

HIDDEN SCARS

Rahab

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REBEKAH
GYGER

Rahab: Hidden Scars

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Scripture quoted from the New International Version of the Bible

To my grandma, Donna Jean Spurrier, and my grandpa, Ronnie Lee Gyger. Though you could not see this book published, I know you would have both been proud.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Part 1

Chapter 1

Night had fallen. A cool breeze blew through the windows, at last making it livable within the stifling house. But Rahab was too nervous to remain inside, crammed in with the numerous members of her family, as well as their guests. She needed air. She needed to be alone.

Lingering near the back door, she glanced over her shoulder, ensuring neither her *ima* nor one of her *abba*'s other wives had seen her escape though the outer room. Lamp light flickered from their main living space, seeming to dance over the amphorae of wine that lined the wall near her, waiting to be served to the men inside.

A touch of fear skittered across her nerves. She didn't want to know what her *abba* would do if she were caught sneaking out into the night on her own. But she also feared choking on the close air inside. Not when her life was to change drastically due to their guests inside.

When no one's shadow rose to stop her, she ducked out the door. Bare feet met the still warm ground and she curled her toes, savoring the sensation of heat clashing with the chill.

Moonlight lit Rahab's path and she ambled to the low wall which divided her family's property from the streets of Jericho. It took no more than twenty strides to cross the length of their yard, but it was land that her *abba* took pride in.

Most could not claim to own so much of Jericho.

It was this distinction which made her *abba* worthy of the honored guests they had that night, for such a small plot of ground signaled her family's wealth and social standing, both lofty enough to allow *Abba* to associate with the likes of Ariciti and his sons.

And if the gods willed, for Rahab to marry into their family.

Rahab braced her forearms on the top of the wall as a harsh shiver coursed down her spine. Only the month before,

she'd sat outside the house while her eldest brother's wife, Shiba, labored inside, birthing the first of her abba's grandchildren. The screaming had made Rahab's stomach churn until she fell to her knees with tears streaming down her face.

At fifteen, Shiba was only two years older than Rahab herself. And Rahab was more than old enough for a betrothal. For their family to postpone any longer would only bring shame on Abba's name.

But that didn't mean she felt any more prepared.

Rahab pressed a fist to her mouth. Why did her stomach have to ache so much? She had seen Ariciti's son, the one she would eventually call husband. Though not fair of face, his was a countenance she could bear to look upon. Yet those eyebrows... she shut her eyes and took in a deep breath.

Ariciti's son had large brows, like hairy locusts that wiggled with every facial expression. And that would not be so awful, if... if she at least knew him.

Would he be like her abba? Or could he somehow be worse?

Her jaw throbbed from holding in the sobs that had gathered toward the back of her throat. Why wasn't it possible to stay home and never marry? She could serve her family, baking the morning bread and washing their bedclothes. And if her brothers' wives fell ill, she could care for their children.

Why did she have to be sent away? It was better to live with what she knew than—

A sharp whine beyond the wall startled her. She jerked her hand from her face and used the edge of her headscarf to brush away the moisture on her cheek. If anyone found her like this...

Well, it wouldn't matter since they were marrying her off anyway.

The sound repeated itself as a high-pitched keening. Shoving up on her toes, she hooked her arms across the wall and tugged herself up to peer over the stones. Loose mortar

rained down on the other side, inciting the whine to grow louder.

Concern set in, drying her tears. It was obviously an animal of some kind, afraid and likely in pain.

Rahab lowered herself back down and side-stepped to the gate. In the dark, she couldn't see the latch. Her hand brushed the rough fibers of a rope and she felt around for the knot and then slipped it from the loop that held the gate in place. The wooden door scraped the ground as she pushed it outward.

The animal moved in the shadows of the wall off to her side, its cries having turned to desperate yips. She inched over, her knees bent and her hand outstretched. "Shh," she whispered. "It will be alright."

It scrambled backwards. With its head raised, she saw the outline of a long nose and flopped over ears. A new chill swept through her. A wild mutt. Though still a pup, the dog's mother was sure to be nearby.

Abba had warned her about the wild dogs. Every abba did. Because dogs killed.

Bumps rose on Rahab's arms. She lowered her voice further. "You're not hurt." She stepped back, heart racing. "I'm sure your ima will come for you."

The gate stood open as she had left it, a dark shadow welcoming her to safety. But before she could pass through, a growl sounded from behind. She froze, still crouched. Blood pounded in her ears and her vision swam.

She never should have come outside the gate.

She couldn't yell for help. The air was locked in her throat and her hands shook as her legs gave way beneath her. There was a vicious snarl and the pup's answering wail.

Light swept from the house, a bright point in her periphery.

Time slowed as noises crashed together. Ima called her name as the mother dog howled. A weight smashed into Rahab's side and pain erupted along her neck. She fell, face

grinding into the earth as Ima's cries faded under the brunt of Rahab's scream.

The right side of Rahab's face and neck were stiff, bound tight with strips of cloth that were caked in blood and honey. The bandages elicited a bone-deep itch and held a scent both sickly sweet and metallic. But those concerns were trifling compared to the lingering throb of pain and the humiliation of flies descending on her face, both the covered and uncovered places.

One landed near her eye and she flinched, startling it enough that it flew away and then moments later returned. This time, when it sat down on the bandages, she left it there.

“What price will I be able to get for Rahab now?” Abba’s voice carried from the other room, raised without shame for who might hear it. “Ariciti had offered three sheep and seven goats. Seven!” Rahab could picture him waving his arms as he spoke. “Now he wants nothing to do with her for his son.”

“There are men far less proud than Ariciti.” Ima’s voice was low and conciliating, though it carried its own sharp edge. “Men who would be glad to be joined to our family through marriage, no matter the bride.”

Propped on her side, Rahab watched her abba’s shadow move in the doorway. “But at what price?” he repeated.

“Don’t give up hope. And pray to the gods that the damage to her face will not be as bad once the bandages have been removed.”

“Yes,” Abba murmured. “Prayer is all we have. And perhaps...” She imagined him clenching his fists. “No, I will not offer a sacrifice. If she is to be maimed, then she will already have cost me enough.”

Cool tears dripped across Rahab’s nose. She clenched her eyes shut and tipped the uninjured side of her face into the blankets.

“Ow!” Rahab flinched away from her Ima’s yanking hands. Her damp bandages still clung to the healing wounds, though she was told the bleeding had stopped. Despite not having seen her reflection, she had already felt the ridges of her wound beneath the bindings with her fingertips.

“Hold still.” Ima’s nails dug into Rahab’s arm, her wrinkled face offering no mercy. “It has been a week. It’s time these came off!”

“But it hurts.”

“You should have thought of that before going where you shouldn’t have.” Ima’s tone hurt more than the rip of the final bandage. “There.” She dropped the linen into a heap with the rest and then wiped her hands on a wet cloth. She motioned with it to a bowl of water near the window. “Now look at yourself.”

Rahab placed her feet on the floor and slowly unfurled from her crouched position. Her legs shook and her stomach churned. Her Ima’s expression offered no clue as to what she would see, only a fixed scowl that never left.

The water in the bowl rippled as Rahab knelt over it, allowing her another moment of uncertainty. But as it stilled, her features came into focus. The whole right side of her face, beneath her eye, was red and crisscrossed with both narrow ridges and pitted cuts that branched out onto her neck, like a patch of red vines. A sob hitched in her throat.

This was what she looked like now? Her vision blurred. No wonder Ariciti had refused her betrothal to his son.

Ima spoke from behind her, “Do you see what your foolishness has done?”

“Yes, Ima.” Rahab touched her cheek. It was as though fire spread from that point, but she only pushed harder, letting tears well as she hopelessly wished that she could push the skin back to the way it had been before.

“You could have been a wealthy man’s wife.” Ima’s words were drenched in bitterness. “Of all your abba’s daughters, you would have brought this family the most respect.” She moved

closer, so she could see Rahab's face. "Now look at you." Her lips pinched together as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Do you know what Mitelik's other wives say?"

Rahab's lip quivered. "No, Ima."

"They blame this on me for being a poor mother. And now Bitnima will marry Ariciti's son in your place."

Rahab tucked her chin to her chest. She knew that the neighbors would soon whisper about their family, the younger sister being married off before the elder. It would make finding a husband for her all the more difficult.

"Do not look away from me." Ima lashed out, striking Rahab's damaged cheek so that she cried out. "You have jeopardized both our positions in this family."

"I know, Ima." Even after her hand fell away, it was as though Rahab's face were being pummeled with stone. But what could she do? Her cheek was already ruined and she would have to live the rest of her life with it. "I am sorry." She covered her face against another blow, her face throbbing and her chest aching from the effort not to cry. "I am so sorry."

Ima scoffed. "It is too late for that." And then she left, her departure from the room somehow leaving more condemnation in her wake than her presence had managed.

Chapter 2

6 months later

“Bitnima cannot serve these men.” Zibqet, Abba’s second wife, stood in the yard, arguing with him. Her hands were propped on hips, wide with pregnant girth. “Ariciti will not stand for it. If she’s to marry his son—”

“What do you expect me to do?” Abba brushed by her, the bronze bands at his wrists catching the sunlight.

The sharp glare caught Rahab in the eye and she ducked her head from her place in the window.

“Don’t treat my daughter like a harlot,” Zibqet snapped.

“There is no one else to help serve the meal.”

“Make Sisa’s daughter do it.”

Rahab perked up. She leaned over the windowsill, eager for his answer. It had been six months since she last stepped outside the house, and just as long since she had seen anyone other than those who lived within its walls.

She finally caught a glimpse of them near the corner of the house as her abba said, “I will not have her embarrass me.”

Rahab’s heart fell.

“And how long before you find a way to make her useful?”

“Until I find her a husband.”

“And when will that be?” Zibqet grabbed hold of Abba’s arm. “The longer you keep Rahab hidden away, the more people will gossip about her.”

“And?”

“And then no one will offer a bride-price.”

Rahab winced. Once a relief, the thought that no one might ask for her hand had turned into her greatest fear. With her face deformed, no one could look her in the eye and other than

Shiba, all of her brothers' wives mocked her. The home she had thought a haven was now her prison.

"Fine." Abba shook off Zibqet's hold. "I will have Rahab serve the meal in place of Bitnima. But you will make sure that when she isn't working, she is well out of sight."

A squeal threatened to burst forth. Zibqet had done it.

Pulling from the window, Rahab turned to the room which she shared with her sisters as well as Abba's wives. The space was dim, but she quickly lit a lamp. She would need to make sure her scars were hidden. To do that, she would need to borrow one of her ima's headscarves.

"What are you doing?"

Rahab paused in rifling through the basket of Ima's things. Shiba stood in the doorway, her infant son, Duni, on her hip. Her long black hair was tucked out of sight and her features scrunched as she shifted the boy's weight.

"I heard Abba say I could help tonight." Rahab squeezed her hand into a fist, waiting for Shiba's response.

"Oh." Shiba frowned. "Is that such a good idea?"

Her chest squeezed tighter than her hand. "You don't think I should be seen."

Shiba's eyes widened. "That isn't it." She strode into the room and lowered Duni to the nearest bed, where he sat up, rocking himself. "I just want to make sure you *want* to be seen."

Rahab tipped her face forward. It wasn't that she wanted to be seen, but that she needed to connect with other people. She needed a chance to find out if everyone would treat her the way her family did, or if they might overlook her imperfection. Shuffling her feet, she nodded.

"Alright then." Shiba reached out and lifted one of Ima's scarves. "I'll help you."

A little face powder from Shiba's chest and a thick scarf of Ima's covered most of Rahab's scars, as well as the lower part of her face. The fabric felt stifling and moist from her breath, and the scarf's edge drooped over her eyes. But Abba's slight nod of acceptance was worth it.

Now he sat on the floor with one of his friends, Hamelkit, from the merchants' street, feasting on the evening meal in a haze of incense that burned in the corner of the room. Rahab's four brothers sat with them, along with Hamelkit's son, Jilsen.

Robust, with broad shoulders, Jilsen was a fine specimen of a man. Her hand shook as she held a platter out to him, waiting for him to notice the fresh figs. Her brother, Idrikan spoke to him, hands waving and drawing their guest's attention, gracing her with a view of Jilsen's profile and strong nose.

The plate grew heavy as she lingered and the small fruits tumbled to one side. A gasp escaped her lips and she reached out with her other hand to steady it.

Jilsen turned to her.

He met her gaze and stared. Her cheeks heated under the scarf and she glanced away. "For you?" She held the plate out farther.

He didn't answer, and for a moment she feared she had offended him. But then he took the platter and balanced it in his own grasp so that it hovered over his knee. "Thank you."

Silence stretched between them.

"Come, Rahab." Idrikan motioned to her. "Do not stand so. There is other work to do."

Chagrin passed through her. She spared a glance in Abba's direction, but he seemed not to notice. Engaged with Hamelkit, the two men were oblivious to everything else in the room. Two of Rahab's other brothers were also bent in deep discussion, the bowl of hummus at their feet nearly empty.

She bobbed her head to Idrikan, accepting his rebuke. Quickly skirting the room, she moved to fill her abba's cup.

How could she have let herself linger with Jilsen? He had yet to see her face, but if he had, he wouldn't wish to speak with her. This dinner was not meant for her abba to speak of another betrothal, only for him to enjoy time with friends. She could not make the mistake of embarrassing him. Not now.

Passing into the outer room, she carried with her the empty bowls she had gathered. Here, the woman and children sat at one end of the room to partake of their own meal. Zibqet remained separate, refilling dishes Rahab would have to set in the main room. When Rahab entered, the woman offered her a brief look. "How is it out there?"

"Abba and his friend are eating well."

"Have your brothers behaved themselves?"

"*N'em.*" Rahab watched as Zibqet spooned hummus into one of the dishes. "Hamelkit's son and Idrikan seem to like each other's company." Or at least Idrikan did. He had spoken intently throughout dinner so far, filling the silence Jilsen left.

Was the man simply withdrawn? Or had her brother overstepped his bounds and forced a conversation where there was none?

Zibqet clicked her tongue. "Good. It had best stay that way." Rahab turned to leave, the dishes balanced in her grasp, but Zibqet grabbed her wrist. "And you?"

Rahab glanced down at the tanned fingers gripping her sleeve. Unlike her ima's hold, Zibqet's did not dig in, leaving marks to be found later. Though protective of her children, Abba's second wife was not as harsh as his first and Rahab could not help but notice the difference. Whereas Ima lashed out at misdeeds, Zibqet merely corrected.

Bitnima was blessed to have a mother such as this. If only her younger sister were wise enough to recognize it.

Answering the woman's question, Rahab said, "The head covering has done its job. Neither Hamelkit nor his son have seen my face."

"That's a relief." Bitnima's voice carried from the far end of the room. Her nose wrinkled. "They might have lost their

appetites otherwise.”

Two of their brothers’ wives tittered, smiles lighting their faces. Rahab struggled for air.

“Bitnima.” Shiba sat upright. “Don’t say such things.”

“It’s true.”

The force of Rahab’s rapid breaths stuck the scarf to her lips.

“You don’t know how they would react,” Shiba argued.

“Enough.” Zibqet’s hold tightened and she patted Rahab’s back and said to her daughter, “You will apologize for saying such things.”

“Why?” Bitnima cast a glance in Ima’s direction, who feigned disinterest. Emboldened, Bitnima scowled. “Rahab’s face would upset anyone’s stomach.”

“It is your Abba’s own imagination and your unkind thoughts that lead either of you to think so.”

At this, Ima’s head reared and she glared at Zibqet. “You disrespect Mitelik in his own home?”

Zibqet stiffened. Rahab watched as she seemed to struggle for an answer. Looking down at Rahab’s hands, Zibqet tsed and motioned for her to leave. “You, take these to the men before they come searching for you.”

But Rahab couldn’t move. Her sandals felt nailed to the ground and her arms were numb. Was her face as hideous as Bitnima said? It had been months since she last dared to peek at her reflection, telling herself she was better served not knowing. Yet she had felt the swelling subside and had hoped...

“Go.” Zibqet shoved her toward the door. “The men are hungry.”

Tucking her chin to her chest, Rahab spun on her heel and fled. The conversations of the main room where the men ate felt as though it were another world, one where she wasn’t noticed.

She stumbled over to her brothers, depositing food between them. Neither one glanced at her and she began to hope that Bitnima had been wrong. Surely if she were so horrifying to look upon, even with her face covered, Abba would not have allowed her to serve the meal for his guests. After all, had he not said that he refused to be embarrassed?

Emboldened, Rahab strode around the room, placing the other bowls before searching for another task. One which would keep her far from Bitnima.

Resting on a low table to her abba's right was a bronze jug for water. In her haste to replenish the food, she had forgotten to refill it. Quickly skirting the room, she snatched up the vessel and then hurried out the front door, intent on drawing the water herself to avoid speaking with her sister again.

The moon was full, allowing her to stride confidently across the arid yard to where their family's well was located. Her arms prickled in the evening chill as a breeze swept at the hem of her clothes, swirling it around her ankles.

Setting the jug at the edge of the well, she then grasped the bucket and rope. With a small toss, she pitched the bucket across the stones and listened for the splash. It took to the count of three before she heard it. Then the rope fell, taut in her hands as the bucket tipped and filled with water.

“Let me help you with that,” a warm voice spoke at her back, startling her.

Rahab turned in place, twisting her head to the side so that she could see through the wrap of fabric. Her heart gave a lurch as she recognized the angles of Jilsen's face. The rope slipped in her grasp.

He reached out and snagged it. Stepping nearer to both her and the well, he hauled the bucket from the depths with quick, hand over hand tugs. When the bucket at last came into sight, dripping as he hoisted it onto the stones, he smiled at her. “A bit late for chores, isn't it?”

“I—” She didn't know what to say. Here was Jilsen, son of her father's friend, speaking to her while everyone else was

still inside.

“Would you like me to carry this for you?” he asked, as though she hadn’t failed to answer him. In the distance, an owl hooted.

“No!” she blurted, remembering the jug she had brought outside. “I mean, I only need to fill this.” She snatched the vessel and clutched it to her chest; wishing she could use it to hide.

Jilsen’s smile broadened. He stretched out his hand. “I can do that as well, if you will let me?”

He wasn’t put off by her. Warmth curled through Rahab at the realization, only to be squashed once she remembered that he had not yet seen her face. Tentatively, she held out her burden, waiting for him to ask why she hid herself.

And then to recoil when she told him.

The water splashed over the jug’s narrow opening as he poured from the bucket, the stream sliding down to her fingers and soaking her sleeves. When it began to overflow, he stopped. “There you are,” he flashed a grin, “all done.”

Tipping her head so that she looked at his feet, Rahab mumbled her thanks. When there was no response other than the sounds of the desert night, she peered upward.

“There are those beautiful eyes.” Emptying the rest of the water back into the well, he continued to stare at her. The bucket splashed far below as he lifted the jug from her limp grasp. “I’ll take this for you. Where were you headed with it?”

Her cheeks flamed. “It was for Abba.” And if she allowed Jilsen to carry the water for her, then her whole family would know they had spoken.

There would be no end of torment from Bitnima and her father’s secondary wives. But how could she justify telling him no?

“Then that is where I will take it.” He moved around her, then stopped when she didn’t follow. “Are you coming?”

A blush heated her cheeks. There was no way to decline without causing offense. Setting her shoulders, she moved in front of him to lead the way.

Prepared to meet the consequences head on.

Chapter 3

The following days proved Rahab's prediction correct. After having arrived at dinner following behind Jilsen, who then offered the jug of water to her abba, she had been dismissed from the room. That night, her brothers told their wives and the next morning the women spread the news at breakfast.

Their mocking laughter had rung loudly until Abba strode into the room. The women all fell silent as Rahab clutched her fingers in her lap. His gaze shifted between them until it came to rest on her. "You did well," he said, before leaving as quickly as he had come.

For the rest of the day, no one spoke a word of it. But when nothing seemed to come of Abba's words, the teasing began in earnest. "Did you think to turn Hamelkit's son's head?" Bitnima asked.

"I am surprised he didn't do so to wretch," one of Abba's wives added.

Blinded by tears, Rahab disappeared into their sleeping chamber to sew and mend. It was not until nine days later, when Hamelkit and Jilsen arrived once more, that she found any peace.

While their abbas spoke, Jilsen found his way into the back room, where Rahab pressed olives in a large vat. At first, he didn't speak, only watched her work until her hands began to shake. Then he squatted in front of her, bronzed calves peeking from the hem of his tunic.

"Can I not see your face?" he asked, his voice smooth like river stones.

A lump formed in her throat. "I am sure you would rather not."

"Then what about just your eyes?"

There was such warmth in his words that she did as he asked, tipping her head to peer between the folds of the linen

scarf she'd taken to wearing at all times. His brown gaze peered back, his interest apparent.

In the next weeks, Jilsen arrived nearly every day. After spending but an hour in the presence of either her abba or her brothers, he would come looking for her. At that time, Ima quickly dismissed her from whatever task she had begun, sending her with Jilsen into the shade of the fig trees in the yard.

Most days, the trees would stand as sentinels, the patch-work shadows of their palm leaves offering little relief from the heat. It made her grateful for the scarf that hid not only her scars but also the beads of sweat dripping from her skin. Yet no matter how hot the evenings became, Jilsen remained steadfast in his attentions, his smile rivaling the sun.

