”

I didn’t understand what it was she wanted from me. I went back over our conversation, looking for clues. “Ohhh,” I realized at last. “You want me to look for your *colors*.”

She nodded, biting her lip so she wouldn’t cry.

“Sweetie, I know those by heart,” I said, gathering her up in my arms. “White and gold, purity and virtue, with some purple...”

“No,” she said, shaking me off. “That’s not what I mean. Not those kind of colors. The other kind.”

I looked at her helplessly.

“The *secret* kind,” she practically hissed.

Then, finally, I really did understand. “That’s not the way they work,” I said. “The colors don’t show me what someone *knows* or what they’ve *done*. They’re a reflection of the way you walk through life.” I tried an example. “If you’re the kind of person who expects to be a helper, your colors will be different than someone who expects other people to help them.”

Her face fell. “Oh,” she said. “That’s not what I thought.” She shrugged and tried to smile at me, but she had to stretch her eyes so she wouldn’t cry.

I pretended not to notice as I removed the last few feathers. “Do you think you could stir up the fire for me?” I asked her as I took the chickens back to the worktable to trim and eviscerate them. “And maybe change the water in the pot?”

It helps to have something to do. By the time the water was boiling, she looked like her old self.

“Do you and the boys like sumac?” I asked as I added the chicken to the pot. “Or is it too spicy?”

“No!” she said, perking up a little. “We love it.”

I nodded. “I think we might even have some pine nuts upstairs,” I said, holding out my hand. “Let’s go look.”

“I love pine nuts!” she said.

“I know,” I said, brushing my palm across her cheek. “I’ve been saving them just for you.”

We found everything we needed without too much difficulty, and returned to the courtyard, where she peeled the onions and I chopped them. I let her be the one to pour the precious oil into the cook pan and set it over the fire. When the oil began to shimmer, I nodded to her to dump in the onions, and I began to stir. “Did something happen in Bethlehem that bothered you?” I asked.

She went rigid.

“It’s all right,” I said. “You don’t need to tell me if you don’t want to. But sometimes it helps to just talk things out. Here, could you stir this for me?”

She took the ladle and poked at the onions, biting her lip.

“What if I’m not sure?” she said.

“Push those over to the side so I can brown the pine nuts a little. Let me see if I understand. Something happened in Bethlehem that made you think something, but you’re not sure if it’s true or not?”

She nodded.

“So it feels a little like cheating to say it right out loud without someone else saying it first.”

She nodded again.

“I think you’re right to be careful about talking about something that may or may not be true,” I said. I reached for the little jar of sumac and sprinkled some on the onions. “How much? Like that?”

“Maybe a little more,” she said.

I added some more, gave it all a good stir, and pushed the whole thing back to one side. “On the other hand,” I said as I speared the stewing chickens with a fork and added them to the cooking surface, “I don’t think it’s *ever* wrong to have a question about something.”

“You don’t?” she said.

“Not *ever*,” I said firmly as I broke up the chicken into pieces. “In fact, I think nothing makes the Lord happier than a good questioner.”

“You do?”

I put down my fork and looked her straight in the eye. “It’s how He made us,” I said. “It’s how we’re different from other animals. He gave us a brain that doesn’t only understand what already is, but can wonder and imagine about what could be. Yes, He wants us to obey His commandments. But that’s not all. He wants us to *grow* and become more than we already are. And the only way to do that is by having questions and doing what’s necessary to get them answered.”

She stared at me for a minute, chewing her lip.

“If whatever is bothering you is a question, then I think you should find someone that you think can help you answer it,” I said, turning back to the browning chicken pieces. “That could be me, or one of your brothers, or your Abba, or even the Lord. It might feel uncomfortable, even scary, because new things always do. But that doesn’t mean that they’re wrong. Just unfamiliar.”

I took the pan from the fire, and covered it with a towel. Then I went to check on the dough. To my surprise, it had almost finished rising. I looked at the sun, which was just beginning to dip below the horizon. “Having your company has made the time go too fast!” I said. “I better fire up the oven or the boys will be back before we’re ready for them.”

“We were going to get her,” Abigail said in a rush. “Abba didn’t tell us that’s what we were doing, but it was.”

“Who?”

She couldn’t bring herself to say. I cast around. “*Miryam?* You were going to get *Miryam?*”

She nodded, so relieved that someone had finally said it that the rest came pouring out. “Safta Esther and Uncle Cleo and Aunt Naomi kept telling him it was time to bring her to his house, but he’d always say not yet, that the betrothal had happened too fast, and he wanted to give her enough time to be able to make a real choice, especially since the five of us were such a burden.”

She saw the expression on my face. “Not in front of us,” she said hastily. “He didn’t say *any* of this in front of us. Besides, we knew she loved us. We didn’t feel bad. Just impatient. But he kept saying he didn’t think it was time.”

I nodded to show I was listening, and stuck my hand in the oven. Nearly ready. I fetched the dough and the two of us squatted down and began shaping it into flat, round loaves.

“Safta said he’d almost made up his mind to ask her when Miryam told him about wanting to go see Elisheva. So then he got all sad because he thought that meant she didn’t want to live with us, but Safta said she hadn’t raised him to be a fool, and that the real reason Miryam wanted to go was because she hadn’t bled, and she was worried

maybe she was barren and he didn't want her, and that what else was she supposed to think when Abba was too busy being patient and righteous to let her know how he felt. So then Abba was going to go after her, but then Safta got sick. And then we had to wait until she died..." She heard what she said and put her hand over her mouth.

"It's all right," I said, patting the flat bread to bake on the curved outer surface of the oven. "I know you didn't mean it the way it sounded. So you think that your Abba was planning to take you to Juttah to bring Miryam back with you, until something happened in Bethlehem that changed his mind?"

"Not in Bethlehem," she corrected me. "Before that. In Rama, when we stayed with Uncle Josef."

"Uncle Josef did something that made your Abba change his mind?"

She looked uncertain. "It all seemed all right until Uncle Simon got there."

"Uncle Simon came to see Uncle Josef while you were there? Was Aunt Rachel with him?"

She shook her head. "No, she stayed home. It was just Uncle Simon. He said he and Aunt Rachel had visited Aunt Elisheva and Uncle Zakharya in Juttah, and they'd seen Miryam, too, and that he had to talk to Abba and Uncle Josef right away. They went away into his office, Uncle Cleo too, and when they came out, Abba told us to hurry and get ready, that we were going home, and that Uncle Josef would send other people to help Uncle Cleo and Aunt Naomi finish moving. But then, instead of taking us home, he brought us here, and none of it makes any sense. Do you know what happened?"

I heard voices and footsteps. "Not yet," I told Abigail. I gave her a quick hug and whispered into her hair, "But give me a little time, and we'll see."

It was a wonderful meal, if I do say so myself, and by the time it was over, even Yusuf's eyes had lost some of their dullness. The children, their bellies full to bursting with the rich food, had gotten quieter and quieter, and now leaned against each other like a litter of tired puppies. Jonas stood up abruptly, holding his baby daughter at arm's length. She was only nine months old, but was larger than some three-year-olds I knew. "The baby needs changing," he said with distaste.

Devorah rolled her eyes at me but got heavily to her feet. She hitched her sleeping toddler, whom the village children referred to affectionately as “the Hippopotamus,” onto one shoulder, and held out her other arm for the baby.

“C’mon, cousins,” I said, pushing myself to my feet. “Let’s find you a place to sleep inside.”

Flushed and heavy-eyed, Abigail put her arms up to me. Yusuf started to protest, but I shook my head at him. “I’m used to Jonas’s beasts,” I told him, scooping up the little girl. “Compared to them, Abigail is nothing but thistledown, aren’t you, princess?”

It took a few minutes to distribute mats and blankets and make sure the children had all used the little clay pot. By the time Devorah and I returned, Yusuf was nearing the end of the story Abigail had told me that afternoon.