“And what is your favorite fruit?” Jilsen’s hand rested on her shoulder, toying with the loose fabric draped around her neck. Though he asked the question, having already declared his answer to be the citrus fruits brought in with the caravans, his eyes were distracted with watching his fingers play with her scarf.

Rahab struggled to draw breath with him so close. “Po... pomegranates.”

“Pomegranates?” His gaze flashed to hers as his smile tipped farther up at one corner. “I would wager it’s because they are as sweet as you.”

A flush overtook her throat and she glanced away, afraid he could see her feelings in her eyes.

His hand fell away, leaving her bereft until he leaned in, tipping his forehead to hers. “You know I have never seen you smile?”

Panic clawed at her throat. “It’s better you don’t.”

“Better for who?” His weight was close, pressing in so that she wasn’t sure if it made her feel safe or threatened.

She scooted to the side, affording herself space. “For us both,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “I am sure

you have heard what happened.” Her brothers would not have kept it secret.

“I don’t believe it could be as bad as you think,” he said, confirming her suspicion. But though his tone was reassuring, he made no further move to convince her. Instead, after a few more moments of burdened silence, he excused himself.

Her mind would not be silent after that. Jilsen knew about her face, and now that she had confirmed its scarred appearance, he would be foolish to return. No matter the time they had spent together, their secluded conversations and his intimate touch wasn’t enough to overcome the stigma she bore.

Convinced that day had been their last together, Rahab gave up concern for her appearance. Tasks which she had avoided, such as beer and bread making, now became her sole chores, the effort taking her mind from what she could never have.

It was better than hoping for something she dared not believe. That he, or anyone, could want her.

Then, four days later, she found herself alone. The men had gone into Jericho to greet the newest caravan and the women had disappeared inside the house to escape the sun. Rahab struggled beneath the weight of a newly filled cask, its contents sloshing with every step. Halfway to the buried cistern, where the small roof and sunken floor could aid in keeping foodstuffs cool, the cask was swiped from her arms and she stumbled.

Looking up once she regained her balance, she found Jilsen smiling down at her, the cask tucked under one arm. He reached down and took her hand. “Come.”

Mute, she followed as he led her to the cistern and tugged her inside with him. Releasing her hand, he pivoted and placed the cask amongst the rest. The clay vessels clinked together and the brief movement stirred the scent of aged barley and wheat grains, along with the mildew of a place often wet.

Arms now empty, Jilsen turned to gather her in them. He squeezed her tight, his face buried where her neck and shoulder met. There, he whispered, “I missed you.”

Words still wouldn’t come. So, she held him in return, afraid that any moment he would disappear.

“I’ve been thinking about you,” he said. “I spoke to my abba... He will come and speak to yours for us soon—”

“What?” She pushed at his arms, but he held fast.

“Rahab,” her name was a breath from his lips as she felt the press of his nose beneath her ear and his hand brushed up her side. “Rahab,” he repeated, “My abba is to ask for you... for me.”

All thought fled, leaving in its wake a flood of disbelief she couldn’t hope to swim through.

Jilsen pressed a kiss to her brow, touching the bare skin above her eyes. “Tomorrow, we will begin to negotiate your bride price.”

A giggle escaped her lips. A bride price? No one would pay such a thing for her, at least not anything of significance. She wasn’t worth it, her beauty torn away by a moment of foolishness.

The tug of her scarf from the top of her head broke her thoughts. She gasped and fumbled for the sliding fabric. “Wha—what are you doing?”

“Come, Rahab,” Jilsen’s voice both pleaded and chided. “Let me see your face.”

He couldn’t. If he did, there certainly would be no bride price, as pitiful a sum as it might have been.

Jilsen leaned away. “Don’t you know me better by now? Have I shown myself to be someone who would shrink away?”

But he had not seen the marks that scored her cheek.

“I am going to be your husband.” His hands glided down her arms and then brushed her waist. “I will see your scars

eventually.”

Tears clogged her throat. “But then you will not be able to turn me away.”

“I won’t do that.” He kissed her brow again, breath fanning her skin. “Rahab,” he murmured as he tugged at the scarf once more.

This time, she let him. Eyes tightly shut, she waited for him to push her away. Instead, she felt his lips on her damaged cheek. They trailed to her mouth and she stilled beneath his grasp. Then his hand was in her hair and he was repeating her name, drawing her closer still.

It was an action she wanted to pull away from. To draw her face covering and disappear within its folds.

As he continued to touch her, pulling at and removing the layers of clothes that kept him from seeing all of her, she could only wonder that in those first moments, when he had seen what she truly looked like, he had not turned away.

Instead, he had claimed all of her while she remained still, afraid to either participate or retreat.

“Rahab?” Zibqet’s voice carried from outside.

Still sitting on the damp floor of the cistern where Jilsen had left her, her clothes askew, Rahab felt only emptiness. She stared at the door and the strands of light peeking through the wooden boards.

It had only been minutes, over and done with before she could wrap her mind around what was happening. And then he had been gone, without a word or an explanation.

Footsteps came nearer, a shadow falling across the door. Then it opened with a scrape of the rope that held it in place and Zibqet’s pregnant form filled the emptiness. She blinked at the ceiling and then her gaze traveled around, finding Rahab on the floor. The woman sucked in a sharp breath. “Rahab.”

Repeating her name, just as he had... before he seemed to forget it.

“Child,” Zibqet said, kneeling before her. “What has happened?”

Her tongue was dry, refusing to force an explanation from her mouth. At the touch of Zibqet’s hand to her arm, she curled in on herself, silent sobs wracking her chest. “Jils...” But she couldn’t finish.

How was she to force the words from her mouth, explaining that something vital had been taken from her... and that she had allowed it to be?

Now that it was over, all she felt was a gaping hole and grief over something she had never known could be missing. And there was no way in which she could describe it. Not when Jilsen had spent one moment crying her name and the next casting her aside as though he had never known it.

Chapter 4

A clay lamp shattered against the far wall, raining dust and dripping oil. Abba lifted the arm he had just used to throw the vessel, running his hand furiously through his hair. “She has disgraced us.” He said this, speaking of Rahab, though he had long since ceased to speak to her. “I am cursed of the gods to have a daughter such as she!”

Rahab sat in the corner, her legs crossed and her heart numb. A tear leaked down her cheek, hidden by the veil which now covered more shame than just her face.

With kind words and feigned adoration, Jilsen had robbed her of both her virtue and any hope she’d had for a future. Whereas before, her scarred features deterred suitors, now it was her sullied reputation after Jilsen had withdrawn his suit.

To Rahab’s right, Ima sat as well, her face pinched and her gaze thunderous. “You believe yourself cursed? I am the woman who bore her. It would have been better had she been lost in my womb.”

On Rahab’s left, Zibqet drew in a sharp breath. “You speak such things for your daughter to hear?”

“I won’t hide what I think of her.”

More tears soaked Rahab’s veil. She balled her hands in her lap.

Would that she had perished before birth.

“And what of Jilsen?” Zibqet asked, “Will you not lay your blame at his feet as well?”

“Rahab should have stopped him.”

“She is thirteen! You also would have fallen to the promises of an older man.”

“I am not a harlot!”

A sob hiccupped from Rahab’s throat. She had known her Ima held no love for her, but to hear such disdain...

Abba spun around at the sound she made, his gaze falling on her for the first time in two days. “I will hear nothing from you,” he yelled, eyes bulging and face turning red. He shook a fist at her. “Your grief is deserved, but I will not suffer your wailing along with your wrongdoing.”

“Mitelik!” Zibqet said.

“Silence.” Abba marched towards them. “You will not defend her.” He grabbed Rahab’s arm, pulling her to her feet.

Zibqet stood. “Don’t hurt her.”

“Quiet, woman.” He pushed Zibqet and she stumbled, her pregnant weight unbalancing her.

“No!” Rahab watched as her abba’s second wife hurtled to the ground, the impact seeming to rattle in Rahab’s bones. When she moved to help the woman who had defended her, her abba yanked at her arm. She tugged at his grasp and his hand fell across her face in a blow that turned her head and rang in her ears.

While she remained dazed, he forced her toward the women’s sleeping quarters. “You’re worthless to me,” he yelled. “Now, not even Hamelkit will take you for the son that ruined you.” He pushed her into the room and held the door as he threw one last threat against her. “Do not think to disobey me or you will find yourself turned out to the dogs that scarred you.”

That night, Rahab huddled in the farthest corner of the room, hiding from the rest of the house. She buried herself in the few blankets she could, keeping her face and her silent tears from the sleeping forms of her family. It wasn’t hard to do, since all had entered without looking her way. Even Zibqet had kept her distance, bowing to Abba’s word.

Surrounded by those related to her, she had never felt more alone.

Ima slept farthest away, as though the distance served to sever any blood tie, while Abba’s other wives lay as a barrier between her and her sisters as if protecting them from the

contamination of shame. And though Rahab had not expected her brothers' wives to treat her with any less contempt, it still hurt to see them settle near the walls, out of her reach.

Rahab sniffed. Her chest ached from holding in the sound of her weeping and her nose was tender to the touch after hours of wiping away dripping mucus with her wrists.

She was a wretch! Little wonder Jilsen had no use for her other than those few moments in the cistern.

Across the room, a child's soft whimper broke through her thoughts, startling her. Sucking in a breath, she held her tears, waiting to see what would come of her nephew's mewling.

Moments later, Shiba's blankets rustled in answer to the infant's cries. Her voice carried through the stillness, consoling the bitter sounds of empty hunger. Immediately, the babe was silenced, his needs met in the grim darkness.

Time seemed to stretch, each moment more painful than the last as Rahab fought the urge to call out and connect with Shiba... someone who could rescue her from the loneliness and guilt that ate at her soul. Moisture gathered on the blanket Rahab pressed to her mouth and her eyes burned.

Just when she thought Shiba might have fallen back asleep, the woman's voice bridged the distance between them, "Rahab?"

She couldn't answer. A lump formed in her throat, choking her.

"I don't know if you are truly awake," Shiba said. "But I cannot imagine that you have been able to sleep after what happened."

Rahab bit her lip to stifle a moan of agreement.

"I don't blame you," Shiba continued, her voice thick. "I know—" For a time she said nothing else. Then, when their silence was heavy with grief and impassible emotions, she said, "Being a woman is never easy. I'm sorry that you learned this hardest of us all."

The care in her words nearly broke Rahab's control, but she kept her mouth closed, willing Shiba to distance herself, as had all the others. Because in the light of day, when everyone else was awake, her sister-in-law would do better to show Rahab indifference than risk suffering rebuke of her own.

Eventually, when Rahab didn't answer, Shiba turned on her side and fell asleep, leaving Rahab to spend the rest of the night in her own grief.

“Get up.”

Two days later, Rahab woke to rough hands shaking her. She blinked her eyes, squinting in the early morning light that cut through the shadows.

Ima towered over her, face a stony mask that hadn't cracked since Jilsen had taken Rahab's innocence. Seeing she had Rahab's attention, Ima turned and marched from the room. She let the door remain open, a clear sign she expected Rahab to follow.

After checking to ensure her veil still held its place, Rahab rose from her pallet. In the outer room, her brothers' wives mixed grain and oil with herbs, forming them into cakes that could later be baked. Their eyes tracked Rahab's progress across the room, their hands so used to their task that they never lost their rhythm.

Blood heated Rahab's cheeks, but she held her gaze steady, trusting the veil to hide her disgrace.

The outer door remained open as well, allowing both light and a cool breeze to enter the house. Just beyond, Ima waited, her arms clutching a bundle of wool. She tapped her foot and raised a scathing brow in Rahab's direction.

Scurrying to do as she was bid, Rahab stepped into the morning sun and claimed her ima's burden. Without a word, she turned to the shade and sat with the bundle in her lap. When Ima next passed her a set of long wire brushes, Rahab set to tearing out clumps of wool and pulling them between the paddles.

As soon as Rahab started, her ima returned inside, leaving her to her own thoughts. Her stomach cramped, chiding her for taking so long to rise and thus missing her morning repast. She bit her lip and hunched forward, banishing the ever-growing hunger to the back of her mind.

By the time the sun rose high overhead, stealing her shade, the growl in her stomach had muted to a dull grumble that she ignored far easier than the sweat dripping down her spine.

“Rahab!” Her ima’s sharp voice rang from the doorway.

Glancing at the two piles of wool on her lap, the larger carded and the smaller not, Rahab answered, “I am almost finished, I—Ima,” she hesitated on the last word, fearful of the reaction it might cause.

Ima seemed not to notice. “Your abba wants to see you. Give your work to Bitnima.”

Abba? Rahab’s heart set to racing. She clutched the wool brushes with cramped fingers, squeezing what little feeling she had left from them. It had been two days since she had seen him. What could he possibly want with her?

“Rahab,” her ima called again, jerking her from her fear-frozen state.

Lightheadedness flooded Rahab as she stood and she shut her eyes, clutching the carded wool to her chest. Before the ground had finished righting itself, she was striding toward the doorway which wobbled in her vision.

By the time she crossed the threshold, she had regained her stability. Bitnima stood just inside, her glare biting as she accepted Rahab’s chore.

Looking Rahab up and down, Ima scowled. “You look hideous.”

For the second time that day, color rose in Rahab’s cheeks.

“Go and change into something cleaner,” Ima ordered, motioning to their sleeping room. She slipped an oat cake into Rahab’s hand as she passed. “And eat this before your stomach is heard by the neighbors.”

Eager for the food and for the chance to leave Ima's presence, Rahab darted away. Though her options were limited, she took her time choosing another garment. Lingering, her nerves stretched as she listened for her ima to call in after her. But every second was an eternal reprieve from whatever was to come.

Choosing a covering of a thin, tan weave, along with a heavy brown scarf for her face, she at last left just as her name was called.

Having tucked the folds of the scarf tight, she emerged and then turned to the main room as her ima indicated. There, her abba waited by the window, his hand tapping at his thigh.

“She’s here, Mitelik,” Ima said, bringing him around.

He took Rahab in with a glance. “Good, now we may go.” He strode forward and opened the front door. “Come, Rahab.”

She glanced between the two, unease growing. “Where—”

“Enough,” his brows pinched in anger.

Heart weeping, though she dared not it show, Rahab trudged out before him. A cart and donkey waited in the place the dog had ruined her face. Knowing what he expected of her, she climbed in the back.

Zibqet stood near the gate, but Rahab kept her mouth shut, not even daring to raise a hand in farewell. Her chest ached further upon noticing the glint of moisture in the other woman’s eyes.

Chapter 5

Rahab had rarely seen the streets of Jericho. Like every woman who had reached marriageable age, she spent her time at home, performing chores for her family. Only feasts and other celebrations would be cause enough for her to leave. But on those days, the crush of bodies would make travel by cart impossible. Now, there were no worshipers drinking to the new moon or carousing as they exalted the coming harvest. Only a handful of men and even fewer women passing on the way to wherever it was they were inclined to walk.

Here and there, children played in the dusty lanes, chasing each other from home to shop, ducking into any shaded area they could find.

Not so long ago, Rahab would have joined them. But that time of her life had disappeared before any of her other misfortunes took place. A scant year which had changed everything.

Eventually, their progress slowed. Her abba shouted for people to move out of his path and Rahab turned in the cart to look over his shoulder. They were approaching the temple of Ashtaroth, which rose above the rest of the buildings on that street, with long stairs leading up to where the temple rested on a platform. Tall columns bracketed the entryway, carved with images of priests and priestesses standing as sentinels.

Here, the way was clogged with men and women who led offerings of cattle and carried grain to the altar, as well as those who left either empty-handed or with tablets inscribed with Ashtaroth's promised blessing, though only the priests could read them.

A shiver traced down Rahab's spine. There was nothing in the cart, no offering which her abba could bring. There was only herself, alone, with her knees up to her chest. Though she knew no one could see her scars, she still felt exposed.

If they continued in this direction, the way would lead to the temple of Molech where the pillars would be decorated with images of bulls and fire. And where the sacrifices would require something far more precious than what Ashtaroth required.

A tear slid down Rahab's cheek and she pushed her face against her knee, hiding her eyes from view and absorbing the tear with her veil.

When the cart jerked to a stop, she told herself to move, to jump from the conveyance and flee. But there was nowhere she could go. To return home would be to ask for punishment and no one else would take her in. She was nothing, a curse. And not even the promise of free labor would convince someone to care for her once they saw her face.

Consumed with the impossibility of escape, Rahab held still when she felt the cart shift with her abba's weight and then heard the scrape of rope as he tethered the donkey to one of the posts outside the temple. Her breath stuck in her throat as he strode around to her and she stared at the boards under her feet.

“Get down,” he barked. When she hesitated, he slapped the wood beside her. “Now!”

She scrambled to the ground, eyes watering.

“When we go inside, keep your face hidden and don’t say a word.”

She gripped the edge of her veil and pulled it closer so that it muffled her reply, “Yes, Abba.”

“Come then.” He turned, robes swishing around his calves.

They moved to the stairs of Ashtaroth’s temple and grief laced its way through Rahab’s chest. Though Ashtaroth was not as fearsome as Molech, she still knew what went on within the temple walls.

Inside, the floor was of large stones cut from limestone. It echoed sounds from every corner of the temple, even the rooms bordering either side of the entryway.

From those rooms came the same sounds she heard through the walls on nights when the men of her family called for their wives. They were the same sounds she had heard from Jilsen when he destroyed her hope for a future, and they mingled with the voices of those who passed through to the altar set in the rear of the temple.

Nausea climbed in her throat and she sucked in rapid breaths. Sounds muted, blessedly blocking everything but the dull roar of her heartbeat. She fisted her hands at her sides and forced herself to slow her breathing, repeating over and over to herself that everything would be alright.

If only it were possible to believe it.

They passed down a hallway, the end of which was draped with thick, purple curtains that hid whatever lay beyond. Women stood around pillars on either side, watching those who came near, and Rahab felt their gazes take her in.

One woman separated from the rest, her brilliant red tunic highlighting the gold paint around her eyes. Her mouth was raised in a soft smile that failed to reach any other portion of her face. Her gaze passed to Rahab before returning to her abba. The smile flickered. “May I help you?” Her voice was warm and soothing, settling Rahab’s nerves.

“Are you the head priestess?” Abba’s question was brisk, ignoring the woman’s courtesy in favor of his own straightforward demand.

Her smile fell the rest of the way. “I am Mitunbaal. And who are you to speak to me in such a manner?”

Again, he ignored her. Half turning, he grabbed Rahab’s arm and yanked her forward. “I have come to make an offering of my daughter to Ashtaroth. I will leave her in your service for a full year.”

“Abba!” The word escaped from Rahab’s mouth before she could stop it.

His hold tightened. “In return, I require ten talents of silver and Ashtaroth’s blessing on my other daughters.”

Mitunbaal raised a brow. “What makes you think you deserve such a blessing?”

“I know you will be able to make more than that amount back from her. It should be enough to earn me whatever I want.”

The room tunneled in Rahab’s vision. She felt herself sway, grounded only by her abba’s bronze grip. He meant to sell her. To the temple, where the women there were spoken of only in hushed voices and, at the mention of them, her ima spat. All for silver and a blessing.

A blessing for Bitnima and her other sisters.

The priestess cut her gaze to Rahab, her lips pulled sharply downward. “And why does she hide her face?”

Rahab looked away. Her hands clutched at the heavy fabric, pulling it tight around her neck.

“Her face will not matter for what she needs to do,” Abba said.

The sound the woman made in answer was decidedly bitter. “Neither will her age.” Her attention flashed once more to Rahab’s abba, disapproval deep in her tone. “Nevertheless, I will take her.” She motioned to the women who stood behind her. “Seek one of my lower priestesses to settle your agreement with the goddess. I will send your silver when you are finished.”

Abba released Rahab, eyes alight as he took in the brightly clad women, his posture already conveying that his thoughts were no longer occupied with his daughter. “See that you do.” He took a step forward as Rahab reached for him.

Her voice broke as she spoke his name, but he tore his robe from her fingers and shook it out as though discarding any filth it may have gathered from her touch.

Mitunbaal snatched Rahab’s wrist, holding her in place. “Do not bother yourself with him.” Her fingers tightened as her voice lowered, “He is not worthy of you.”

“When was the last time that you had your woman’s courses?”

Rahab ducked her head at the question, her cheeks stinging with humiliation. “Two weeks past,” she whispered. Beneath her feet, the stone where they stood had been painted with amber designs.

Mitunbaal fit her hand beneath Rahab’s chin and forced her head upward. Her gaze pierced, making Rahab feel as though she saw everything. “Your eyes are nice. The flecks of gold do much for your appearance when so much of it is hidden.”

Beneath the scarf, Rahab’s cheeks burned hotter. Her eyes were what Jilsen first noticed about her.

The woman’s hand fell away. “Your abba brought you here because you have already known a man, didn’t he?”

Was her shame so well written on her?

“I see,” Mitunbaal said, “then there is no need for me to tell you what you can expect, is there?”

“No,” Rahab whispered, though she wished there were.

With everything in her, she wished that there were.

“And how long ago was it that you were with him?”

“A week.”