“Simon and Josef are beside themselves,” he was telling the men. “She was under their protection when it happened.”

“Who was?” I asked.

There was a short, pained silence.

“Yusuf, I know you want to protect her,” Jonas said. “But we are her family, and this will touch all of us. Salome and Devorah needs to know.”

Yusuf passed his hand over his eyes in the gesture I had noticed earlier that afternoon. “Yes, of course,” he said. “It’s just—I can’t believe this is really happening. I keep telling myself that this will all turn out to have been a terrible mistake. It’s time I faced the fact that this situation is going to affect many lives besides mine and Miryam’s.”

He turned to me, his eyes so full of compassion that I braced myself for something really, really bad.

“Do you want the good news, or the bad news?” he said, sounding like the old joke.

“The good news, I guess.”

“Zakharya and Elisheva are expecting a child.”

“*What?*” I exclaimed. Devorah and I threw our arms around each other and shouted with laughter. The temple was saved! The Priesthood was saved! Joy broke over us as clear and bracing as the first rains of winter. After all the years of pain and despair, God had once again condescended to make a miracle for His children, as He had for Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah of old. It was almost too good to be true.

But the men only sat there, avoiding our eyes.

Devorah and I looked at each other. Something cold crawled through my stomach.

“What? What could possibly be so awful that it has wiped away all joy, all gratitude for such a miracle?” I demanded.

Yusuf’s head was bent. Without looking up, he added. “So is Miryam.”

I didn’t understand at first. “So is Miryam *what?*” I said. “So joyful? So forgetful? So what?”

“So is Miryam expecting a child.”

I stared at him, my mouth open. “She can’t be. There must be some mistake.”

“There’s no mistake. Rachel and Simon saw her themselves. And though she would not discuss it with them, neither did she deny it.”

I stared at him, trying to understand. “But Miryam would *never...*” Unless, of course, she hadn’t had a choice. My eyes narrowed and I hurled myself at Yusuf. “How could you? How *could* you? My beautiful, perfect sister,” I railed as Zebdi held me back, his strong fingers biting painfully into my upper arms. “She was under *your* protection!” I shouted.

“Be quiet, Salome,” Zebdi hissed. “You’ll wake the children.”

Everyone stopped, straining to hear the slightest stirring from the roof. I didn’t care. They’d find out sooner or later—everyone would. Instead I fought to get out of Zebdi’s arms, not because I thought he would relent, but because my body needed to be fighting against something strong, something *real*.

“Shh, shh, Salome,” he said. “Listen. Listen. There’s more.”

“More? How could there be more? And *you*. How *dare* you invite such a man into our home? I cooked him our chickens,” I sobbed idiotically. “The chickens I was saving for our *baby...*”

Yusuf dashed the wine remaining in his cup to the ground, and stood up. “The child is not mine.”

He didn’t shout. Yusuf never shouted. But his words thudded like stones against my ears. Time slowed, so that I could see, actually see the ripples those stones sent shuddering through the fabric of everything I knew and valued. Before they got to the end and ruined everything, I threw myself at him and, with the whole strength and weight of my body, slapped the sad patience off his face. The crack of the blow and the jerk of pain that shuddered from my palm through my shoulder helped, but not enough. I spat on him. “That for masking your own dishonor with a lie at my sister’s expense!” I raged.

He wiped away my spittle, his eyes never leaving mine. “I didn’t lay a hand on her,” he said. “You can believe me or not, but it’s the Lord’s own truth.”

I heard, though I tried not to, the truth of his words. “No,” I said. “No, you’re wrong.” I searched the circle of faces flickering in the firelight for some sign of fellow outrage, but there was none. “I can’t believe it!” I shouted at them. “I won’t believe it!