The priestess studied her, as though searching for falsehood. For a moment, Rahab thought she saw the woman’s gaze soften. But then she turned away and motioned for Rahab to follow. “Come. You’re sure to be hungry and we must find you a place to sleep.”

She led the way to another room, one beyond the curtain. The space was large, with a statue of gold in the center. It bore the form of a woman, one with large breasts and an ample waist, though her head was small and narrow. Around her neck lay a rope of flowers and around her feet were bowls of burning incense.

Mitunbaal slowed, her attention fixated. “From now on, this is your goddess,” she said, “serve her well and she will do

the same for you.” When Rahab didn’t answer, she frowned in her direction. “Do you understand?”

“I—” But she didn’t, not the way Mitunbaal clearly wanted her to.

“Never mind,” the priestess said. “You will have time to learn.” Then she walked across the room, passing through another, smaller door. There she strode down a narrow hallway, leading Rahab to the end.

A door to the right opened to a kitchen, where women dressed in plain clothes stood over cookstoves. A large, wooden table took up much of the floor, where young girls diced vegetables and herbs before mixing them into bowls of yogurt.

“Give me your stool,” Mitunbaal said to one of the girls, who promptly hopped from it and stood along the table’s side. “Now bring me a bowl of whatever it is they have made for dinner, along with some bread.” The girl hurried off and Mitunbaal motioned for Rahab to claim the stool.

Rahab hesitated. Though Mitunbaal was the only one who watched her, she couldn’t help but feel the attention of everyone in the room. Without thought, her feet carried her three steps back toward the door.

“Come now.” The priestess grabbed her wrist, pulling her forward. “There is nothing to do about it now. This is your life, and you will make the best of it.”

Tears blinded her. “Why can I not do as they are?” she asked.

“Who?” Mitunbaal asked.

Rahab lip quivered. She blinked through the moisture in her eyes and glanced at the other women in the room. From the way they were dressed, she knew they did not serve in the rest of the temple.

The priestess laughed. “Oh, child, they are slaves. They will never have the honor of serving Ashtaroth as you shall.” Then she patted the stool, “Now sit and eat. Tomorrow is soon enough to begin your duties to the goddess.”

The girl returned then, with a bowl of lentil soup and a hunk of rye bread. Once she set the food down, Mitunbaal dismissed her to fetch something for Rahab to drink.

Though her heart was heavy, Rahab's stomach had yet to be fully sated. Tearing apart the bread, she dipped it into the soup and then stuffed it in her mouth. As her hunger eased, so did some of her fear. Here, there were none of her abba's wives or her sisters to tease her. And though Shiba was absent as well, there was some part of Mitunbaal's personality that reminded Rahab of Zibqet.

Now that Jilsen had ruined her, maybe this was the best life she could hope for.

Her bowl was nearly empty when the girl returned once more, a frothing goblet in her hand. Mitunbaal accepted the cup and then placed it in Rahab's hand. "Now, this shall taste bitter to your tongue, but trust me when I say that you shall need it to get through the months ahead."

"What is it?"

The woman smiled, the light from it failing to reach her eyes just as it had when she spoke to Rahab's abba. "A blessing of the goddess. It will keep you fit for her service."

And what if she didn't want to fulfill that service?

"Rahab," Mitunbaal said, her tone sharp with warning. "You may not actually need it now. It hasn't been long enough to tell. But you will not be able to get around this in the future."

Stomach burdened, both with food and disquiet, Rahab accepted the beverage. She tipped it to her lips, grimacing first from the foam on her lips and then from the taste of bitter herbs that coated her tongue. After draining the rest, she set aside the cup and pressed a hand to her throat, willing down the reflex that would see her meal returned to the outside.

"There," Mitunbaal's hand came down on her shoulder, rubbing in soothing circles, "it was not as unpleasant as you may have thought, was it?"

"No," Rahab said, despite the churning she felt inside.

“Now, we will find you a place to sleep.”

They crossed the hall, entering a room filled with beds. And though the sun had not yet gone down, many of them were occupied.

Halfway across the room, Rahab felt a shaft of pain streak down her spine. She froze, breathing in through clenched teeth as another flared in her side.

“Quickly, Rahab.” Mitunbaal gripped her under the arm and pulled her, half dragging, to a pallet in the far corner.

By the time she had sat, it felt as though fists had grabbed her innards, squeezing and twisting them. A whimper escaped and she collapsed on the blankets, a fist to her mouth and an arm wrapped around her waist.

“I know,” Mitunbaal said, “it hurts.”

A sob rattled Rahab’s torso. She barely felt the high priestess’ hands kneading the flesh at the base of her spine.

“But in the next few days,” the woman said, “it will be nothing but a memory, one that will be protected against with other precautions. And you will not need to worry about carrying a reminder of that man with you.”

Chapter 6

The cramping lasted through the next day, followed by two more days of weakness so intense she was unable to rise from bed and had to be fed and tended to. Mitunbaal provided most of the nursing herself, now and again alternating with one of the other priestesses. At some point, Rahab's scarf was removed, revealing her scars to anyone who cared to look.

Something dark shaded Mitunbaal's eyes when she looked at them. Her lips pinched in a tight line while her fingers brushed at Rahab's hair, offering a soothing touch despite her having given the beverage that had forced Rahab to her bed to begin with.

"I should have sent your abba away with nothing," the priestess spat at one point. "Would have served him for what he has done to you."

It was that sentiment which kept Rahab from turning away from her and burying her face in mortification and anger. Though she knew the woman could not be fully trusted, her heart soaked up the words like cracked earth, thirsty for rain.

At the end of the third day, she was sitting up, soft pillows bracing her from behind like a gentle hug.

Mitunbaal had gathered two of the other priestesses, along with a slave. While the slave held out new robes and tunics, the priestesses awed over the fabrics and colors, debating which to offer Rahab as a complement to her skin.

"No, not yellow," one of the women said, "she will only appear sicklier than she already does."

"Well, it is better than this blue, and it brings out her eyes," said another.

"Just because you find it pleasing does not mean the patrons will."

Mention of the men she would be forced to entertain destroyed what faint glimmer of contentment Rahab had felt.

She sank down into the pillows and blankets, as though she could hide from what was in store for her.

“Don’t argue over something so trivial,” Mitunbaal said. “While the yellow is better, neither is the right choice.”

“Then which do you prefer?” the first woman said, irritation barbing her tone.

“Do not get testy with me.” Mitunbaal narrowed her gaze. “Unless you wish to go back to work in the front rooms?” At this, the woman glanced away. Mitunbaal reached out and brushed aside the top fabrics the slave girl held, revealing darker colors beneath. “The best thing for young Rahab, are the reds. I dare any man to gaze into her eyes, framed by these, and be able to turn away.”

A shudder passed through Rahab’s shoulders.

“Framed?” the second woman spoke this time.

“Yes, I intend for her to continue wearing the veil.” Mitunbaal claimed the chosen robes, then turned and held them up for Rahab to better see. “I know you are afraid, but there is nothing to be done for it. We must all play our part for the goddess.” For a moment she hesitated, and then laid them across Rahab’s lap. “Let these garments be your shield.”

Later that night, before the last of the lamps had been blown out, Rahab swung her feet from the bed and tested their strength. Her legs held as she rose slowly, arms outstretched to catch her if she fell. When her limbs held steady, she paced slowly in the narrow space between her bed and the next.

With each step, she begged her legs to give out; for her knees to buckle beneath her or her stomach to cramp once more. Anything to prolong the inevitable. She thought to seek out the slave girl who had first brought that crippling drink, but her memories of that evening were hazy compared to the pain she suffered that night.

Turning back to the bed, she stared at the crimson garments folded at its foot. Unbidden, she reached out to crease their folds. The fabric was soft and smooth, as though running her hand over water without breaking the surface. And

the color was the deepest and fullest that she could ever remember seeing. Despite what they meant, she found herself wanting them. Never had she been given something so beautiful.

One of the room's other occupants snorted, an older woman who rolled over in her sleep. Rahab jerked her hand from the clothes as though scalded. Her heart raced and she hated herself for the thoughts that had entered her mind.

That with rewards such as these, perhaps it would not be so awful giving herself to men when she had no hope for a better future anyway.

“Never accept a man based on appearance alone,” Mitunbaal warned Rahab. They stood outside the heavy curtain to Ashtaroth’s throne room, watching the early morning worshipers make their way down the hallway toward them. “Beautiful men can be cruel, even when seeking the blessing of a goddess.”

Rahab drew her veil tight over her face and stared down at her toes peeking from her sandals. She would rather not choose anyone.

“No.” The High Priestess elbowed her in the side. “Do not shy away from their gaze.”

Rahab looked back up. The men coming toward her were young and old, slovenly in appearance and well-kept. In their faces, she searched for signs they might be like her abba and brothers.

Mitunbaal sighed. “Today, I will help you chose. But watch carefully. After this, you must do it on your own.” The woman stepped forward, parting the throng of priestesses and worshipers with her presence alone.

Lingering near a pillar some distance from the heavy curtains, stood a man in plain robes. His belt was wrapped tight around his waist and his sandals were well fastened, though his hair stuck up from his head as though he had run his fingers through it all morning. His gaze darted around at

Mitunbaal's approach, giving him the appearance of a sheep facing a lion.

"What is it you have come to the home of Ashtaroth to find?" Mitunbaal asked, her voice as soothing as it had been for Rahab when they had first met. "I am sure I can pair you with a priestess to petition the goddess on your behalf."

"I..." his gaze flittered, refusing to meet hers. "My wife and I, we seek to have a child." His cheeks colored beneath his beard and he clutched his hands before him, knuckles turning white.

"A worthy request." The priestess turned then, took Rahab's hand and pulled her between them. "Perhaps you will find this woman to your liking?"

The man nodded, not even bothering to glance at her.

"Go on," Mitunbaal urged Rahab beneath her breath. "Do as you have been told."

Rahab shook. She saw her hand reach for his, saw him stiffen at her touch. Her conscience battled. She did not want this; *he* did not want this. But he was there, asking for a blessing, and she was a girl with nothing before her other than a year in the temple's service.

Leading him back through the crowd and into Ashtaroth's presence, Rahab coaxed him first through the placing of incense and then through the prayers that would open the goddess's eyes and ears to his plight. The words were a breath on her tongue passing through numb lips that moved even when her chest ached for them to stop.

When finished, she took his hand again, noticing that this time, he did not react. She found his face blank, his eyes looking into a future she could not see. Hopefully it was good.

Weaving their way from the room, Rahab took him into another, smaller chamber. There, she urged him to the thin mattress on the floor and put out the small lamp set in the wall. Later, when they were finished, a slave girl would come and relight it. But for now, what they did was best left in the dark.

Not every man who Rahab chose following that day was as indifferent to her as the first. Some grasped at her, holding on as though she were their only hope at love, then turned from her once they were finished. Others were harsh, rough with their words and their hands. These men, she never allowed into her bed again.

Far less varied than the men were the requests they brought to the goddess's feet: wealth, favor, honor, and glory. Even fewer asked for noble things such as wisdom, guidance, or health for themselves and their families.

None of them inquired for more than her name. No one wanted to know if she had any requests of her own. They only cared that worship of Ashtaroth required their petition to be offered in passion, when their minds were most open to her presence. And for women like Rahab, there was little passion found in the dark corners of the chambers where they worked.

The time before Rahab had lost herself seemed long gone and distant. It took less than a month for her to lose the regret that colored her cheeks, along with the hesitation.

What happened during the day, she no longer cared. So long as she could return alone to her bed in the common room at night.

“Rahab,” Mitunbaal said one day, stopping her as she left her chamber following a man who hurried to tighten the belt at his waist. Rahab herself was fiddling with the heavy scarf about her face, ensuring nothing but her eyes could be seen. The other woman frowned. “Are you not able to keep your hands from playing with that strip of cloth even for a moment?”

Fear stirred in her gut for the first time in weeks. “If I leave it be, it may fall.”

“Well, it makes you seem like a scared infant. And only the worst of men want that.”

Rahab tucked her arms around her waist. “Then what will you have me do?”

“I do not know. But for now, try not to be concerned with whether anyone sees. They have not come for your face anyway.”

Three days later, Mitunbaal found a solution. She kept Rahab back in the kitchen after the priestesses broke their fast, directing her to take a seat at the table as she had once before. Two slave women held Rahab’s arms, steadyng her.

“Forgive me,” Mitunbaal said, “but this shall hurt.” She held a needle over the flame of a lamp, heating its end so that it glowed red.

Rahab dug her nails into her knees and wished for the covering of the scarf the High Priestess had made her discard. The slave women at her back dug their hands in tighter.

Leaving the lamp, Mitunbaal turned to Rahab with the needle aloft. She gripped the top of Rahab’s head and then brought her other hand to Rahab’s nose.

Heat seared the flesh between her nostrils, bringing tears to her eyes and a scream to her throat. She attempted to raise her arms but felt them bound to her sides as the sharp metal was driven all the way through.

“Shh,” Mitunbaal petted her hair, “Only a little while longer.” But the pain only increased as the needle was moved back and forth, widening the hole it had made. When it was finally finished, Mitunbaal quickly snatched a ring that she’d laid on the table and fit it into place. “There.” She motioned for the slaves to step away.

Rahab held her back stiff, her head unmoving. Tears rolled over her cheeks and trailed down to her chin. In her nose, the ring was heavy and awkward, feeling as though someone had thrust a rod rather than a needle into her skin.

Mitunbaal clucked her tongue. “Yes, it hurts. But the pain will fade, and soon you will not even remember it.”

“How long?”

The woman hesitated. “Longer than you would like.”

For the rest of the week, Rahab was allowed to hide in the room where they all slept. Gradually, the puffiness faded and she could touch the ring in her nose without yelping. On the fourth day, after she was assured that the redness had faded, Mitunbaal brought Rahab a new veil.

This one was sheer, offering only enough obscurity to mask the scars from those who already did not care to see the shadows in a priestess' eyes. One side of the veil hooked to the ring in Rahab's nose, ensuring that it would never fall away, leaving Rahab's hands free for other things.

Chapter 7

There was chanting in the streets. A crowd of men and women had been gathering outside the temples since the night before, consuming offerings of grain and wine on behalf of the gods who would never actually taste them. It was the Festival of New Harvest... five months after Rahab had first arrived at the temple of Ashtaroth.

Like the other priestesses, she stood near the entrance to the temple, waiting for drunk revelers to stumble into her arms and later, her bed.

Her blood warmed with the excitement, the songs and movement carrying her with their chaos. Never before had she been allowed to leave the safety of her family home during this time of year, but now she stood in the thick of the revelry, absorbing the energy into her very pores.

A wineskin was passed into her hand and she tipped it back, allowing the sharp liquid to travel down her throat and coat her chest in warmth. She closed her eyes, lingering in the sensation as the wineskin was tugged away and she was left to digest the feelings that swarmed her. With every vessel that came her way, she claimed a guzzle, welcoming the lightheadedness that came with it.

At one point, Mitunbaal appeared beside her, her outline fuzzy and her words distant. “Be careful, Rahab,” she said, but then there was a man grasping at Rahab’s robes, tugging her into the shadows of the temple pillars.

The next morning, Rahab awoke far from her bed. Her tunic was pulled down over her arm and thunder bashed her skull. She squinted at the sunlight streaming through the main door of the temple and a whimper escaped her throat as her stomach heaved. She pressed her lips tight, stemming the flow of what might come up.

Outside the temple, there were voices raised in a second morning’s revelry. Strident laughter scraped her ears and the

scent of burning sacrifices seeped through her veil.

There was a snort at her back and something tightened around her waist. She looked down to find an arm with dark skin and hair, the knuckles wrinkled in age. His face lay pressed against her side, his eyes closed and his lips parted in silent breaths.

Rahab pressed the back of her hand to the veil covering her mouth. Tears stung her eyes and the whimper she had fought before turned to a keening wail that nothing could stop.

Bodies stirred on the floor around her, their noises muffled by the drum of anguish in her chest. The man blinked and she watched as he first looked at her and then raised his head to take in the temple. His lips turned to a frown and then a scowl when her keening failed to cease. But she couldn't stop.

In all the months she had been there, she had taken man after man to her couch. None had known her and few had returned. This man would be no different.

Except that *she* knew him. Ariciti—the man she would have first called father-in-law had the dog not marred her face.

The festival continued for the next five days. Each morning brought pious offerings while every day set with feasts and debauchery. For the second and third days of the celebration, Rahab refused to come out from the room all the priestesses shared. Instead, she spent the time with her legs pulled to her chest and her head resting against her knees.

“I warned you.” Mitunbaal’s golden robes filled Rahab’s downcast gaze. “You shouldn’t think that because you serve the goddess you are free of the consequences.”

But Ashtaroth had been far from Rahab’s mind when she chose to accept drink after drink. It had been the memory of her past that she had wanted to drown. Instead, she had resurrected it with more pain than she could have ever imagined.

“And neither can you continue to linger in bed every day. Come tomorrow, I will expect you to return to your duties.”

“Yes, Priestess,” Rahab mumbled.

The next day, she rose before the sun and dressed. The robe she had worn those first days of the festival lay at the foot of her bed. She kicked it, along with the veil, across the room to mingle with other discarded garments left by priestesses too exhausted to take care of their possessions.

That night, slaves would gather the clothes to be washed and, by festival’s end, they would be returned clean. That would have to be time enough for Rahab to forget what had happened in them.

Clad in a deep orange tunic, the last color of sunset, she strode from the room, determined to put aside everything she had felt since the year before, when her face and her life had been torn. She would double her veils and bury her face—her past—so that even memories could not hurt her.

“There you are.” Some months later, Mitunbaal met Rahab coming through the curtain early in the morning. Her voice was pitched low, as though her words were too important to be shared. “Come with me.”

Rahab followed her through the temple, stopping in the shade of the pillars near the main entryway. The place where she had lain with Ariciti seemed to call to her, mocking her gaze. Locking her teeth, she turned away, placing the memory behind her.

Mitunbaal appeared not to notice how she reacted to their location, or else believed it should not have mattered. Instead, she placed a hand on Rahab’s arm. “You remember that your abba brought you here with the intent of leaving you for a year.”

“Yes, Priestess.” Her heart raced as she realized that a year had already passed. “Has he changed his mind?” She squeezed her hands at her waist, offering prayers to Ashtaroth that he had.

“No,” Mitunbaal tone dipped in sympathy. “He waits outside for you.”

“Oh.” Rahab expelled a breath and released the clench of her fists. She would not allow herself to care. Just as with Ariciti, her abba would hold no sway over her emotions.

The High Priestess’s grasp tightened. “I know I have not asked you what happened to bring you here, but I also know your life could not have been a good one.”

Rahab bit the inside of her lip to squelch the trembling she felt there. “No, Priestess.”

“I do not want you to tell me now,” Mitunbaal continued. She raised her hand, sliding her fingers beneath Rahab’s veil to rest them against her cheek, where she was sure to feel the pits and ridges of Rahab’s scars. For a moment, it seemed as though tears glistened in her eyes before being quickly blinked away. “I cannot bear the knowledge on my conscience, not when I have no power to keep you here.”

“Yes, Priestess.” Her throat felt thick around the words.

“But know this,” here Mitunbaal grasped both of Rahab’s shoulders and leaned with their faces close together, “for the past year, you have born the power of Ashtaroth. You are a priestess, mighty with the strength of a goddess. Do not let anyone treat you as anything less.” The woman released her, taking a step back. “Now, you must go.” She leaned close. “But do not lower your gaze for anyone.”

Rahab sucked in a gasping breath. “Thank you, Priestess.”

They stood awkwardly, neither moving. Then the older woman nudged Rahab’s shoulder. “Go on with you. Your time here is at an end.”

Rahab stumbled then, her feet seeming to war with her legs as they carried her through the main doors. Outside, the sun assaulted her eyes, blinding her so she did not see the man approach until he blocked the light from her eyes. Her abba stood before her, a smile on his lips as he looked her over.

“I see they fed you well,” he said.

Her brow wrinkled, confusion tearing through the walls she had erected around her heart. Could her abba actually be pleased to see her?

“And what is this?” he asked, flicking the ring in her nose. “Is it for the men to lead you like a bull when you are unwilling?”

Hope leaked away, like puss from a wound. She should have known better than to uncover it. Tipping her head up, she met his gaze. “No, it is not.”

He scowled. “But it has to serve some use. I can’t imagine the Priestess wasting money on you unless it served her own purpose.”

Rahab hesitated, unwilling to telling him the truth, but knowing he would insist on it.

She still remembered the feel of his hand striking her face.

“The ring holds the veils in place,” she said, bitterness thick in her tone.

Her abba laughed then. “Is that so?” His lips twisted in a leering grin. “That’s something I should have thought of. But at least this way, I didn’t have to pay for it.”

Anger tightened in her chest. Was money all she was worth to him? If so, why had he returned for her at all?

“Come.” He turned away, waving for her to follow him. “It is time for us to go home.”

At the foot of the stairs, Rahab saw the cart she had been brought in, the old gray beast that had been pulling it now replaced with a much younger animal. As before, she climbed up in the back, this time preferring the solitude it offered.

From the front, her abba smacked the donkey’s rump, urging it forward. They picked their way through the streets of Jericho, returning the way she had first come. Though the sights were no different, she saw them with new eyes; men whom she recognized and wives whom she knew they had been unfaithful to. Even the man who had first come to her, begging for a child.

Had Ashtaroth granted his request, or had his offering of gold and incense been worth no more than the time he spent with her, whispering the name of another woman?

Notes of a song carried to her, and she turned her head when she realized it was her abba whistling. It was a tune she recognized, one of seasons and plenty. “Do you know,” her abba said, breaking off his song, “that sending you to the temple was the best decision I ever made?”

She held her gaze, refusing to hide her face even though he didn’t look at her.

“Since trading you for Ashtaroth’s favor, I have married off both of your sisters. And for much more than I had hoped.”

Relief and jealously pierced her heart. Though Bitnima would no longer be there to torment her, it was Rahab’s misery that had earned Bitnima her happiness.

“I can’t even say that I am mad you ruined yourself anymore,” he said. “I would have married you off if you hadn’t, and then where would we be?” He laughed; she didn’t.

Chapter 8

There was no one waiting for them when they rumbled to a stop outside the gate. The yard was empty, and the front door of the house open. It felt like a dream, returning after so long away. Had she ever actually lived there, or had that all been a cruel nightmare given by the gods?

Rahab moved to the edge of the cart. Supporting her weight with a hand against its edge, she leaped down. Dust puffed around her feet, coating her elegant sandals and dirtying the hem of her scarlet robe.

It was then she heard a squeal; saw a small, naked form rush from house. The little boy stumbled on wobbling legs while a woman hurried to grab him. With the toddler wiggling and screaming in her arms, the woman tipped back her head, nudging hair from her face. It was in that moment Rahab recognized her sister-in-law... and wished that she hadn't.

As Abba swung open the gate, the women's gazes met. At first Shiba frowned, as though confused by the stranger standing outside her home. Then her features paled and her lips parted in shock. The boy in her arms thrashed, bucking from her grasp so that he slid to the ground, only to quickly heave to his feet and hobble to where Abba stood.

The man laughed and swung the child up, tucking him tight against his chest. "Are you excited to see me?" he said, tickling the boy under his chin.

Shiba pulled her gaze away, pink replacing the pallor of her cheeks. "Forgive me, Abba, but Duni escaped me."

"That's alright. I am glad to see the boy eager to spend time with me." He touched the boy's nose and then tipped him under his arm. Duni screeched in laughter, his happiness knives to Rahab's ears.

If not for the rottenness of her fate, she might have already been mother to her own child. One her abba would have been proud to claim as his descendant.

Eyes downcast, Shiba played with the fringed belt at her waist. “In—in that case, I will return to help Sisa with the evening meal.” She turned without a backward glance, and hurried toward the house.

“Make sure there is enough for Rahab,” Abba called, his smile directed to Duni. Raising a finger, he tickled the child’s tummy. “Wouldn’t want the girl to go hungry now, would we?”

If Shiba had heard what was said, she gave no indication.

Rahab glanced away. Even as a child, she could not remember her abba ever showing her so much attention.

Stepping inside the house was like entering a tomb. Compared to the temple’s wide-open rooms, the inside of their home was cramped and dark, smoke from lamps and incense giving off a haze. Her brothers sat on cushions in the main room, their faces registering first surprise and then contempt upon seeing her.

It seemed that no one had known Abba intended to bring her home.

Her brother, Idrikan stood, his gaze traveling from her to his son in Abba’s arms. His features tightened and he wavered on his feet, as though struggling against the urge to snatch Duni away. “Why is she here?” Though his voice was impassive, Rahab felt a hole open in the pit of her stomach.

Somehow, she had believed with Abba’s having come for her, that at least some of the family’s opinions of her had softened. Now she knew that too had been a false hope; one she never should have let take flame.

“Idrikan,” Abba answered, “don’t be so harsh to your sister. It is because of her that we enjoy the prosperity we have had of late.”

What prosperity? The house was the same, her brothers’ clothing no better than before. The only difference she saw was the beast that had brought her home. What could have been worth selling his own daughter?

“Abba...” Idrikan started.

But the man heard nothing. After setting Duni on the floor, he gestured for Rahab to follow him. “Come see what riches you have brought our way.” He stepped over cushions, walking toward the room in the back. There, he continued outside, striding around the house to where a set of stairs lead to the roof.

Rahab kept pace, curiosity overpowering the urge to stay away. The roof had never been a place she liked to be, with a sun-caked floor that burned her feet and only a knee-high wall to keep anyone from falling off.

Abba stopped on the eastern side of the roof, looking out over the city and the many buildings filling its streets. He pointed to the distance, where mountain peaks glowed red in the light of the setting sun. Nearer, though still so distant it was hardly a concern of hers, was the wall that surrounded Jericho.

For a moment, she simply enjoyed the beauty of it, forgetting there was more to the sight than its appearance. The anxiety that had plagued her bled away and she relaxed with a sigh.

Perhaps now, she would come up here more often.

“Do you see it?” Abba asked. “That wall... the mightiest in all of Canaan.”

“Yes, Abba.”

“Do you know that it is a feat to own part of it; to claim a piece of its might and strength?”

She hadn’t. Not that she had ever thought of owning it. What did homes and property mean to her when she would never claim them?

“Well, I tell you that I bought a house there. It required most everything I earned from your sisters, but it will more than pay for itself.”

She looked to him then, studying the smile and excitement that played on his face. How could a home ever pay for itself, when their family already owned one?

But then his expression shifted, his lips curling in much the same expression he'd had earlier that day when he'd come for her. "Or should I say, that you will more than pay for it?"

The evening meal was taken in the main room, Rahab's abba and brothers seated in the center while their wives sat behind them.

Rahab ate with neither.

In a far corner, she sat with her legs crossed, her own plate of food at her feet. No one had looked at her since she returned from the roof where her world had further fallen out from underneath her.

She should have known her abba wouldn't bring her home out of the kindness of his heart but only from of the greed of his purse. And here she was, exiled from her family, marooned in the depths of her own thoughts.

Duni crouched at her abba's feet, his hands reaching to mimic his elder's. They ate, scooping lentils and seasoned lamb with their fingers. With their other hand they drank, though more of the wine soaked into Duni's tunic than into his stomach.

"The boy's a hungry little cub, isn't he?" Abba grasped his grandson's wine skin, stopping the spill of red that soaked into the rug. "Maybe his ima had best take him to be washed up."

Idrikan clicked his tongue and motioned the child toward his wife.

Wiping her hand on the cloth at her feet, Shiba rose. She grabbed the boy around his waist and hoisted him to hers before leaving.

Without Duni's presence, the room settled into silence.

Rahab pushed the lamb on her plate. She looked to where the other women shared one platter, their food mounded in the center while they ate in an unaltering rhythm.

Zibqet sat to the back, her eyes unfocused as she stared at nothing, her fingers moving from plate to mouth while empty.

It was then Rahab realized Duni had been the only child in the room. The last time she had seen Zibqet, her abba's wife had been heavy laden with child.

Sorrow tightened in Rahab's chest seeing the woman who had been closer than her own ima, now with arms empty. What had happened to steal Rahab's younger brother or sister?

“Rahab!” Ima’s voice cut sharp across the room. Every head turned her way. Ima’s features scrunched in anger, her tone biting with it. “Do you know no better than to stare?”

“I—” Rahab hesitated. She had not meant to be rude, but with no one to speak to, she hadn’t a better way to learn what had happened in her absence. “Forgive me. I only wondered...”

Lips quivering, Zibqet looked to her lap.

“It is not your place to ask such things,” Ima scolded. “You are a horrible, selfish child.”

Anger flared in her chest and Rahab tipped up her chin. “I am not a child.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t act like one.”

Rahab balled her hands into fists, the juices of the lamb squelching between her fingers.

Abba laughed, drawing both their attention. “Now, Sisa, there’s no need to be harsh.”

“She’s thoughtless!”

“She has been gone and is bound to be curious.”

Ima’s nostrils flared and Zibqet seemed to curl in on herself. The other wives either stared in mute horror or else picked at the rug beneath their feet. “Then you speak to her,” Ima said. “Explain what has befallen this household since she turned herself a harlot and brought this curse down on us.”

Abba’s face lost all joviality, his eyes narrowing as a muscle in his jaw ticked. “There is no curse.”

“Is that not what it is called when a man turns on his own son?”

“I turned on no one.” Abba motioned to Rahab’s brothers seated around him. “These are my sons.”

“The ones yet living!”

Rahab’s breath lodged in her throat. She shifted her gaze from Abba to Ima, to Zibqet. What Ima was saying couldn’t be true. Abba would never...

But had it not been only a year ago that she had believed him incapable of what he had done to *her*? What would stop him from doing away with an infant son when he had so many others?

Had the ashes of Zibqet’s child mingled with those of many other sacrifices to Molech while Rahab had served Ashtaroth?

Abba stood, his face a mask of rage. “Get out.” He motioned to the doorway which Shiba had already left through. “You will not question my actions and still eat of my food.”

“It was my hands that prepared it.”

“And I am the one who provided it.” He marched forward, stepping over pillows while sons and wives scurried out of his path. While Ima glared up at him in defiance, he wrenched her arm, lifting her to her feet.

“Don’t you touch me,” Ima screamed. And then again, “Don’t you touch me!” It was a futile demand. A desperate cry repeated with the knowledge that she had no other means of defense.

Rahab scooted until her back was pressed against the wall. Fitting her palms against her ears, she curled forward with her legs digging into her stomach. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she winced at the echoing sound of flesh meeting flesh.

Chapter 9

The next day, Ima wasn't able to stand. Her face was a patchwork of bruises, her lips swollen to twice their size. After Abba finished with her, promising the same treatment to anyone who thought to help her, he had Rahab's brothers carry her into the kitchen where she stayed the rest of the night and on into the afternoon.

Now, she lay in the corner, her moans setting everyone on edge.

Rahab sat across the room, a bowl of chickpeas in her lap. She absently picked at them, shelling some while dropping the rest untouched. All the while, her gaze never strayed from her ima.

The women worked in silence, unspoken agreement marooning them all in their own thoughts. Only Duni continued to play, his murmured words understood by no one but himself as he stacked twigs meant for that night's cookfire. The sticks tumbled, scattering across the floor, and he shrieked with glee.

Zibqet suddenly stood, her hurried steps carrying her the long way around the boy on her way outside.

Everyone else stilled, their gazes tracking her passage.

Shiba tucked her chin to her chest, her lip quivering.

Rahab's arms ached to draw her brother's wife close, to pat her hair and speak words of encouragement. At the same time, her feet itched to race outside, to find Zibqet and promise that never again would children be stolen from her; never again would her offspring feed the fires of Molech.

But Rahab knew neither woman would welcome her comfort. She was the curse that had brought their pain, the stark reminder of their place in the world.

Theirs was a life of service, bound to the wills of their abbas and husbands. Best to pray to the gods for men who

were kind and seal your lips to bitter wails when they were not.

Gathering her focus, Rahab returned to shelling chickpeas with new determination. Her fingers pinched dry, brown pods, splitting them so she could then push the peas out with her thumb. They fell into the bowl, settling into the mix of chickpeas and pods.

Ima moaned again and Rahab's hands faltered.

She didn't want to step in. The woman she called Ima had never truly been one to her and the beating she had suffered was not one Rahab wished to experience herself. But the sounds made in pain called out to her, stirring a sympathy she could not keep buried.

Moving the bowl from her lap, Rahab rose. Striding to the pitcher of water set in the corner of the room, she grasped it and the small drinking vessel sitting alongside. She could sense the other women's gazes on her as she poured water into the cup. Setting the pitcher back onto its low shelf, she turned, ignoring the sets of eyes that followed her.

No one spoke when she reached Ima's side. Kneeling, she set the cup down and reached to raise the other woman off the floor. Her breath grunted from her nose as she heaved her up by her shoulders, moving her to lean against the wall.

Ima cried out. Her head lolled to the side and she shakily lifted her hand, only for her arm to then collapse beside her. Rahab raised it to rest in Ima's lap and then tipped her head up.

“You need to drink this,” she said, having poised the cup at her ima's swollen lips. When she made no move, Rahab tipped the vessel, spilling water in her mouth and down her chin.

The woman jerked, spitting water.

Rahab brushed the dribble from her ima's face and tried again. This time, Ima's eyes cracked open and she swallowed. By the time she had finished everything in the cup, her front was drenched and the edge of her tunic had slipped, revealing more bruising along her collarbone.

As Rahab laid the woman back down, the voice of one of her brother's wives at last carried across the room. "You shouldn't have helped her."

"I know." But neither could she have done any differently.

For the next ten days, Rahab was the only one to look after her ima's needs while the rest of the women simply ignored her. Gone was the closeness Rahab and Shiba had shared before her time in the temple, replaced with a coldness rarely felt in a desert.

And if Abba new what Rahab was doing, he chose not to mention it.

By day eleven, the swelling on Ima's face had gone down while the bruising turned the yellow color of bile. Because of Rahab's ministrations, the strength had returned to her arms, if not fully to her legs, and she began to shove her daughter away, insisting she could care for herself.

Even then, Rahab continued to place food and drink near where she slept in the kitchen.

Because of Ima's defiance, Zibqet became Abba's new favorite. Every time he called for her at night, the next morning she would return to the kitchen with an expression more shuttered and broken than before.

And every night at dinner, Abba would drink and laugh, his conscience clear while his women lay broken. "Pretty soon, I tell you," Abba said, his words interrupted with a chuckle, "we will live with the wealth of kings! All that is left to do is to furnish Rahab's new abode and then..."

But Rahab tuned out his news. Her hands clenched within the folds of her robes, hidden from view. Her vision saw red and inside she screamed for her brothers to stand up and do something to stop this. But the men she was forced to call family said nothing.

They were not the ones who had to live with the shame that came with being a woman under their abba's thumb. They

were not the ones cast down, or scowled at in the streets for allowing a prostitute in the family.

They were not women.

It was day fifteen when Abba called for her. “It is time for you to make good on my investment.”

Silently, she climbed into the back of the cart she had come to hate and turned her face to the road as they pulled away.

No one said anything to her as she left. They didn’t even come out to see her away.

The streets they traversed were blessedly different than those they had traveled before. Rahab let her feet dangle and her legs sway with the jostle of the cart. Rather than temples, they passed merchant stalls and the homes of Jericho’s poor. But being clothed in the red garments she brought from the temple still drew gazes.

Near the city wall, Abba pulled the cart to a halt and lumbered from the front to tie the donkey at a post. Then he called for her, his feet already carrying him toward an open doorway.

Rahab hopped down, her gaze taking in the city around her. At that hour, the sun blazed down on stone and adobe homes, blending everything in a tan haze. The wall rose tall overhead, the two-story buildings constructed into its sides the only thing that kept its three-story height in place.

Inside, she found a room lit only by the light streaming through the doorway and windows on either side. There was a hiss of flame and then she saw her father standing across the room, illuminated by the lamp he was now setting in a crevice in the wall.

The room was open, without walls to cordon off space. Instead, the floor was littered with pillows that sat atop a large rug woven with red and gold designs that glittered in the lamplight. Against the far wall was a couch, and a set of stairs to the right led to the second floor.

After lighting two more lamps, Abba left one on an adjacent ledge and strode with the other to the stairs.

Rahab followed, curiosity pulling her deeper into a place she wanted no part of. And yet...until now, she had never really dreamed of having a home of her own. Here, she could have control. Not Abba, not Ima. Far from their eyes, she could spend her days doing as she pleased.

Upstairs was somewhat different from below. While the space was just as open, there were now three windows facing toward the front and one that looked out through the great wall. While her abba turned to lighting more lamps, she drifted in that direction.

The mountains were so much closer here, their peaks rising so high she had to lean out in order to seem them. Now they were bathed in light as they had been the evening she first learned about this house. At this distance, the stone cliffs seemed to have turned to gold.

A road came from the south, winding through fields of grains and grapevines. And farther east, beyond the mountains and the hills, was the river Jordan. Closing her eyes, she could almost imagine she heard it, rushing and pulling at its banks.

Drawing herself away, she found the room fully lit. Abba was speaking, his tone serious, his expression dire. But she heard none of it. It was like there was a ringing in her ears; a river's roar, a drumbeat of regret.

There was a basket in one corner of the room, the lid barely covering yards of brightly colored fabrics. In another corner were the stairs that led both down and then up to the roof, and across from that, a floor lamp. But in the corner nearest to her, where she only now dared to look, stood a bed piled high with cushions. Though far grander than the one she'd had at the temple, it was still for the same purpose.

However, instead of serving Ashtaroth and interceding on behalf of her patrons' prayers, she would be a common harlot, claiming money to satisfy men's hunger.

“Rahab.” Abba came to stand before her. Under his beard, his lips flattened in a frown. “Did you hear what I said?”

She hesitated. “I— yes, Abba.” She looked away, hiding the truth from his gaze.

He huffed. “Then take this.” He pressed something into her palm, closing her fingers around it. “This is all you get for now. I’ll return in a week, and there had better be more than there is now when I do.”

Coins shifted between her fingers, trapped in her loose grip by a leather pouch. Her hand shook. She had no idea how to do what he wanted.

How was she to ask someone to pay her? And how much was enough?

How much was too much?

She had never done this, never been responsible for finding men who would come to her. Never had to provide her own food and clothing. And though she wasn’t concerned for her abba, she wished that he would worry for her.

She wished that he cared.

Chapter 10

There wasn't any food in her new house, only empty vats and a few baskets. And since she could eat neither, she was forced to venture out the next morning.

She stumbled through her door with nothing but the bag of coins in her grasp. That early, Jericho's walls blocked the sun and a chill breeze blew through the street. She huddled in on herself, tilting her head to better cover her face with the veil while she tucked her arms close into her sides.

Dressed in her bright clothes, she knew she stood out against the tans and browns of the city. And without the protection of her abba and his rumbling cart, she was all the more exposed. And hunched as she was, she must have seemed ashamed. As though she wanted to hide from them in plain sight.

Around her, men and women hurried about their errands. The women averted their gazes as she passed, many with features pinched in disgust. In contrast, the men studied her openly, making her feel as though they could see through the thin layers she wore.

Mitunbaal's admonition came to her then, the reminder to meet their gazes. So she straightened, forcing herself to walk upright and confident despite her desire to do anything else.

Their stares she was used to, but combined with the women's aversion, it only served to remind of how far she had drifted from a respectable existence.

Eventually, after Rahab had traipsed so far as to leave the shadow of Jericho's wall behind, she located the market. At this hour, women bartered for fish fresh caught from the river as well as the last of the year's grain. The flies had already risen, buzzing where they were not welcome.

Rahab hesitated, her gaze sweeping the throng of open-air stalls and the booming symphony of voices.

But then she caught sight of a basket of olives, the plump green fruits glistening, their pungent scent too much for the flying insects. Even without being able to smell them herself, her stomach clenched and her mouth watered. Soon, she stood alongside, her memory vacant as to having ever moved.

“Ah, I see you have good taste,” a man said, coming to stand on the other side. “These came fresh yesterday from the city’s eastern grove.” His smile was appraising, clearly taking in everything about her.

Too late, she realized that her eagerness may not have played in her favor.

The man stretched, leaning one arm against a pole which held the canopy over his stall. The sleeve of his tunic bunched along his bicep and his grin turned lazy. “You know, for you, I might be able to work out a deal that is... acceptable to the both of us.”

Beneath the veil, her cheeks heated. “I...” She fiddled with the weight of her purse, mentally counting the few coins. She wasn’t so naive as to wonder what sort of trade this man inferred. And giving him what he clearly wanted would ensure there was less coin to make up for when her abba returned.

But how could she trade herself for something so frivolous? Would she continue to take such deals, until she had begun to value herself as nothing? “I’m sorry.” She took a step away from him though she held his stare. “I cannot do that.”

His shoulders stiffened and his lips tipped into a frown. “My produce isn’t good enough for someone like you?”

“No, I just—” When his eyes narrowed further, she realized there was no point in trying to pacify him. “It’s still early and I have other purchases to make.”

Quickly, she turned away, striding farther from him. A few stalls down, she ducked into the shade of another merchant’s table. There, she turned her back to one of the poles, breathing deep.

“What are you doing?” a sharp voice spoke from behind, startling her. “Get out from there.”

She scurried to do as the man demanded and spun to find a man older than her abba glowering at her beneath the edge of his camel-colored turban. “If you are not going to buy anything, then go away. I don’t need a woman like you hanging around.”

A wave of flies buzzed around fish piled in baskets at his feet. The red scales offered a gory splash of color against the otherwise drab interior of his stall.

Rahab sucked in a deep breath, willing her heart to settle. “How much?”

He eyed her, the harsh line of his lips not easing. “Three silvers.”

For how many fish? She glanced at the baskets, unsure how she should ask.

“Three silvers for one,” he snapped.

That was half of what she had. “One?”

“The price is more for lurking in my stall.”

She looked down the line of merchants. There were not any others selling fish. But three coins... Her fingers shook as she undid the purse’s drawstring. Reaching in, she pulled out what she needed.

The man grabbed them and stuffed them in his own purse. “Well,” he said, “take one and get out of here.”

“But...” She looked at their blank eyes and open mouths. How was she supposed to carry it?

“Hurry up!”