I clamped my hands over my mouth as I was hit by a stunning wave of nausea. I stumbled away from the others, out of the light as my stomach cramped and heaved. The baby! This wasn’t good for our baby. Then it all came spewing out—the anger and the fear, the shame and the confusion, in an acrid, roiling sea. And it wouldn’t stop. It had to stop. My baby wasn’t ready. But it didn’t.

I felt a new kind of heave—low, in my back, that left me rigid and gasping in pain. Fright turned instantly to mind-loosening terror. *Oh, Father*, I prayed. It was all I could manage. *Oh, Father*.

Then I felt the comforting warmth of Zebdi arm around me. I clung to him. It was all I could do. I couldn’t talk or explain. All I could do was hang on. But he seemed to understand.

“It will be all right,” he whispered into the ear that wasn’t pressed against his strong shoulder. “We will make it all right. The two of us and the Lord together. I don’t know exactly how, and I don’t know how long it will take, but it will be all right in the end. Miryam is a righteous woman, and the Lord is bound by covenant to protect her. So He will. Somehow, He will.”

His strength flowed into me, as it had so many times and in so many ways. My terror eased. My body eased. I allowed him to wipe my face clean. But when he would have led me to bed, I refused to go.

“No, really, Zebdi, I’m fine,” I insisted. I ran my hand gently along the hard line of his jaw fuzzed over by a day’s worth of bristles.

“But the baby,” he said. He removed my hand from his cheek, turned it over, and kissed the palm. “I don’t want you to overdo.”

“I won’t,” I promised. “It was just the shock. But I’m ready to play nicely.”

“Sure?” he said, his hazel eyes seeming to drill down into the depths of my soul.

“Sure,” I said, and with a quick glance around to make sure that our corner was as dark as I thought it was, kissed him on the mouth.

“I need to apologize to you, Yusuf, for that undisciplined display,” I began.

“Shut up,” Jonas said, roughly but not unkindly. “We all love her.” He turned to Yusuf. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t really want to *do* anything. But I’m not sure the Law gives me that option.”

My blood froze. I knew exactly what the Law had to say about a betrothed woman who betrayed her vows. By breaking the law of chastity, she introduced evil into her community. Such an evil could only be removed by destroying the vessel that housed it. They would take her from her house, and then they would stone her to death.

“Who cares what the Law says?” I burst out. “This is *Miryam* we’re talking about.”

“We don’t get to choose when the Law applies and when it does not,” Jonas snapped. “Not even for Miryam.”

“Josef and Simon blame themselves,” Yusuf said, getting up and starting to pace. “They say Miryam was under their protection; that they were so preoccupied by Sarah’s illness that they barely had time to notice she was missing before they got the message from Zakharya telling them she was all right.”

“Missing?” What was he talking about? “When was she missing?”

“When Simon and Alphaeus and them got to Rama and found out your Aunt Sarah was dying, Miryam went to bed with everyone else,” Zebdi explained. “In the morning she was gone, but things were so confused no one realized she was missing until much later in the day.”

“Go? Where did she go?” I stared at him in horror. “You don’t mean she walked all the way to Juttah by *herself*?”

“I’m afraid I do,” he said unhappily.

That changed everything. By choosing to deceive her relatives and walk, unchaperoned, for a full day along public roads, Miryam had lost any claim to social respectability. The fact that she was pregnant only confirmed the scandal.

“At first, Josef assumed she’d been attacked on the way,” Yusuf said. “But Simon and Rachel said it must have happened earlier, or she wouldn’t be showing already.” Yusuf massaged the back of his neck. “I don’t know. I just don’t know.” He squared his shoulders. “And I don’t need to know. It is not my responsibility to judge her. Only to respond in an appropriate way. I don’t want her stoned, but an error of this magnitude cannot simply be overlooked. Even if I wished such a thing, I doubt our good neighbors in Nazareth would allow it.”

There was a sting in those last words that made me wonder how much the neighbor’s reactions to the shaming of his wife and his crippled daughter had bothered the seemingly imperturbable Yusuf.