Panicked, she reached for one on top and grasped it with both hands. She hustled off; the fish held out before her with its tail hanging limp.

Someone knocked into her and swore.

She turned to apologize, but the man was already striding away and she could feel the ground shifting beneath her feet. Once her vision started to whirl, she knew that whatever was

happening had less to do with the earth and more to do with hunger and a sense of being overwhelmed.

How was she supposed to do all of this for herself?

With wobbling steps, she made her way from the market and stumbled through the streets. Eventually she reached the wall. Pulse under control, she managed to find the stairs to her house and strode inside. Walking across the room, she placed her purchase on the table and then wiped her hands down the sides of her robes.

Tears bit her eyes and her lower lip quivered. She had made such a fool of herself, first with the olive merchant and then with the fish monger. She had not thought...

She simply had not thought. And now, all she had to show was a single fish and a half empty purse.

Hunger gnawed on Rahab's stomach by the time the sun began to set.

She had already eaten the fish, having cooked it in a pot over a fire in the corner of her roof, where the breeze could carry away the smoke. The meat had been flavorless, without oils or spices to engage her tongue, which was already dry from lack of water as she had not managed the nerve to go out and get any. But with night falling... she didn't have any other option if she wanted to survive.

Finding two small jugs set into a corner, she lifted them under her arms. Outside, the streets were largely empty, with lights flickering in open windows where families gathered for the evening meal. Rahab strode determinedly by them, refusing to look to either side lest she spot someone watching her and thus lose her courage.

At the well, she set both jugs down and reached for the rope tethered to the well's edge. The fibers made a sawing noise as she heaved upward, hand over hand. Once she felt the slick handle of the clay vessel used to haul the water up, she grabbed hold and hoisted it over the side.

Rahab had just lowered the vessel back into the well, prepared to repeat the process in order to fill her second jug, when she heard the crunch of footsteps behind her. A spark of fear stilled her hands.

“Well, hello,” a nasally voice said, those two words dripping with an intonation that made her skin crawl.

Preferring to see him rather than allowing the man to linger behind her, Rahab turned, rope sliding through her grasp until there was a loud splash below and the rope stopped moving.

The man who had approached her was only a shadow, his frame narrow. “You can finish what you are doing.” When she made no move, he laughed. “I won’t hurt you. I only wanted to know what it would cost me to spend the night with a woman who has managed to find a place living in Jericho’s wall?”

Her fingers trembled. “Two silvers,” she said, and then winced. She had just set her value at less than that one fish. Nausea churned in her stomach.

“Only two?” The man stepped forward, his sour breath reaching her face as his hand brushed her cheek. “I think I may just have to accept.”

Her knees shook. Even he thought she could have asked for more. “And... you have to carry my water.”

He laughed. “Oh, I believe I can do that.”

The next morning, Rahab rose from the cushions of her bed and rushed to the window which faced out toward the mountains. Her stomach heaved, discarding its only contents, the water she had brought back the night before.

Or rather the water her customer had carried for her.

Her veil flapped in the breeze, its edge soaked with the bile that had only moments before burned her throat. She heaved again, her stomach seeming to thrust itself upwards, though nothing but a whimper came out. Her nose dripped and she

turned to wipe it on her sleeve... and then cried out at what felt like tongues of fire shooting through her shoulder.

The man had lied when he said that he wouldn't hurt her. She tucked her arm against her side and shivered.

How had Mitunbaal prevented this from happening? Never had Rahab heard of a priestess forced to endure a patron's brutal passions. But though Rahab had begged the man to stop, he had only said he intended to receive what he had paid for.

And though he had left moments before her stomach had rebelled, she could still feel the hard grip of his hands on her arm as he had held it behind her back.

Using her other wrist, Rahab pushed the veil away from her face. She unhooked the nose ring, letting the fabric fall away as the breeze touched her skin. At that early hour, cast in Jericho's shadow, it bit with cold, chilling the moisture on her face.

At least here, there was no one to see her scars.

Stripping her veil the rest of the way from her body, Rahab wadded and threw it in the corner, wincing at the tug on her arm. A soft cloth lay on a table across the room, next to the only filled jug. She strode to it, first washing her face before gulping down enough water to wash the acidic taste from her mouth.

With the liquid sloshing in her stomach, she sank to the floor and surveyed her house. Pillows and blankets were strewn about near her cushions and the other jug lay overturned on the floor. Empty after her customer claimed its contents for himself when he woke up.

Already, the fish and more than half of the water she had ventured out for the day before was gone. If she did not find the strength to go out again, she would eventually lose the ability to do anything at all.

And if she wanted to live, she would need to replace the money her abba had given her.

Hunger clutched at her stomach, an angry maw demanding to be fed. No matter how her life had deteriorated to this point,

she didn't want to end it this way— starved, bruised, and afraid.

Chapter 11

That same afternoon Rahab decided she wouldn't return to the market anytime soon, not if she could do anything about it. Staring out the window, at the view of the mountains outside Jericho, she formed an idea that would see her fed and clothed without having to return to the place where she'd experienced such humiliation.

A group of fishermen had first put the spark of thought in her head, their wagon loaded with baskets of their early morning catch. She had heard the creak of wheels and the shout of a voice urging on a nag that appeared one step from the grave. Then she caught the glint of light on scales and saw the billow of dust kicked up behind them.

It was then her stomach rumbled, demanding to be filled. She placed a hand over it, her mouth twisting in regret.

She shouldn't have looked through the window. She should have been content to stare at the wall...

But then she saw men stride from the city on foot, their faces turned to the fields and vineyards. Soon after came shepherds, driving their herds into the hills in search of scrub brush and streams.

Through those gates every source of food was brought in and out of the city, as well as the men who worked tirelessly to produce it. And here she now lived, so close to the one place they were all forced to pass through at the end of each day. Whether these men could pay with money or a trade of goods, many would prefer the convenience of her house to seeking their entertainment elsewhere before they returned home.

Rising from the cushion she knelt on, Rahab quickly moved to the basket of clothing stuffed in the corner. Riffling through its contents, she grasped ahold of the yellow scarf with silk that glistened in the sunlight. She wrapped it in place of the one she had discarded that morning and attached the fabric to the hoop in her nose, disguising herself once more.

Hoisting one of the empty jugs into her arms, she flew down the stairs and into the street, her empty stomach propelling her onward. Back at the well, in the opposite direction of the city gate, she wasted no time dwelling on the experience of the night before nor the haughty eyes of the women who currently watched her from their homes nearby.

Balanced on her uninjured shoulder, the overfilled jug spilled over and soaked the collar of her tunic.

She was actually going to do this. She was going to stride down to the gate and find customers of her own. She, Rahab, was going to find a way to provide for herself through the only means she had been trained in.

Drawing a deep breath, she turned on her heel and hurried back the way she had come, passing the steps of her house and continuing onward. The wind picked up around, blowing her hem around her calves and offering relief from the beating sun.

Perhaps it was a blessing from Ashtaroth, a final gift for a lonely girl who had played priestess in her temples.

But why would a goddess ever take the time to think of someone so insignificant?

Nearing the gate, Rahab spotted a line of camels, their riders dusty and slumped. At the caravan's head, their leader spoke to city guards, his hands waving to the baskets full of goods laden on the beasts of burden.

Rahab let her gaze travel over each man in turn, picking out the details Mitunbaal had taught her to see; how to distinguish a good customer from a bad one. A lesson she had neglected in the dark of night, when fear had tainted her actions.

Near the center of the caravan was a youth of similar age to her, his frame slouched and his expression lending more to boredom than exhaustion. Beyond him, an older man who was perhaps an uncle or cousin, had features pinched in a harsh scowl. To the right of both, another of their party seemed to be sleeping where he stood, while yet another had marks of spittle

in his beard. Farthest away were three slaves, identified by the bronze collars around their necks.

Only the caravan's leader, a man with a bearing of confidence and hair that had begun to gray, drew her attention.

His shoulders were held back, his eyes alert despite the grime and dirt which coated his robes in a fine yellow dust. He spoke to a city guard, his hands motioning to his camels and goods. As Rahab approached, his gaze flitted to her, lingering only a moment before returning to the man before him.

Rahab waited, her breath shallow and her fingers shaking. What if he didn't want her? She had known some of the men at the temple to be particular, choosing women because they were buxom or thin, younger or more mature. And if he did not take an interest in her, then she would be forced to either wait out the day in hope of finding another caravan, or swallow what was left of her pride and go into the market.

Her stomach pinched, a combination of hunger and dread forcing a burning sensation into her throat.

Around the gate, other guards started to notice her presence, first one and then another as they nudged each other. She could hear their murmurs, could feel their eyes; but here, in the open, no one said anything.

Eventually, the first guard inclined his head and stepped away, leaving the caravan leader on his own.

That was when he fully turned to look at her. His brown gaze collided with hers and a thrill of warmth shimmied down her spine from its intensity.

Slowly, he moved toward her, his gaze sweeping her from head to toe. "Hello," he said, his voice rich and pitched low so that only her ears could hear it. "Who might you be?"

"Rahab." She shifted the jug in her arms and felt a drop of water seep into her sleeve.

"I'm Aram." A smile tugged at his lips. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Quickly, she shook her head and her hair rasped under her veil. “I hoped to be able to do something for you.” She held the jug out-stretched, elbows locked to keep her arms from shaking.

“Is that so?” He reached to take it from her. And unlike the man from the night before, his approach didn’t fill her with fear.

“Perhaps I can offer you the hospitality of my home?”

“Hm.” Aram tipped the vessel to his lips. His eyes closed and his throat bobbed beneath his beard as he drank. Lowering the jug, he brushed the moisture from his face with the back of his wrist. A smile raised his lips. “Only me, or my men as well?”

“I—” She hadn’t thought to consider what his companions would do without him. But couldn’t they find their own lodging? Or would she need to put them up as well? Her cheeks heated at the thought of them being privy to whatever Aram might ask of her. She stuttered, “of— of course they would be welcomed as well.”

She would need more water and a place for them to sleep. And food... she had come down here hoping to trade her company for what she needed, but might they expect her to supply a meal as their host?

Her hesitation must have shown, whether in her stance or tone of voice. The grin slid from Aram’s lips as his gaze seemed to sharpen on her. He tucked her jug under his arm and tipped his head. “Are you certain filthy men like us are who you wish to put up in your home?”

When Rahab didn’t answer immediately, Aram lowered his chin. “Perhaps it would be best if we found other lodging.” He moved to return her vessel but she thrust her arms out before her, stopping him.

“No,” she said, “my home is open. I only thought of what I might do to help. For you, I can draw water, but for the rest...” She would never sleep if she had to do the same for all of them

and their camels. But having already invited them, she could not expect that they fetch their own.

Perhaps a better idea would have been to wait at the nearest well and then approach after the men of the caravan had seen to their own needs.

“I see.” Aram’s gaze seemed to cut through her veil, exposing both her inexperience and her shame. Then he took a step nearer and lowered his head to speak close to her ear. “What if I decided to send them away?”

Her smile wobbled unseen beneath the cloth over her face and she forced gratitude into her voice. “That would be preferable.” She took a deep breath, forcing words from her lips that she knew would seal her fate as the woman in the wall; the one who would never cease to welcome men to her bed. She exhaled, “Their... absence would allow us a little more freedom this evening.”

His slight answering smile promised he fully understood. “Nirar,” he called over his shoulder, “leave my camel and then take the rest to the nearest inn. I will spend the night elsewhere.”

Part 2

Chapter 12

8 months later

Sinai Desert

The walls of Salmon's family tent flapped with the slight buffeting of wind and sand. Though it was the middle of the day, when the tent flaps should have been flung back to let in the sun, theirs was closed tight, allowing only the barest cracks of light. There, in the dimness, Salmon knelt at his abba's side to watch the rattling breaths that shook the older man's chest; waiting for the moment when those breaths would cease altogether.

Nahshon, leader of the tribe of Judah, had already walked the earth for sixty years and outlived all but three men of his generation. And with Yahweh's promise that none but Joshua and Caleb would enter the Promised Land, it seemed too much to hope that Salmon's father would last much longer.

The tent divider flipped open, revealing the face of Salmon's younger brother, Einan. His pinched features mirrored the mourning Salmon already felt in his soul.

But Einan wasn't alone. Behind him stood Moses, old and weathered, though still able to stand with the aid of his staff.

Salmon stiffened. The man had led them for so long and now claimed more than a hundred years, twice what Salmon's own father would ever see.

"I have come to visit an old friend," Moses said. The words he didn't have to say, lingered—before it was too late.

Years of habit forced Salmon to nod and rise from the ground. He took Moses' arm and led him to the sleeping man's bed before departing in Einan's wake.

Outside, Salmon found Phineas the high priest waiting. He stood with his arms folded, but as though he wasn't really sure where he should place them, his vestments bunching around his elbows.

“What are you doing here?” Salmon’s voice was thick with grief and resentment. “Aren’t you afraid to become unclean should my abba join our forefathers today?” He shoved by, striding toward Einan’s tent a stone’s throw away. There, his one-year-old daughter, Gavriila, played by the cookfire with Einan’s wife.

Phineas’ voice followed him. “We are blood, Salmon. Don’t you think I would wish to see my uncle now that my elders are all gone?”

“You have Moses!”

Until recently, no one had cared that Nahshon’s sister had been married to Israel’s first High Priest. It was only now, when Yahweh had displayed his favor in allowing Nahshon to last thirty-eight years in the desert, that anyone came to visit.

Reaching the edge of his brother’s dwelling, Salmon lifted his daughter beneath her arms and then set her inside the tent. “Yaldah, play in here for the moment.” Coming back outside, he turned to Einan, who had followed him. “Abba will not last the night. Why did you have to bring Moses and his kin to witness our suffering?”

“It is Israel’s suffering. Do you think that the loss of the last of our forefathers means nothing to them?”

“Not the last of their forefathers.” Salmon pounded a fist against his chest. “Just of ours. Of Judah’s.”

“We are brothers! The tribes fight as one and mourn as a family.”

A family doomed to destruction by the very hand of the God they served. “I don’t want our father’s death to become a political move.”

“It already has.” Einan shook his head. “This is Yahweh’s sign. Once those who rebelled against him have perished, we can finally enter the land promised to us. Abba’s passing is not something that will go unnoticed.”

“And the men of the other tribes will turn it into a celebration instead of treating it as the time of mourning which Abba deserves.” Just as the tribe of Levi had turned on their

brothers at the foot of Mount Sinai and countless men had slaughtered their kinsmen over Moabite harlots, so would the people of Israel turn on the memory of a great man whose only sin had been to fear.

The same as the rest of their generation. But who didn't fear a future of the unknown, following a God who answered to no one?

By nightfall, Nahshon's chest ceased moving while his sons kept vigil beside him. Outside, Moses had waited, afraid of uncleanness yet unwilling to be far when the news finally came.

It was Einan who delivered it to him, while Salmon lingered, grief tightening in his chest as an even heavier burden settled on his shoulders.

At thirty-five, he was now leader of Judah; responsible for the offerings of his tribe, for the disputes of his kinsmen, and for leading the entire assembly of Israel from camp in pursuit of the ever-moving pillar of cloud before them.

It was Salmon, son of Nahshon, who would lead his tribe in the path of the Lord. The same path which had claimed first his wife, and then his Ima and now his beloved Abba. And no matter how many times his father had told him that the pillars of cloud and fire were proof of Yahweh's care and protection, he could see nothing but the hail of stones that had once claimed the life of a man who had dared to gather wood for his family's fire on the Sabbath.

Einan returned, his footsteps loud in the absence of their abba's breath, as well as the breeze that had surrounded the tent that afternoon. "Moses says that Yahweh will not move the camp until we have finished our seven days of mourning, though we will need to depart soon after offering our sacrifices at the tabernacle."

Salmon didn't ask where it was that they would go. He already knew that the next journey would lead to Canaan, the land of milk and honey.

And fears which made men see giants.

“Tell him that we will be ready.”

“Are you not going to speak to him?” Einan’s voice grated, his disapproval unmasked.

“He has his God to speak to.” Salmon stood, reaching for the ashes Einan’s wife, Jael, had left for them only hours before. Until their time of mourning was over, she would keep Salmon’s daughter far from uncleanness, while the widows of their tribe prepared Abba for burial. Sticking his hand into the cooled embers, he gathered a handful into his fist. Then he raised his arm and scattered them over his head, trickling them over his beard, and dusting them onto his shoulders.

Einan accepted the bowl in his right hand. “If you continue to speak like this, Moses will have no choice but to remove you as the leader of Judah.”

“Have you not heard the word of the Lord? Moses’ time is short.” Bitterness coated his words. Not even Yahweh’s favored, the savior of his children, would enter the Holy Land. It seemed that service to the God who smote Pharaoh meant a life of walking on hot sand, wary of vipers hidden beneath the grains.

And Salmon’s life was one shackled to the will of a jealous God, whose proclaimed mercies were only kind when compared to his wrath.

Chapter 13

Rahab stood to the side of her bed and drew a robe across her shoulders. Yellow; the color Aram most liked to see her in. He'd told her it made her look like the sunrise over Jericho, a welcome sight at the end of a long journey. For her, his visits gave a sunset feeling, his patronage banishing anyone else from her bed.

For the span of a few days' time, she could pretend she belonged to one man. To a husband who at least provided for her, even if he didn't care.

On the bed, Aram rolled over with a groan. His arm reached out and slipped around her hips, tugging her back against the mattress. His voice rumbled with sleep, "Do you need to leave?"

She leaned into him, letting her hair and veil brush against his chest. "No one else will draw the day's water."

"Couldn't that be done later?"

Rahab stiffened. Now was the only time she could go without the glaring eyes of Jericho's wives, the women whose husbands visited her more often than the temple across the city.

When she didn't answer, Aram's grasp loosened. "Alright then." He sat up with his curled hair mussed from the pillows. "Let me go with you."

"It's women's work."

"Hm." He leaned in for a kiss to her cheek, just above the veil. "So?"

Her heart warmed and her stomach tightened. She could love this man, so different than her abba and brothers. Yet she knew that she would never be his wife. Even if he could overlook her trade, he had still never seen beneath her veil, having accepted her privacy as part of the price for her company.

Besides, men came to women like Rahab when they were tired of their wives.

Two days later, when Aram and his caravan departed for the desert, Rahab retreated to the shade of her rooftop. With the wall rising another story above her head, the southeast corner near the stairs always offered relief from the daily heat until almost noon.

She sat in a chair Aram had bought her, carding wool that he had helped her procure after his second visit to her home. He claimed he would bring her a loom soon, as well. Until then, she would keep herself busy turning coarse wool into finished yarn. Her paddles scraped together; the metal nails driven through them catching with every other pull. At her feet were two baskets, one which continued to fill with the product of her labor while another slowly emptied of its unworked contents.

By the time the sun reached her private hideaway, she had finished what little wool there was. She covered the full basket and shifted it beneath her chair, then stood and stretched, arching her back.

Downstairs, she lifted a piece of bread from under a cloth and poured a glass of wine. She enjoyed the silence as she consumed the brief meal.

From below, she heard a knock on her door. With a quick swallow, she downed the wine, making the last bite of her food palatable. Then, a smile pasted on her face, she strode down to meet whomever had come to see her this time.

Was it the blacksmith three houses down? Or one of the guards come off their rotation?

For the next hour, it would not matter.

Salmon strode alongside the cart which contained most of his earthly possessions. It had been thirteen days since mourning and burying his abba and, as Moses had proclaimed, a day after their family had been pronounced clean, once more the

cloud had led Israel forward. Into the mountainous land of the Moabites.

Gavriila sat on Salmon's shoulders, her small hands pulling at his beard while his arm bound her legs against his chest to keep her from kicking or falling back. She chattered ceaselessly, with many of her words indecipherable as they left her mouth, tripping on the heels of each other.

He rested his head back and made sounds of agreement in his throat. Though he couldn't understand her excitement, he wanted her to know that he heard her. Hopefully, one day, she would know he did the same even when she believed that he didn't care about her opinion. And there were sure to be moments of those. He'd had enough of them with his own abba; when heads clashed and tempers flared.

And unlike him, little Gavriila would have no ima to run to.

“Salmon!” Jael called.

His head came up and he looked to where his brother's wife tugged at the bridle of their mule, urging it and the cart it pulled over the craggy ground.

“What do you look so dour for?” She waved upward to the homes of the Moabites built on the mountainsides and the people who stood there watching them pass. “Do you not see that Yahweh is with us?” Her mule tugged and she stumbled, her smile never leaving her lips. “After years of fighting, we find peace with our brothers!”

It was those years of Israel's fighting, of destroying whole kingdoms and then continuing on while they left their enemies in ruin, that gave them this so-called peace now. Salmon was not fooled. These sons of Lot wanted nothing to do with the sons of Abraham who moved through their land, trampling their crops and packing down their fields with people. And while there were many cities which now lie in rubble in the desert behind them, places where Gavriila could have had a home, the Israelites were here paying for this tenuous peace with the gold they took from Egypt.

Swinging Gavriila down from his shoulders, Salmon set her up on the cart next to one of his servants. He pulled out a water skin and passed it up to her before claiming the purse tucked beneath the folded walls of his stowed tent.

The bag was half empty, its contents already spent when they passed through the land of Esau in Seir. It would no doubt be a worthless skin by the end of their journey, containing nothing more than sand when they crossed into their promised home.

A sigh worked its way from his lips. Clutching the purse in his fist, he moved out from the wagons toward the craggy stones lining the valley floor. His feet found a smoothed path created by the people who lived there and followed it upward.

Behind him, the people of Judah continued on without him, following the billowing pillar of cloud that floated lazily before Israel. Above, a man watched Salmon's approach, his shifting gaze showing him to be torn between study of an approaching stranger and the presence of a horde pursuing clouds in the dry season.

Salmon raised a hand in greeting, officially stealing the man's attention for himself. "*Shalom.*"

The man's features remained as unmoving as the mountain at his feet. At his back, a woman peeked through the skin flap of their door, her wide eyes far more expressive of her fear. The man spoke a sharp word to her, banishing her inside, before returning Salmon's greeting in an accent which drew out the word as though testing it, "*Shalom.*"

Peace. It was a word allowed between them due to their divinely recognized kinship. But had the blood of the Moabite ancestors not sprung from Lot, then such a thought of peace would never have entered into this moment.

Conscious of the other man's potential fear, Salmon kept his hands in full view as he tipped his purse and shook coins into his palm. The gold and silver pieces winked in the sun and the other man's brows lifted.

“We thank you,” Salmon said, “for safe passage and use of your streams.” He moved closer, holding the money between them.

The other man hesitated. His hand rose, only to hover a hand’s breadth away. “Why do you pay for that which you can take?” The question was rough, slow as though not used often. Nothing like the quick tongue that Israel had claimed from centuries of Egyptian influence.

“Our God demands it.” It was the first of Yahweh’s proclamations about the other nations which Salmon had latched onto without question, urging all of Judah to be an example that the rest of Israel could look to. Though he would have preferred to settle his people long ago, he would now take any chance to keep his hands from further bloodshed.

Accepting this answer, the other man fully extended his arm, allowing Salmon to dump the coins into his grasp.

That finished, Salmon turned away. He strode back down the path and fell in among his kinsmen, offering aid where he could. All the way, he kept one eye on the cloud, waiting for when it would stop, allowing them rest for the night. It would be at that time that the edges of the cloud would blacken, curling in like ash, before setting aflame.

At the head of Israel, it had been thirty-eight years since anyone had slept without the sky lit so bright that it hid the stars. Salmon had never known a night without it. When they finally came to the promised land, he wasn’t sure how he would be able to dwell absent that nightly reminder of Yahweh’s wrath.

Five months after traveling through the land of the Moabites, Salmon stood at the edge of the Arnon Gorge, his tunic girding his loins and his hands armed with his sword and shield. Einan stood to his right and at their backs were their kinsmen, all dressed the same. In the desert, a day behind them were their wives and children. And there, out in front was Joshua, son of Nun.

Down in the gorge was the region of Heshbon and the army led by their king, Sihon, who now marched out from Jahaz. At least that was what was whispered among the Israelite's ranks, passed back by those who had been chosen to lead the fight at the sound of the shofar's blow.

After two years of peace, time enough to leave a trail of gold from Seir to Ar until they had run out of it, the people of Israel were once again at war. With no blood ties to the people of Heshbon, and no love lost when King Sihon spurned the messengers sent to barter Israel's safe passage, the desert sand would soon be bathed in red, littered with bodies that would be feasted on by wild beasts.

And Israel would replenish their herds and purses with the plunder of those who had stood in their way.

Chapter 14

4 months later

Normally, when Rahab's patrons came, they knocked on her door or else banged as if they were too drunk to be civil. Then, they would call out, seemingly certain she was hard of hearing. But this scrape of her door on its hinges and the confident tromp of footfalls proceeding toward the second-floor stairs were that of someone who knew he couldn't be turned away.

Rahab sighed and drew the shuttle of her loom down, cinching the strands of her weave tight before looping the yarn where she could pick up once her and her visitor were finished. Rising, she moved to the stack of baskets near the window in her room and lifted one from the top.

Behind her, the intruder mounted the last step, the slap of his sandals announcing his arrival ahead of his booming voice. “Daughter!” His tone was just as cheerful as the last time she had seen him.

“Hello, Abba.” Setting aside the basket in her hand, she reached for the one beneath. Removing the lid, she revealed her hidden purse, now full from a week of hosting patrons.

“Hello, Abba?” he said, approaching behind her. “Have you no more warmth or affection for me?”

She turned, purse in hand, and offered him a smile that strained along the edges and failed to lift the muscles around her eyes.

He took the bag with a snort. “Better. Though I hope the one you give your customers is more genuine.”

She let the smile fall away as she watched him pour the coins onto his fingers, counting them with a brush of his thumb.

“Good, good.” He transferred a handful to the pouch tucked into the belt at his waist. “Who would have thought

when you ruined your face, you would have made yourself even more valuable to me?” He chuckled and reached a hand to pat the side of her head covered by the veil.

The muscles in her back stiffened and she looked away with her eyes, offering him nothing beyond a posture of submission.

He moved away, his presence lingering as he studied the room. She knew the moment his attention fell on her loom and he strode in that direction. “And what is this? Have you been holding money back from me?” His voice was sharp, warning that she needed to step with care.

“No, Abba.” She walked behind him. “The loom was a gift from one of my patrons. Seeing it here lets him know that I welcome his visits, and so he comes more often.” She didn’t tell him that those visits had sometimes stretched into weeks, or that Aram had shown her more kindness in that time than anyone in her family ever had, other than maybe Shiba.

And she hadn’t seen her brother’s wife since moving to the wall of Jericho.

“Did he give you the yarn as well?”

“Wool. I carded and wove it myself.”

Her abba turned to her, his brows knitted together like a dark cloud over his eyes. “You did that instead of entertaining patrons?”

Her answer came in a voice thinner than her yarn, “Only in the hours when no one comes to see me.” In the mornings, when other women made their husbands’ early meals, and later, after those same husbands stumbled from Rahab’s bed so that they might tuck themselves into their own.

Those were the hours when she had nothing to do but think. And now, to weave.

For a moment, her abba said nothing. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her loom. Stepping back toward it, he reached a hand to feel the portion she had already completed. “Your weft holds tight.”

She held her breath, waiting for him to either affirm her choice of free-time or else scuttle her only comfort.

“I want you to begin selling your work.” He withdrew his hand. “If you intend to continue, you will need some way to purchase new wool and I will not have you taking it out of your other profits.”

Her veil fluttered with the exhale of her breath, though her heart had not yet returned to its normal rhythm. Her abba was not finished speaking.

“Once I know how much you are able to make from your endeavor, then we will speak about how much of the profit you are allowed to keep for your own devices. Until then, I will send one of your brothers to gather what you make and sell it at the market.”

“Am I not able to do that for myself?” Not that she would. But she would rather give the task to Aram than one of her brothers.

“And waste more time? No.” He waved his hand, brushing aside her suggestion. “Idrikan needs more to occupy his days anyway.” He continued to speak as he turned to the stairs. “The boy has been spending far too much time with his wife recently, and I mean to place his priorities where they should be.”

Idrikan had been spending time with Shiba? A pleasant warmth curled in Rahab’s chest. If Shiba could find happiness even under Abba’s roof, then perhaps there was hope for others in their family.

Smile hidden behind her veil, Rahab followed her abba down to the first floor and then outside. She cupped her fingers over her eyes, shielding them from the sun while he continued down the street without a backward glance, his confident stride carrying him past the guards at the gate along with the merchants who might later come to see her.

But for now, she would weave. And when the hours stretched long, she would pride herself on knowing that she

was capable of doing something else with her life. Even if her abba didn't want her to believe it.

It was another week before she heard Idrikan's knock on her door. The hesitant echo of fist against wood at first confused her, as did the patience afforded by the unknown visitor in the time it took for her to answer. Then she pulled open the door to see his face, the narrow nose and green flecked eyes so much like their abba's, but with a lack of haughtiness that somehow made him seem... smaller.

He shuffled his feet and cast a glance behind him. "Abba sent me for the cloth you've been weaving."

Almost a year without seeing each other, and no greeting. But then, he hadn't spoken to her after she'd returned from the temple either.

Rahab opened the door wider and stepped back, allowing him room to enter. When he made no move to do so, she said, "You will have to help me carry them from upstairs."

He exhaled and his hands fisted as he crossed her threshold. His gaze shifted, taking in the many lamps and pillows she had scattered around the room while she closed the door behind him. "I— uh," he cleared his throat and clasped his hands at his back. "Shiba, she wanted me to tell you that she thinks of you."

"Thank you, Idrikan." Rahab's throat thickened. "That is the first I have heard from home."

A frown shadowed his face. "Has abba told you nothing?"

She quickly blinked away a flood of moisture. "Not much." Leaving him and the conversation behind, she proceeded around the mass of pillows and to the flight of stairs.

His footsteps followed. "Zibqet is to have another child."

Rahab's toe caught on the step. Pain lanced her heart and she squeezed her eyes tight. For the woman to be pregnant after the way she had lost the last— Rahab couldn't imagine

that she was yet over her grief nor had forgiven her husband. “I am...” Rahab licked her lip before biting it. “I am sure that Abba must be pleased.”

Idrikan didn’t answer until they passed into the light on the second floor. Even then, his response was difficult to catch as he murmured it to her back. “No one is.” Then he strode around her, stepping up to the loom which now bore a weave of deep red. “This is a good design. It should sell well.”

Sensing that her brother would refuse to explain himself, even if she asked, Rahab let the line of conversation drop. Instead, she addressed his appraisal of her work. “That is the first of it. What I have for you now is not as brilliant.” She motioned him to a stack of folded cloth in mostly browns and more earthy reds. Simple colors done in simple weaves that anyone might afford, as well as cheaper materials that she could work with at her skill level. The deep red currently on her loom, the one the color of the sun setting over the mountains beyond the wall, was something new.

Something she had only dared to try once her abba had confirmed her right to the venture. Before that, she wouldn’t allow Aram to gift her with the more expensive supplies. But now, she could pay him for them.

“Well, I am glad that you have found something to do.” Idrikan’s cheeks stained pink and he looked away, toward the wall as though he could escape through it and into the city streets. His throat bobbed and he pivoted to the stack of cloth, fitting one arm beneath while holding the other on top. Lifting them to his chest, he spun back around.

Rahab sidestepped, allowing him to walk around her to the stairs.

Back on the street, he moved to place her wares in the back of his cart while she lingered in the doorway, tempted to follow and learn more about what happened at home and yet afraid to step out of place.

Her brother didn’t need a harlot following him into the streets.

With the drop of new weight in the cart, the donkey hitched to it raised its head and brayed. The sound echoed off the nearby homes and drew glances from a group of children hidden in their shade.

She turned away, ashamed to meet their gazes, instead looking to the south and Jericho's main gate. That was when she noticed one of the city guards, clothed in leather armor and a bronze sword at his waist, striding toward her.

Below her, the creaking of the wagon ceased and Rahab moved to wave her brother off, thinking he had settled himself in his seat. But he was standing off to the side, his attention also on the guard coming their way. His hands curled into fists and his features darkened.

Nausea swam in her stomach. She had hoped that none of her customers would approach while he was there. "Idrikan—"

"Get inside."

His voice was cool and her cheeks burned. But as she moved to do as he said, someone else called her name.

"Rahab!"

The sound sent a chill down her spine. She pitched forward, gripping the doorframe. Even with her face turned away, she couldn't will her feet to move. Not as the stomp and rustle of leather and metal studded armor neared.

"Rahab," the man called again, her name tinged with laughter. "It is you. I had scarce believed it when they told me."

Bile climbed in the back of her throat.

"What are you doing here, Jilsen?" Idrikan's voice rang out, loudly speaking the name Rahab didn't want to even think. When had he joined the city guard?

"My friend," Jilsen came to a stop just behind her, "it is good see you. How come you never visit?"

"You know why."

"What? You're going to hold that against me?"

“Go back to the gate, where you should be.”

Rahab had never heard such venom in her brother’s voice. She spun around.

Jilsen’s face burned red beneath the thick beard that now covered his jawline. His eyes narrowed and, rather than match Idrikan’s tone, he spoke as though announcing the weather. “I think that I should have every right to be here. Without me, your sister would be married and your family would have already spent the last of her bride price.”

Idrikan took a menacing step forward, but Jilsen only laughed. “Oh, no. For the full two years of my service to the city, you cannot hurt me. Not without repercussions.”

“What is it that you want?” Rahab moved a hasty step toward them, drawing both men’s gazes, though she met only one of them in return. That of the man who had stolen everything from her.

He pivoted his attention from her brother to her, his frown shifting once more into a grin as his shoulders relaxed. “I’ve come to congratulate you.”

At one time, that smile would have made her blush. Her heart would have raced as her thoughts swam with how to please him. But now she had seen too many like it, all from far too many men to remember most of their names. And not a one of them had meant it.

But knowing who Jilsen was, and the position he currently held, she tipped her head. “Thank you.”

“See.” He moved closer, encroaching on her so that his shadow fell across her face, “That is a much better reaction.” His hand cupped her arm, drawing her into his chest.

Nausea mounted and behind her veil, she cringed.

“Rahab?” Idrikan’s voice neared, laced with disgust and anger. But were those emotions directed at Jilsen? Or were they meant for her as well?

Her chest quivered with the effort it took to keep a wail of defeat from creeping into her response. Reaching down, she

took Jilsen's free hand, fitting her fingers through his. Over his shoulder, she called to her brother. "Tell Abba that I do as he asks, and that the next batch of cloth will be ready by next week's end." A turn on her heel faced her back to the stairs, her greatest regret following close behind.

And her second greatest, the one which even now told her she should throw herself at her brother's feet and beg him to save her, buried itself deep as the creak of Idrikan's cart announced he was abandoning her.

Chapter 15

The next morning

Gilead

Salmon pulled a bleating lamb from the huddle of sheep. His hands were slick with blood, staining the animal's coarse wool with streaks of darkened red. Einan stood off to the side and accepted the squirming creature when Salmon passed it to him.

“Do you think this one will do for the sacrifice?” Lifting the animal with both arms, Einan stared at its face. “There are no blemishes that I see.”

“No.” The lamb’s head rammed into Salmon’s leg, so that his denial left him as an exhaled grunt. He nudged the sheep so that Einan pulled it to his chest and then moved beyond them. “We’ll only use lambs from our own flocks.”

“But these *are* our flocks.”

Ours as of that morning, after the bodies of their previous masters had fallen, blood seeping into the cracked earth. Until that moment, they had belonged to another family, one who had spent years raising and protecting them. No, Salmon would not offer one of these animals which he had never raised a hand to tend.

In this small flock, there were ten sheep, with three yearlings among the lot. Four others were round and pregnant, ready to drop new young in the next weeks. For their sake, Salmon knew that Israel could not press as hard as they were used to, else they would lose the young which they had only just added to their herds.

Surely Yahweh would offer them a reprieve.

Salmon tipped his chin, glancing up at the cloud which hovered overhead, its presence ever there, ever watching.

Beyond the small sheep pen, men of Judah and the other tribes strode the narrow path winding between the village

homes. Those striding emptyhanded wore the smiles of victors while the rest bore frowns of concentration as they led flocks and herds through the carnage of mere hours before.

Einan set the lamb back on its feet, then smacked the larger ewe toward the pen with the flat of his sword on the animal's rump. "Whether we offer any of these or not, we only have need of one more ram." He gestured to the lamb which pranced, blocking the way for the rest. "That one will soon be old enough to make a nuisance of himself."

"I—" A scream rent the air, cutting off Salmon's response. His muscles tensed, fingers curling in on themselves as his pulse increased, rushing through his ears and drowning out the noise around him. His vision blurred, narrowing to single, chipped, stone at his feet.

After a moment, when the scream failed to repeat, he closed his eyes. He breathed in, jaw clenching as he eased his fingers apart.

His brother came beside him, his own jovial mood forgotten. "I thought that the town's people had been taken care of."

"Some of them would have hidden themselves."

Einan was silent.

"It doesn't matter." Yahweh had already declared these people's judgment. Feeling sorrow and remorse wouldn't change that. "Let's get going. I would like to be at our fire before night sets."

"Salmon."

He stopped, only then realizing that he had moved to leave.

"We all see their faces in our dreams."

Salmon turned, pegging Einan with a glare. "And yet Yahweh does not sleep."

"Can you not put this behind you?" Einan pitched his voice low, his eyes shifting to peer over the low walls that separated them from the rest of the men of Judah. "It has been

months since our Abba passed and still we move closer to the Promised Land. Will you not accept that Yahweh means good for us?"

"It is not *us* I am concerned for, it is *them*." Salman thrust an accusing arm out, pointing to the open doorway of the crumbling stone house which had been pillaged not an hour before. Already flies swarmed, the low buzz the closest thing to a mourning keen that would be observed over the bodies hidden inside.

"You pity *them*?" Einan took a menacing step forward. "What of their children they have slaughtered in the name of their gods? What of our people who—"

"And what of their children that we have slaughtered in the name of ours?" Salmon's anger slipped, his voice catching. Pressure built in the back of his eyes and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

In his mind's eye, he played over again the image of the little girl who he knew lay just inside, her gray dress stained red with her own blood. And the moment just before she had ended up like that, when her wide eyes had looked at him with the same fear Gavriila had for the shadows each night.

Only for this girl, this daughter of Gilead, Salmon had been those shadows.

Einan gripped Salmon's arm. "Don't think about it."

How could he not?

"I mean it." Einan's voice gentled and he pulled Salmon's hand from his face. "Yahweh is just. Everything he does, everything he commands *us* to do, is righteous."

Salmon tugged away. He turned and bent down, hoisting the male lamb up and onto his shoulders. "Where is the justice in killing those who know no better?" He stepped out, making way for the ewes and yearlings to follow him. Over his shoulder, he said, "Yahweh's commandments were given to us by Moses, and these people have never even heard of him."

Jilsen stood near her window, staring out into the city with his chest clothed in shadow rather than the tunic he held in his hands. His features were expressionless as he played with the fabric in his grasp. “Have you heard that there is an army coming?”

Rahab drew a blanket to her chest. She couldn’t imagine Jilsen actually wanted her answer.

“I’ve heard it mentioned by the other soldiers, passed around by the merchants coming through the gates. An army of escaped slaves, lost but leaving carnage in their wake.”

A puff of air left Rahab’s lips. He spoke like he had before he ruined her, making up stories and fanciful lies. But if he wished to scare her now, then he had forgotten she already knew him too well.

She swung her feet to the side of the bed farthest from him and reached for the gown pooled on the floor. “The day is almost over. I’ll have other customers soon.” Ones who would pay in more than threats.

He turned toward her, the corner of his mouth tipping up on one side. “You don’t enjoy my conversation?”

“I never did.”

He chuckled. “That’s a lie.” Lifting the tunic, he finally fit it over his head. With it in place, he reached for the sword belt which he had left draped over one of her baskets. “Do you wish I were that merchant who comes to see you?”

Rahab stilled.

Jilsen crossed the room, stopping at the foot of the bed. “Don’t tell me you thought no one noticed. The nearest harlot in all of Jericho, and for weeks at a time only one man comes to see her?” He leaned in, pressing his fists into the balled-up blankets. “Believe me, Rahab, it’s not because no one else wants to visit you.”

“How could you possibly know this?” Her words were spoken as a bare thread, thin and easily broken.

“Because I only just entered my time of service, you mean?” At her nod, he continued, “You think we would talk about our lives or families? That is far too painful.” His sword shifted, clinking against the footboard as his voice sharpened. “So what is left but to gossip like women as to who passes in and out of the gate and which of them will turn to your door?”

She curled into herself, the silk of her gown slipping from her grasp. But then she found her voice. “I’m not a fool. I know everyone talks about me, that they whisper behind my back. And whose fault is that? Your—”

Faster than the dog that had attacked her two years ago, he lunged and slapped her across the face, catching her veil as he did so. It pulled the ring in her nose, the sharp yank hurting more than the blow.

“Don’t talk back to me, Rahab.”

Fire burned in her nostril and something wet made her veil tacky. A muscle in her cheek pulsed. “Get out.”

“Excuse me?”

She raised up, shoving him with both hands, smearing blood down his tunic with one. “Get out.” Her throat thickened, her words emerging in a croak. “You never married me. I’m not yours to strike.”

“You—”

She swung at him, pitching forward in the bed. “I’m not yours to strike!” This time, she screeched it, ensuring that somewhere, someone would hear.

He backed away, as though uncertain she would be worth the effort. But she didn’t stop yelling.

“You men like to gossip? Then what will they say about you? Will they think that you are trying to drive the prostitute away? To destroy their last source of amusement?”

Downstairs, there was a banging on the door. A potential client who wouldn’t appreciate the local pleasure woman being damaged. Jilsen’s features paled.

Rahab unhooked her veil, lifting it away. Though she could not see her own face, his reaction was enough. With blood dripping into her mouth and scars puckering the right side of her face while anger burned in her gaze, she would strike anyone with fright. "Get out of my house." Her words were a command, her tone low and menacing from the evenness in which she spoke.

Turning on his heel, Jilsen rushed from the room. Below the door opened and an angry voice accosted Jilsen while she remained sitting on the edge of her bed.