“After giving it a lot of thought, I’ve decided that the best thing for all concerned is for me to put Miryam away, privately. Which is why we’ve come. Would you two be willing to take Miryam into your home?”

“Of course,” Zebdi said instantly. “It would be our privilege.”

“Think carefully,” Yusuf cautioned. “Bringing her here is bound to have uncomfortable consequences for you and your family.”

“You think we would mind?” I snapped.

“You’d be surprised by how much you can mind when your neighbors attack not only Miryam and her child, but Salome and your child as well,” he told Zebdi.

Jonas snorted. “They won’t do it in my hearing,” he said. “At least more than once.”

Yusuf permitted himself one of his measured smiles. “I’m glad to hear it. I can’t tell you how grateful...” He paused. The straight line of his lips above his beard trembled, and he looked down, fighting for control.

I had never seen Yusuf like this. Not once. It was as if the noonday sun suddenly wobbled and threatened to fall from the sky.

“I’m sorry,” he finally managed, still not looking at us. “I’m not myself. But I hope you know what is in my heart. Thank you. All of you.” I saw the effort it took for him to lift his head. When his liquid black eyes met mine, the purity of the patient pain he didn’t bother to hide pierced me to my core, shattering a barrier I had never glimpsed but always carried. Then he turned and made his deliberate way up the stairs to where his children slept.

I leaned against Zebdi, too depleted for propriety. He had to half-carry me to our bed. He set me down and disappeared, returning a moment later with warm water and a handful of the hyssop I grew for cleaning. Without speaking, he knelt down and washed first my face and neck, then my hands and arms, and finally my tired, swollen feet. Then he dried me off, tucked me in, and, after undressing himself, wrapped himself around me.

I took one of his hands and kissed it. “Thank you,” I whispered.

He tucked my head a little more comfortably under his chin. “It’s going to be all right,” he said. “I don’t know how, and I don’t know when. But Miryam is a good woman, and the Lord will make it right if we let Him.”

Zebdi was giving me the words I needed. I was too tired to find them myself, but in the moment of my need, he opened the way I needed to find. That's what I had seen in Yusuf's eyes. The willingness to accept bafflement. The willingness to fully inhabit both his love for and trust in Miryam and his love for and trust in the Law. The willingness to abide the contradiction between what *should* be and what *was* without denying the force and power of either.

I knew that, I wanted to tell Zebdi. I knew Miryam was righteous. And I knew the Law was just. And I knew the Lord that loved them both would open a way we had not seen; that our pain was not permanent, was not despair, only a temporary confusion. I knew all those things, but I knew them clearer and deeper because of him.

I wanted to tell him all of that, and more—how much I loved him. How grateful I was for the protection of his strong body and honest heart. How much I needed him, and how much I knew he needed me. And how grateful I was that we both had gifts to give the other. But I was too tired to do it justice. And he already asleep.

God in heaven, I prayed. You gave a miracle to Zakharya and Elisheva. And they deserved one—they have done all they could to protect and honor the covenant of our fathers. But they have at least had the blessing of making that offering together.

Miryam and Yusuf have also given all they have and are to Thee—and in terrible solitude. If there is anything I can do for them, if You can cut out some piece of my happiness and use it to cover and protect them, if there is any sacrifice I can make or deed I can do that will grant them the love and security they have provided so generously for others—I hesitated, feeling the weight of my own offering, making sure it was a price I was willing to pay—then help me do that thing.

Then, exhausted, I fell asleep.

I was back in Nazareth, at the stream where we had gone to wash our clothes and I hurt the lizard that had startled me. Except Imma and the lizard were gone, the stream had shrunk to a muddy trickle, and Miryam was all grown up. And she was putting away the laundry instead of washing it.

Confused, I looked around for guidance. A bright Being stood at my elbow. He said nothing, but gave me a reassuring smile.

I followed her to the cave, and then outside in the sun. I saw Gabriel. I heard his words. I heard hers. I saw Yusuf pray, and the cousins come. I saw her in Rama, and the angels that cleared her path to Juttah. I heard Elisheva's thanksgiving prayer, and Miryam's song of joy.