Then there were sandals slapping against the floor and a man called out at the foot of the stairs. "Woman, are you alright?"

"I am fine," she answered, "but I will not see anyone tonight." And they would not want to see her like this.

There was a harsh mutter and then the man left, slamming her door behind him.

Tears blurred Rahab's vision. She never should have let Jilsen intimidate her into letting him in. She should have let Idrikan send him away, accepted the potential for their abba's wrath that she had dared deny a client.

Part 3

Chapter 16

1 year later

The mountains of Abarim

“Salmon!”

He looked up at his name, turning from where his daughter showed him her newest collection of varied stones, to find his brother running toward him. For a moment, his vision flickered with the image of some other person, someone not his brother; this man surrounded by many others, all with swords drawn.

His stomach clenched at the sight, sweat breaking out along his brow. Despite knowing Einan was friend and not foe, his arms still ached to push Gavriila behind him, to protect her from a threat his mind had conjured.

Instead, he dug the fingers of one hand into his palm.

“Salmon.” Einan slowed, his chest heaving. “It’s Joshua... He says that Moses has passed.”

Anger flickered in Salmon’s chest. For this, his brother frightened him? Dredging up the emotions that had followed him this year since Gilead? “You behave as though it were unexpected.” Reaching down, he fitted his hands beneath Gavriila’s arms and lifted her to straddle his hip.

Gavriila offered a gurgled shout. She attempted a leap from his arms, outstretched hands trying to collect the rocks that had been left on the ground.

“Enough, Gavriila.” He righted her, narrowly keeping her from landing on her head. “You have plenty in our tent.”

“Mi—”

“Quiet.” In his head, he heard the screams of another girl, one whose abba had been unable to protect her.

Einan scowled at him. “Must you be so harsh?”

“Leave me be.” Salmon clutched his daughter closer, ignoring her tears as they wet his tunic and she muttered complaints into his shoulder. He strode back toward Judah’s tents, dust kicking up around his feet.

He was unused to this hard ground, teeming with life in the form of shrubs and young trees. It was nothing like the desert sand, which made walking difficult and produced only lizards and scorpions.

Just one more sign that they were nearing the Promised Land.

Back in their tent, Salmon pulled Gavriila off of him and laid her on their mats. Exhausted from her fit, she rolled to her side and blinked her eyes a few times before letting them slide closed. Dark curls fanned her temples, sticking with the heat that plagued them no matter where they lived. In moments, she would be asleep. If only he could join her.

Einan spoke from behind him, “I know you have dreams that keep you up at night.”

Salmon stiffened. “I thought I told you to leave me alone?”

“You did. But under Joshua’s orders, I cannot.”

“Joshua’s orders?” Salmon swung around, facing his brother head-on. Everything in him ached to start a fight, but wisdom reminded him of his daughter at his feet, so he pitched his voice low, “Has he heard of my weakness?” Salmon’s fists closed. “The sign of Yahweh’s curse on me?” For what else could these memories be?

No one else seemed to struggle with the horrors they had all seen.

Einan sighed and looked away. “I have said nothing.” Then, firming his shoulders, he met Salmon’s gaze once more. “But if he knows, it is Yahweh’s doing. I can’t say anything else about why he has sent me to find you.”

Salmon took a menacing step forward. “Cannot or will not?”

With a blank eyed stare, Einan took a step back, opening the tent flap with his arm. “Both.”

Salmon stared out the opening, tent and sand blurring together. He had seen this day coming, when the rest of Israel’s leaders would notice that his worship of Yahweh was not the same as theirs. That he hardly cared to worship their God at all. But he had lied to himself, believing it would be some time to come, after they had taken the Holy Land and he was able to settle his daughter in a home that was not so often uprooted.

He should have known better.

Dread tightened his gut. He cut a glance at Gavriila’s sleeping form and then stepped close to Einan. “If something is to happen to me, you keep her safe.”

An air of defeat seemed to settle across his brother’s shoulders. “Salmon...” He left the sentence unfinished, and fury climbed Salmon’s throat.

Whatever Joshua’s decision, if Gavriila were to take part in Salmon’s punishment, Einan would not stand in the way. It was his way, to follow Yahweh’s commands without thought or question.

Salmon grabbed Einan’s collar and forced him from the tent first, causing the younger to stumble. “You best pray to your God that he does not ask for Gavriila’s life.”

“My God?” Einan’s face burned red. “My God will not ask for her life, though if you continue, he is likely to demand yours!”

“It would not be the first he has punished a child for the sins of their abba.”

Frustration climbed in Einan’s tone. “Salmon, that may be exactly why Joshua has called you, and still you will not repent?”

“Does it matter? Will he forgive me?” Salmon shoved his brother, pushing him farther back. Emotion clogged his throat, making his words thick. “Is anyone shown mercy?” Certainly

not their abba, not Moses, nor the people of Canaan they were about to invade.

Yahweh promised to be with them, but only if they obeyed. And who could keep all the laws their God demanded? The number of which had been multiplied only hours before Moses went up to Mount Nebo to die, when he handed the written law to the priests to be placed in the ark.

It was crippling to dwell on the number of rules Salmon would need to remember, to teach his daughter to remember. And then also to have to lead Judah, conquer Canaan, and battle his own doubts and fears? He would never be equipped to handle it all.

But Einan held silent, his lack of answer a heavy weight between them. There were no promises he could give. Not without knowing what it was Joshua would say.

Salmon rubbed a hand across his eyes. "Call your wife. Have her watch Gavriila until I or Joshua say otherwise."

His brother clapped him on the arm. "Now, that I can do for you."

The sun shone down on Jericho's gate and everything around it, warming the top of Rahab's veil like the ovens used for making bread. And with the sun directly overhead, there were few places to hide from it.

With the arm of one of Jericho's generals wrapped around her waist, Rahab was tethered to his side, imprisoned by his attentions as well as the heat. While his fingers rubbed her hip in slow, absent circles, his eyes watched the horizon. Had they stood at the tallest point of the wall, the Jordan river would have been visible, glittering in the distance. Instead, they stood just outside the city, where he would have the best view of the faces before him.

"I don't like it," the general murmured. Amongst the din of squawking guards and merchants, his words reached only her ears.

She thought of not questioning him, of leaving his comment unexamined and his focus on the distant hills, away from her. But the dark slant of his brows told her that whatever his thoughts, it might benefit her to know them.

Reaching up, she grasped the leather cord binding his armor, where it had slipped out and now fluttered in the hot breeze. She gave it a slight tug, drawing his gaze. “You don’t like what?”

For a moment, he stared at her fingers. Then he gave her waist a slight squeeze. “The Israelites. They are no more than two leagues beyond that river and just out of view. Yet the merchants speak of unending numbers, stretching across the sand.”

Rahab’s stomach soured. Merchants arrived daily at the gate, delivering word of the outside world, but Aram was no longer among their number. Not for months now, since she had foolishly allowed Jilsen into her home and then banished him the next day.

He had found his retribution in hassling Aram and then seeing him banished after the following confrontation.

Now, until Jilsen’s final year of service came to an end, only the General could silence the spiteful man’s sway over the other guards. Aram would be kept from her and who could say if Aram would try to return following such humiliation.

Caught in her own thoughts, Rahab paid little attention until the General released her, stepping away. She watched him as he melted into the ranks of his men, calling out instructions for the guards to intensify their search of everything coming through the gates.

She crossed her arms and studied the straggling train of people trying to enter the city. There were the usual wagons, piled with goods from the farms in the mountains, as well as carts filled with baskets of goods brought far from the west and the north. Even now, more than forty years after the humiliation of Egypt at the hands of the Israelites, Jericho was receiving only a trickle of Egyptian cloths and spices shipped across the Great Sea.

And with the Israelites approaching, even what Jericho did see was secondhand, sold by merchants desperate enough to make the journey into potentially dangerous territory.

But there were also families among the merchants. Unattached to the caravans, they fought with camels that sought to bite them while children scurried around their ankles.

A pang filled Rahab's chest as she looked on. It had been nearly four years since she had lost all hope of a family of her own. Even if Aram returned, any offspring of theirs would be taken from her, either to be raised by his wife or else claimed by her abba for the flames of Molech so that a child might not hinder her work.

After witnessing Zibqet's tears, Rahab knew she preferred the idea of the former.

The crunch of sandals on gravel alerted her to someone's presence before a voice spoke behind her. "If it's not the harlot, come from her hole in the wall." Rahab stiffened at Jilsen's words. He had moved too close, his presence felt at her back though he didn't touch her.

"What do you want?" She turned, discreetly placing distance between them. "Don't you know that your general has already claimed me for tonight?"

The usual lust was gone from his expression, replaced with distaste. "He has done no such thing, though you clearly seem to think I would believe you."

She raised her shoulder in a shrug. "Spoken or otherwise, he will come tonight." She had long learned to discern a man's appetites as well as his weaknesses. The General's was fawning women, while Jilsen's was pride. And his had been bruised when she had cast him from her home without fear of the consequences.

Not that she wasn't already paying for that.

"Then perhaps you should go and wait for him?" Jilsen pressed close, his teeth bared in a snarl. "I can't stomach you. Get out of my face."

Rearing her head, Rahab pitched her voice loud, so those near heard. “It is you who placed your face in mine. If you disliked the proximity, you should have planned this conversation better.”

He latched onto her arm. “Don’t mock me.”

Now she kept her words low, barely allowing them to pass through her veil. “Don’t threaten me.” She gave a sharp tug, wrenching from his grasp. “You’ve already taken everything. There is nothing left for me to lose.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.” She raised her chin, letting her eyes speak for what her other hidden features could not. She was done being used by him. Done being his plaything.

His eyes shifted between her own. “I wouldn’t be so certain of that.”

“What can you take from me, Jilsen?” She backed away. Perhaps she would heed his advice to wait for the General elsewhere. “My life means nothing. You made certain of that.”

Chapter 17

Joshua's tent was far enough from Salmon and Einan's that they decided to claim their camels before setting out. The leader of Israel had his dwelling set toward the middle of the camp, within the bounds of the tribe of Ephraim, dutifully stationed to the west of the tabernacle. His home was large, consisting of a complex of tents filled with his children and grandchildren, as well as his third and most likely final, wife. The previous two had long ago been gathered to the afterlife in Abraham's bosom, along with the eldest of Joshua's sons, the same as Salmon's own wife had been.

As Salmon and Einan approached, Joshua's wife ducked from the main tent. She carried a basket set against her waist and raised her opposite arm to shield her eyes from the noon sun as she studied them.

Some yards away, Einan stopped. He snagged Salmon's reins, indicating he should as well, causing Salmon's camel to give gurgled huff. "Shalom, Kali. We've come to see Joshua."

The woman's shuttered expression never changed. Lowering her hand, she motioned behind them to the south. "He went that way." And then she turned and strode away.

Salmon frowned. Why had the leader of Israel chosen such a woman?

Riding in the direction she had indicated, the brothers passed through to the tents of Gad where they stopped for further directions. They were motioned on, that time and the next, leading farther from the center of camp until the desert once again claimed the horizon and the sun inched farther and farther toward the west. At the rear of the camp of Gad, a man finally pointed them to a bent and gnarled juniper in the distance, beneath which sat a dark form. Tethered to the tree behind him was a single camel.

Confusion stole through Salmon's mind, melding with irritation over how long it had taken to find the man. Most of a

day, wasted. And if Joshua were going to punish him, why do it out here with no one other than Einan to witness?

By law, every trial required two other individuals present.

As they drew near, Joshua shifted from his place seated on a large bolder to where he could face them. He drew his right leg up to cross over his left and rested interlocked hands on his knees.

Even at his age, the man boasted fewer joint pains than Salmon did.

“Sons of Nahshon, I see you have found me.”

Einan nudged his camel to kneel and then dismounted. “I had not anticipated the need to search.”

The old man nodded. “Originally, I had not anticipated it either. But soon after I sent word to you, I felt a need to come here and pray.”

Salmon let his anger spill out, frustrated not only by his lack of understanding but also by the audacity of a man who called for them and then disappeared. “Why come so far from your tribe?” he accused, while his camel swayed beneath him, matching his mood with the stomp of its feet. “Are there still not enough trees where we have placed our people that you had to seek out this one?”

Joshua tipped his head upward, the sun behind him so that he had no need to shade his face. There wasn’t any repentance in his gaze, though there seemed to be a sort of contemplation. After a moment, he sighed. “In the months since Moses passed, I’ve found that there was a reason that he had often disappeared to be with Yahweh. Sometimes you need to be away from the many voices in order to discern how Yahweh would have you lead them.”

“And is it working?”

“Somewhat.” Joshua glanced away. “Though, the cloud of the I Am’s presence doesn’t descend for me. And because I am not a Levite who can enter the tabernacle as I wish, I have found that this place suits the purpose of solitude at least.” He

motioned to a smaller rock near his feet. “There is room for one of you to sit if you want.”

Salmon didn’t budge and, after a moment of hesitation, Einan accepted the invitation. “If you’ve come to pray, why did you not call back your messenger?”

“Because what I have to say must still be said.” Joshua uncrossed his legs, his own features growing pensive. “I’ve seen the glow of Yahweh upon Moses’ face whenever he left the tabernacle and have lingered outside long after Moses left so that I might feel the presence of God. But no matter how hard I try, I am never able to discern the audible voice of the I Am.”

The brothers exchanged a glance. Salmon raised a brow.

“For that reason,” Joshua continued, “I’m left in confusion over what to do when Moses’ instructions end.” He pointed off into the distance, where the ribbon of the Jordan glimmered in the setting sun. “Once we cross the river, what will we do? What armies will we face?”

To Salmon, it seemed like something Joshua should have asked while Moses was still alive. And what did it matter who they attacked first? Yahweh’s cloud would lead them from city to city, bathing their territory in a field of blood.

Einan spoke for the both of them. “What do these questions have to do with you calling us?”

Joshua’s penetrating stare found Salmon. “You have led our journey for the past two years. Though you might not have carried the weight of all Israel, you have born it for your tribe, who are the first to march out against our enemies.”

“It’s Judah’s lot.” An honor bestowed generations after the initial conflict between their ancestors, which forfeit Reuben’s right to lead Israel while Judah was given the position in his place.

“And you’ve performed it without wavering.”

An itch wormed its way into Salmon’s throat and he coughed to the side.

Joshua stood. “I need you to cross the Jordan and search out the land.”

“Why would you trust me with this?” A hole seemed to open in the pit of Salmon’s stomach, making it feel as though he had fallen through and continued to do so. This was not what he wanted. Leading Judah when it meant the safety of his family was one thing, but leaving them to face a land unknown?

Waving away Salmon’s objection, Joshua pressed on. “I knew your abba well, long before I was ever Israel’s spy or its commander. He was a brave warrior, a wise leader, and most important, a zealous man for God.”

And Yahweh had still abandoned him.

“I’ll never forget when he ran headlong into the Red Sea before it had even begun to divide.” Joshua chuckled for a moment, before his smile fell away. “We all thought him insane. But then, he was one to have more faith than the rest of us combined.”

“I’m not my abba, Joshua.” Nahshon had been zealous, whereas Salmon was detached. The man to first lead Judah through the desert had been courageous, while their newest leader was struck by crippling nightmares that haunted his days as well as his nights.

Sunken in misery, it was a moment before Salmon realized Joshua yet studied him. “I know you are not your abba, just as I am not Moses. But no matter who we are, we cannot doubt that Yahweh has placed us where we will bring him the most glory.”

At that moment, Einan cleared his throat, reminding them of his presence. He stood as well, his searching gaze shifting from Salmon to Israel’s anointed commander as though he couldn’t quite make sense of the two. To Joshua, he said, “You wish to send only Salmon?”

“No, I would send both of you.”

“But why send us, when you have already traveled the land you wish us to search out?”

A shadow crossed Joshua's gaze. "That was forty years ago."

"Do you think so much has changed?"

Though it had been so long ago, before Salmon was even born, he had still learned the stories of giants whose knives were like swords and whose legs like tree trunks. Tales that had passed as rumors from cookfire to cookfire until they blazed as an inferno all their own and the men of Israel refused to cross the Jordan. Including Salmon's abba.

It had been Nahshon's greatest regret.

"You never know what may have changed," Joshua answered. "Is Israel not different than it was before, a new generation with a new heart?" He shook his head. "I would rather not enter the Promised Land without knowing what we will encounter. And besides, even Yahweh commanded it the first time around."

Tension seized the muscles in Salmon's shoulders. Israel couldn't afford to repeat what had happened before.

"I know announcing my desire to send spies will stir up fear," Joshua continued, "and so I wish for this mission to stay between us until you return."

Einan motioned in a circle. "The three of us? You will send no one else?"

"Only two witnesses are needed." Joshua grasped Einan's shoulder. "Are you afraid that Yahweh will not be with you?"

Einan turned and met Salmon's gaze once more, though he addressed their elder. "No, I am not."

Salmon's fingers clenched, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Abba," Gavriila said the next day, as she saw him about to depart through their tent flap, "where are you going?" Her tone implied nothing more than curiosity, her young mind yet unsuspicious of his sneaking out when he should be asleep.

He'd thought her asleep. That he would leave without her knowing and then when his daughter did rise, she would find her Dodah Jael out by the morning cookfire. That she would forget his absence soon after.

But with her small footsteps pattering on the rugs between him and their nest of sleeping cushions, Salmon realized that he couldn't stomach the lack of a goodbye.

He pivoted so he could catch her to his side, dropping the bag he held. Kneeling, he found that her head reached his chin and his arm could have fit twice around her waist. A lump formed in his throat while she giggled as though it were a game. "Your *Dohd* Einan and I will be gone for a few days."

No more than a week. If the I Am could create the world in that number of days, then the immediate land of Canaan could be spied out in just as many.

"What will you be doing?"

"Doing?" Shifting his hand, he wiggled his fingers into Gavriila's side. He pitched his voice in a playful growl meant to mask his emotion. "What am I doing?"

His daughter shrieked and tried to pull away, but he closed off her escape.

"I'm catching a nosy *yaldah* who is pestering her abba."

"No." Laughter bubbled up with the word and she writhed, little hands pushing at his. "I'll behave!"

Immediately, he stopped. "Will you?" He held her away from him, his voice back to normal, hoping she could sense his seriousness. "Will you listen to your *dodah* while I am gone?"

She stilled, grinning at him. When he failed to smile in return, her own slipped hesitantly. "Yes, Abba."

"Good." This time, he yanked her into a tight hug, squeezing so that she giggled once more though his own thoughts were far from cheerful. Tears welled, and he blinked them away for her sake.

He would promise Yahweh any form of devotion if only he would allow Salmon to return to her, to see her grow, and to

know she was cared for.

The Jordan River ambled through the channel, the slow-moving water glinting in the moonlight. Dark limbs hung across, creating an image of crouching shadows in the moonlight which were far removed from the empty deserts of the past forty years.

Pack slung over his arm, Salmon lingered along the edge. He let the water lap at his toes, chilling him despite the warm breeze. Next to him, Einan stared at their obstacle as well.

Though only a tent's width across, the Jordan was deep, with banks that sloped sharply in many places from each year's flood. Though the brothers held their footing now, climbing up the other side while sodden would be no easy feat.

Einan broke their silence first. "How do you suggest we go about this?"

Rebellion seeped into Salmon's thoughts. He wanted to say they would turn back and wait for morning to tell Joshua that their errand was foolishness. But then they would be making the same mistake as the spies all those years ago, claiming their new land bore impediments which were insurmountable. And though daunting, the rushing waters were no true reason to give up.

A sigh leaked from his throat. "We walk through. With our burdens held over our heads."

"And what if it is still too deep?"

"Then we throw the packs across and pray that Yahweh spares us from drowning!" Salmon took the first step. Muck seeped into his shoe, and he slid, legs pulling painfully apart. Water soaked into his tunic, splashing up to his waist and chilling him further.

If not for his foul mood, he might have enjoyed the dip. Instead, he forced down a growl and dragged his back foot to meet the first before shoving forward again. Within the first few steps, the mire swallowed his ankles.

Einan splashed beside him and together they drudged their way across, water rising to their ribs. Insects swarmed around their heads, biting at their ears and necks. Salmon gritted his teeth, holding back the curses he longed to call down.

A curse on the biting insects. A curse on the river Jordan.

A curse on Joshua and a God who would never let them find rest.

Chapter 18

“These people are all fools!” Jilsen’s shout rang out, drawing sharp glances and murmured grumbles.

Rahab turned her face away as he reignited his daily rage. It had been the same for months now. Come morning, when she made her way down from her home, the gate would already be flocked with people wishing to enter. Unlike in years past, however, these people weren’t merchants, and their ever-growing numbers set off more tempers than just the guards’. Especially since none of those who arrived intended to leave.

“Shut your teeth on your tongue!” the General’s voice rang out, this time cutting an early halt to Jilsen’s tirade.

A small grin flickered on Rahab’s lips. At last, someone had said what she thought. Even if Jilsen were not completely wrong.

With hundreds seeking to enter, Jericho was becoming overrun. Families camped in the streets while cattle filled the once beautiful streets with their stench. There was nowhere left for the people to go, nor any good will to share between them.

If not for Jericho’s call for men at arms, no one would be allowed in.

Just then, a feminine cry pierced the air. “No!”