I still don't know why God showed those things to me. I am no matriarch, or priest, or prophet. Just an ordinary girl who loves her sister.

I woke early, feeling refreshed and strong. I eased out of bed, glad Jonas could sleep a little longer, washed myself, and went to start the bread.

I had scarcely started milling the flour when I caught sight of Yusuf tiptoeing down the stairs with bright-eyed Abigail in his arms. Tension crackled through my body. I hadn't had time to prepare. I didn't know what to do. I had what this good man needed, but I didn't know how to offer it in a way that he could accept. Or even if it were my right to do so.

Then our eyes met, and we knew what each had been shown.

"Abigail was hoping she could help," was all he said.

I stood up, dusting off my hands. "I would treasure it," I said. "I have missed having you and the boys around. Tell you what, Abigail. I know your Abba has things he has to do. But you and the boys don't. Do you think we might be able to talk him into leaving you all with me for a few weeks?"

Abigail looked at her father, her heart in her eyes.

"I'll make a deal with you," he said. "If you promise that you'll be good for your Aunt Salome, then I promise that Uncle Cleo and I will bring you a wonderful present."

"Uncle Cleo?" she said confused. "But we just saw Uncle Cleo."

"So we did," her father said. "But this is a very special kind of present. Too precious for one man to bring to his home alone."

While Abigail was puzzling over that, he asked me over her head, "Is there a message you'd like to send?"

I considered. "Tell them," I said. "Tell I them that I was shown a great light."

“I’ll tell them we both were,” he said. Then, slowly and deliberately, he pressed a father’s kiss on my forehead.

Chapter 19: Going Home

Miryam woke early, with the roosters. She stretched, and prepared to open herself to the peace that garnished these months in Juttah. It had come each morning, a gift from heaven, no matter what. It had shielded and protected her from the glances and mutterings of neighbors scandalized by her unaccompanied arrival. It had granted her serenity to overlook Rachel's startled questions, and Simon's more pointed ones. But now, suddenly, it was gone.

She was being foolish, she scolded herself. The peace was there. It was always there. Maybe she was just tired. Or perhaps it was the change of seasons. Now that the earth was moving from summer to autumn, the early morning hours were chill and dark. She just had to get up and doing and her body and spirit would fall into their familiar rhythm.

But they didn't—not when she fetched the water with the other yawning girls and mothers, nor when she built up the fire, nor when she made the bread or brewed the tea meant to ease Elisheva and Zakhayra's aches and pains. Instead, the uneasiness, the sense of waiting, of readiness, just grew.

It was a relief to hear Zakharya stumping into the courtyard behind her. Miryam poured the tea into the cups she had waiting, and turned to hand them to him.

He grinned, one eyebrow cocked in a question she didn't understand, as Elisheva bustled out behind him, turning up the sleeves of her tunic. "I believe your uncle wants you to guess what he is holding behind his back," she said, addressing Miryam with something of her old crispness.

Miryam looked back and forth between the two expectant faces, until the pieces fell into place. What she had thought was uneasiness, or maybe even fear, was neither. It was a prompting, an indicator of...what? And then she knew. She knew as if a voice had spoken it aloud. Yusuf was coming. Rachel and Simon had told him about the baby, and he was on his way.

Now, when she needed it, the peace came, settling around her shoulders with the weight and warmth of a parent's loving arm. Yusuf was coming, and whatever happened, she would not face him alone.

“Uncle Zakharya is carrying torches,” Miryam said, smiling into her uncle's guileless eyes. “Because that's the way he shows special guests that they are welcome. Even when they arrive well before dark.” He beamed at her, and she planted a kiss on his soft, old forehead before turning to her aunt. “And as for you, dearest of Elishevas, if you had even a grain of the good sense you have about everything but yourself, you would be contemplating a lazy morning in bed. No—don't say it. I'll go fetch the cardamom.”