Rahab sought the noise, her attention arrested by the struggle of a plain clothed woman and a soldier. The man had hold of her arm while both grappled over a boy half their size, with tears streaming down his face.

Abruptly, the soldier released the boy. The swift loss of force knocked the child to the ground while the soldier reared back his hand and slapped the woman across the face. There was a loud pop and then a blood curdling scream.

A shudder traveled down Rahab's spine, her own cheek stinging with the memory of Jilsen's last visit to her home and all the times she had seen her abba strike any of his wives.

While Rahab remained immobile, Jilsen appeared as though summoned by her thoughts. He grabbed the woman from behind, pinning her arms at her back. She screeched and kicked, her foot striking the first soldier's chest.

The man cursed, and Jilsen jerked the woman away.

A fire built in Rahab, igniting in her chest and spreading out beneath her skin. It propelled her legs, moving her just out of the soldier's reach. "What are you doing to them?" The fierceness of her accusation surprised even her, ripping at her throat.

The first soldier scowled. "This woman wants to enter the city with her children, but balks at the idea of letting her eldest son enlist."

"Who cares what she wants?" Jilsen said. "Take the boy. She and the other brats can remain in the desert if she doesn't like it."

"Ima!" the child yelled, his cry carving into Rahab's heart.

"Let him go," she said. "He's not even old enough to grow a beard."

Jilsen snarled. "Leave out of it, woman." Then he turned, flinging the boy's ima away from the gate and the press of people around it. Two smaller children ran to grasp her waist, but she lunged before they reached her, her hands curled like claws aimed at Jilsen's face.

He ducked the woman's arms and slammed his shoulder into her chest.

A gasp sucked the air from Rahab's lungs. How could she have ever thought to marry this man?

"Go!" Jilsen bellowed, looming over the woman who now lay in the sand, gasping.

Her children hovered beyond her, their hands twitching toward her while their fearful gazes observed her abuser.

The fire in Rahab's limbs crackled out. In its place lingered a chilling emptiness, muting her surroundings.

How many children would be caught up? Torn between self-preservation and loving?

How many throughout history would come to regret their choice?

Rahab placed herself between them, hands raised toward Jilsen's chest. "She can stay with me."

Had this been anyone else, her plea may have been enough. But Jilsen wasn't impressed. "Will she serve customers the same as you?"

Disgust swarmed her veins. "Haven't you ruined enough lives?"

His nostrils flared. "Take in another family. One who could actually contribute to this city." He swiveled and grabbed hold of the oldest boy's wrist before he and the other soldier dragged the child through the gate, kicking and screaming.

Rahab spun on her heel. The woman still lay on the ground while her other children cowered together, tears streaming down their dirt-streaked faces. Neither could have been older than six years of age, the older girl clutching her brother as though he might be taken as well.

She knew what it was like to see her *ima* struck down. Though she couldn't remember the first she had ever seen it happen, she would never forget the pain or the fear that had kept her well out of her *abba*'s reach.

"Hello, little ones." Kneeling, Rahab brought her eyes even with the little girl's. The child stiffened and searched for Rahab's face beneath the veil.

The boy, perhaps five, scrubbed at his tears. "Ima," he whimpered.

To the side, the woman stirred, her breathing swift rather than labored as it had been moments before. Her face yet turned to the ground, she begged of anyone who would answer, "Where have they taken my son?"

Rahab let her hand hover over the woman's back, afraid to actually touch her lest she lash out. "To the garrison."

A moan leaked from the woman as she rose and Rahab retreated. The woman lifted quivering arms to her other children. "I'll never see him again."

"You don't know that." Rahab watched the children huddle into their ima's form and a pang of longing struck her. What would it have been like to ever experience such love from her own ima? A woman who had not even protested when Rahab was sent to the temple of Ashtaroth, where Mitunbaal had become more of an ima than the one who had birthed her.

The woman glared. "They will send him to fight those filthy Hebrews. Children are not meant to wage wars."

Rahab had no answer to this. All around them, other people were working to enter the city while soldiers rifled through their possessions, claiming whatever struck their fancy. In this family's case, it had been a young boy. "I am Rahab. I live in the wall." She motioned toward her window, hidden from their view. "It is close to the garrison. You can stay with me if you would like."

For a moment, the woman didn't speak. Her narrowed gaze accused many things, most of which were true. That Rahab was a prostitute. That she stole men from their wives and took money that should have fed their families.

But then something shifted, and the expression on her face softened. "You would do that for me?"

A lump formed in Rahab's throat. "I would." Her abba need not know of it.

Releasing one arm from the tight grip of her children, the woman stretched out to touch the back of Rahab's hand. "I'm Tanyth."

A shot of warmth traveled through Rahab and her vision blurred. When was the last time she had been touched out of kindness? She rotated her wrist, clasping their fingers together. "Come. I'll make sure the soldiers let you in."

Jilsen may have forbidden it, but if the General ever wanted to visit her home again, he would allow Tanyth and her children into the city.

Once Tanyth and her family moved in, Rahab's small home wasn't silent for the next two weeks. The long hours spent weaving on the roof, alone with her thoughts, were overrun by children who raced up and down the stairs, overjoyed by the loss of their chores now that they lived with someone else.

It was also on that roof where the small family spent most of their time, allowing Rahab to ply her main trade in the rest of the house.

Tanyth remained out of sight of the customers, carding wool to keep herself busy. With that task now taken from her, Rahab spent more of her free time weaving, the work passing swiftly as the women talked.

For that alone, Rahab didn't mind losing her solitude.

At eighteen years of age now, Rahab should have already had her own family. Hers should have been nearly the age of Tanyth's youngest, Yassib, wreaking havoc while Rahab baked bread rather than entertaining men. But had that been the case, then Tanyth and her children would still be outside the walls of Jericho while her eldest was forced to prepare for battle with an enemy none of them had yet to see.

“Look what you've done!” Tanyth's sharp words carried from where she and her children stood looking out at the street. The girl, Taliya, held one end of a red strand of yarn, the other disappearing over the edge of the wall.

Rahab's heart plummeted. That yarn was all she had of that shade, the red dye no longer entering the city now that the merchants who sold it hadn't been to the city in over a month.

Her shuttle slid from her fingers, *thunking* on the ground as she vaulted to her feet. She turned to the stairs, the steps passing in a blur, her hand trailing the walls as she made her way without taking the time to light a lamp.

On the first floor, she saw the yarn stretched across the window, the sharp angle of which warned the rest had likely rolled its way out into the road.

Filthy and ruined. How much would there be that she could use now?

She reached the door and yanked it open. A large form blocked her path.

“Abba!” The word escaped as a sharp exhale. Her foot hovered over the threshold; her body frozen beneath her abba’s glare.

“What is the meaning of that?” His accusing finger pointed not at the yarn, but at the guilty face of Tanyth’s daughter peering down from the roof.

Bile climbed Rahab’s throat. “I let one of the refugee families stay with me.”

And she had thought she would be able to keep him from finding out. Her abba never came to visit her anymore. So why was he here now?

“Are they paying?”

“No one can pay.” Immediately, she flinched. That was the wrong response.

His nostrils flared and he shoved her into the doorframe so he could get by. Pain ricocheted through her spine, but she ignored it in favor of speaking out. “Please, Abba! They’ve not been in the way. Tanyth helps with the cloth—”

He rounded on her. “And what do you do with your sudden free time?”

“I...” She shuffled around her thoughts, searching for something that would appease him. “We’ve made more cloth. I’ve finished—”

“What good is cloth?” The veins popped in his neck, his face streaking red. “We are on the verge of war, no one is going to buy clothes. And if this *family* is going to live in my home and live off my food, they will compensate *me* for it.”

She ducked her head. “Yes, Abba.” Fear swirled in her gut as a nagging thought pushed its way to the forefront of her mind.

How had he found out? Her abba’s anger wasn’t that of someone who had only now discovered he had been left out of a decision. It was simmering and planned. As though he had known even before he saw Talliya standing on the roof.

“If you wish for them to stay here, you best think of a way to pay for them.”

“I will.” They would find a way.

Chapter 19

8 days later

Salmon ran a hand through his hair, shaking out the dust that had collected over the past day. It had been nearly two weeks since he and Einan had crossed the Jordan, their time dedicated to traveling the Promised Land, spying on its inhabitants.

What they found were predominantly empty dwellings.

Village after village lay empty, with those left behind being only the most stubborn of people. Here and there, the brothers had stumbled across loose animals as well as abandoned stores of food, which sustained them. But while Einan had accepted the provisions with enthusiasm, declaring them Yahweh's gift, Salmon had been unable to mask his usual prick of guilt.

After spending the entirety of his life without a home, he couldn't imagine the kind of fear which would drive someone from theirs.

Now, at last nearing the end of their journey, the brothers stood in line outside the gates of Jericho. After weeks of silence, the loud chatter grated at Salmon's nerves. But the smell was worse.

Fresh cattle dung lined the road, along with that which Salmon suspected belonged to humans. Only three paces away, a young girl stepped to the side and squatted, the telltale splatter and growing stain in the sand alerting him to what she was doing.

He coughed and looked away. Next to him, Einan's lips curled in disgust.

“Why don't they go farther away to relieve themselves?”

“Maybe they don't wish to lose their place in line.” It seemed anyone might if they tried to leave. Behind him, a

squabble broke out, one man accusing another of trying to squeeze in where he did not belong.

Einan flinched. “Is everywhere in Canaan like this?”

“Maybe you should stop asking such questions before someone notices.” Salmon crossed his arms and stared ahead, blocking out his brother’s irritation.

His brother had always been a good Israelite and follower of Yahweh. He had never traveled outside their camp in order to visit the peoples around them, instead finding contentment with their own. For Salmon, it was different.

He’d visited the Moabites. Long before Moses had condemned the men of Israel for worshiping the gods of Moab, or Phineas the priest had slain a man in his own tent for bringing a Midianite woman into the camp, Salmon had gone for sheer curiosity’s sake. What was it like among these people who were not Israel, were not Egypt, but something else?

That same sense of curiosity pulled Salmon’s attention now, causing him to focus on those around him. The clothes were different, some artfully woven of different fabrics, while most seemed patched together with whatever may have been at hand.

There were pigs, ghastly sounding creatures who rooted around at their owners’ feet with tails wagging. A faint memory tickled the back of Salmon’s mind, of Abba mentioning having feasted on pork before Yahweh had forbidden it. Of wearing whatever clothes could be found for the slaves of Egypt, piecing together remnants by firelight after days of toil.

Now, Salmon’s life was a set of never-ending rules. If it were not for the fact they were about to be wiped from the face of the earth, he might have envied these people.

“Don’t look at them like that.” Einan jostled him, his tone jabbing as swift as his elbow.

“Like what?”

“Like you would rather be one of them.”

Salmon firmed his lips. “Don’t speak my thoughts for me.”

“So, it’s true?”

“Of course not!” He shifted uncomfortably. Something heavy settled in his chest, warning that perhaps he had not spoken the truth. His throat felt dry when he added, “Our people are my home. I would do anything for them.”

But if not for them, would he have discarded Yahweh?

Einan’s glare cut deep. He leaned in, lowering his voice. “I think it was a mistake for Joshua to send you here.”

“Then why did you not say something before?”

“I was foolish.”

“And now it’s too late.”

While he’d been arguing with his brother, the line of people had moved forward, and Salmon took a large step to reclaim his place before someone else did. The gate now stood within thirty paces; the guards’ faces distinguishable from one another. Some of them were mere boys, their facial hair not yet grown while others seemed older than his abba had been in the end.

“What do you think they are searching for?” Salmon asked, his irritation diverted from his brother. Never had he seen a place so well guarded, not even the cities they had previously destroyed. And what would they tell Joshua? That most of Canaan was deserted, ripe for the taking, while the city of Jericho seemed nearly impenetrable with walls that towered overhead, protecting a mass of citizens?

Einan crossed his arms. “I don’t know.”

Unease built in Salmon’s gut. “Now may be a good time to say a prayer.”

“Say one for yourself.”

The line moved forward again, with a man leaving his weeping family and entering the guard house while the rest moved into the city. A few moments later, the next family did the same, this time dividing from a son.

“What are they doing?” Einan muttered under his breath.

Despair latched at Salmon’s spirit. “This is how they’re building their army.” They were preparing for Israel to cross the Jordan.

Einan’s gaze fluttered to the top of the wall, to the gate and the soldiers surrounding it. “We still have to get inside.”

“Are you volunteering to join their ranks?”

“Maybe it should be you since you seem to have such a love for them.”

Salmon’s temper smoldered. But with the soldiers now only ten paces away, he bit his tongue rather than lash out.

Swords glimmered in their belts, the bronze catching the sun. Sweat slicked his palms and trickled in his beard. His pulse kicked up, his mind whispering thoughts of war.

When one of the soldiers turned to them, he wasn’t sure whether he imagined the guarded expression which overtook the man’s features. “And what are two men who’ve come by themselves wanting in Jericho?”

A response lodged in Salmon’s throat. What should he say?

“Just here to see the grandeur of the city,” Einan answered for them. He motioned to a couple of women standing just inside the gate, their bright clothing marking their profession. A jaded smile tipped the corner of his mouth. “I hear the women are a sight to behold.”

Salmon locked his neck to keep his head from rearing and cast his brother a critical glance. How had a righteous man like Einan thought to say such a thing? And why would he think that a statement of curiosity during a time of looming war would work?

The soldier looked them over, then flicked a glance in the women’s direction as though pondering the response. After a moment, a grin slowly split his face, showing off teeth which were far too bright. “Indeed.” He turned back to Einan. “And Rahab is the best of them. She’s the one with the veil over her

face.” He leaned in as though conspiring. “You’ll have to pay more for her to take it off.”

“Do you think it worth it?” Salmon coughed on the words. Curiosity about the people they were to destroy and laying with one of them were two very different things.

“If you’ve the coin for it.” The man faced the gate and raised his arm. “Rahab,” he yelled, “I’ve customers for you.”

Hidden behind the folds of their garments, Rahab’s hand was gripped in a stranglehold by Tanyth’s. Both women stood at the gate, waiting for either the soldiers or a merchant to take interest in them.

It was Tanyth’s first day.

For a week, they had tried to think of ways for the woman to bring in money and keep her children housed. But Rahab’s abba had been right. No one was buying cloth, and so Rahab’s side business had dwindled.

This morning, the wind blew, tugging at the edges of Rahab’s veil. Each instance sped the rhythm of her heart as it threatened to bare her secret to those around her.

She would never forget that Jilsen was the only one she had ever shared her appearance with since donning the veil. Nor could she overlook that even in his maliciousness, he had never shared the knowledge of her scars with anyone else.

It seemed that even the mention of them was too much for him.

Now, she watched as that very man stopped people at the gate, searching women and children while stripping them of their abbas and sons. A chill danced along her arms.

What had her city become?

Turning away, she looked to Tanyth, gauging the other woman’s features for some sign of how she was handling it all. “You know you didn’t need to come. I can bring customers to the house for both of us.”

“I want to be here.” Tanyth’s lips pressed together, her gaze as hard as the grip she had on Rahab. “I will do it for the chance to glimpse my son, as well as show these men that they have not crushed me.”

But was that not what had already happened? Crushed one day at a time until all that existed was a world created for them? A world made to contain them. Inviting Tanyth to stay with her had been Rahab’s one true act of defiance and now that would result in the other woman’s shame.

“Rahab!” Her name shouted from outside the gate caused her to jerk, painfully yanking her hand from Tanyth’s.

She scanned the faces, catching Jilsen’s gaze before even recognizing his voice as being the one to call to her. His teeth flashed in a predatory smile as he motioned to her. “I’ve customers for you.”

Distaste blackened her mouth, and she felt herself withdrawing, refusing to answer him. But rather than deter him, it only seemed to entertain him more. “Come now, don’t be inhospitable!” The two men beside him frowned, their arms crossing in a way that highlighted the similarities between the two.

Tanyth turned and spat in the sand. “That man is despicable.” Her anger at Jilsen for tearing away her son had not died. As they had yet to see the boy, Jilsen’s appearance could only be like salt in a festering wound. And here he was now, bringing his companions toward them.

The men were covered in dust like the merchants from far off, but they were on their own, without servants or camels. Their beards were long and their hair even longer. Though their features were familiar, still something marked them as... different.

And neither one was being pulled away to join the ranks of Jericho’s soldiers.

Jilsen spoke, his tone and the glint in his eyes allowing no argument. “Take our visitors to your dwelling. And make them comfortable.”

Something was wrong. A chill swept up Rahab's spine. She swallowed against the dryness in her throat. "And who will be paying for my services? Them, or you?"

His lips thinned in a line. "I'll see it done."

"See here—" the younger of the two men stepped forward, "—this is unnecessary. We are perfectly able—"

Jilsen turned on him. "You would deny me the generosity?"

"We—"

This time, it was the older of the two strangers to interrupt, smacking a hand against the other's chest. "We're honored." He shifted his gaze from Jilsen to her, meeting her eyes. "By both of you."

Chapter 20

“We’re honored?” Einan’s hushed accusation was growled in Salmon’s ear as they followed the two women away from the gate of Jericho. “Have you no eyes? Can’t you see what they are?”

“I can see well enough, and I have a brain to go along with my eyes,” Salmon shot back. He shouldered his brother away.

“Then why are we still following them?”

“You’re the one who implied their company was what we were looking for.” Salmon fought the urge to glance behind him. The hair on the back of his neck bristled at the thought of any of the guards still watching. “If we don’t go with these women now, they’ll be sure to tell their patrons in less than an hour when they wander back to the gate for paying customers.”

Einan’s silence was answer enough, and Salmon let it stretch between them.

He sidestepped a mound of discarded clothing—and who knew what else—as they wove their way through a thick and putrid cloud of people. Even this close to the gate, there were families who had set up camp in the street, their refuse cast about them.

Fear of Israel had driven Jericho to live this way?

To Salmon’s surprise, the two women soon slowed not far from the gate, further assuring that he had made the right choice in following rather than deserting them.

The veiled one led the way up a set of stairs built into the side of the wall. She stepped inside a door and then held it for the rest of them, her searching gaze meeting Salmon’s a moment before he turned away.

In the dim light, he could only make out a few jars and discarded pillows, as well as a faint glow coming from the far-right of the ceiling. He blinked, struggling to focus on Rahab

as she moved farther in, a trick of the dark making it seem as though she were spectral. There came a sharp hiss of stone striking stone and small glimmer appeared in front of her.

“Come with me.” She turned, the light coming with her as she held a lamp between her fingers. It illuminated a series of stairs to her right, leading to the glow he had already noticed.

“Wait.” Salmon snagged the wrist of the other woman as she moved toward the first. This woman tensed against his hold and tilted her face away. He released her. “I know what it is you think...” But how could he explain that he had no intention of doing what they expected of him?

The veiled woman spoke while the other stood frozen. “You needn’t worry. We don’t expect you to pay yourself.”

A strangled noise came from Einan’s direction.

“No!” Salmon felt the force of his denial echo through the room more than he heard it. “I— that is not what I meant. Einan and I do not intend to engage in...,” he waved his hands, “with you.”

“Then, what is it you do want?” Her words were slow, as though she were afraid of the answer.

His cheeks burned. “F-food.” He drew back his shoulders. This was a sentiment he could speak of at length, without any hint of embarrassment. “It has been weeks since we have enjoyed a meal we didn’t cook ourselves. And I would rather the money from the gate go to that instead of... other pleasures.”

There was a moment in which the woman hesitated. Then she laughed, the sound filling the room and easing the awkwardness. “Just food? I think we can do that for you. Don’t you agree, Tanyth?”

The other woman huffed.

“You think food is really all they want?” Tanyth demanded as she and Rahab climbed the stairs to the roof.

Her children sat in the far corner, near the city wall, and Rahab nodded in their direction as she reached for a basket set against the wall nearest her. Inside were the loaves she and Tanyth had baked the day before, now cooled and ready to eat.

“This is meant for us.” Tanyth pressed near, her voice lowered.

“Jilsen will pay us for it.”

“That man!” Tanyth spit. “I will never trust him. Nor should we trust those two downstairs.”

“But I do.” Not Jilsen, he could never earn her trust again. But something about the men who had followed her home filled her with a sense of calm.

And that terrified her.

Was it just the way they looked at her? Or rather the way they didn’t. Not even with Aram had she felt so... unassessed. As though what she looked like or what she could do for them didn’t matter.

Or maybe the men were too fearful of the attention they had drawn to themselves to care about her.

Movement pulled Rahab’s focus to the children who had risen and now posed to run to their ima. Tanyth jabbed a finger in their direction. “You two stay over there until I tell you otherwise.”

The children halted. “Yes, Ima.” The girl grabbed her little brother’s hand and tugged him back into the corner, covering them both with the sheepskin blanket Rahab had given them that morning.

Tanyth turned back to Rahab. “If you are determined that we should go through with this, then give that to me.” She motioned for the basket.

Rahab grasped her arm. “You don’t have to do this. I know you don’t believe—”

“No,” Tanyth tipped her chin to her chest. “I can’t allow you take on the burden of my family.” She smiled, briefly, as though the action could bolster them both. “Besides, if you are

right, then I won't have to do anything other than feed some hungry men."

"That's the spirit." Inwardly, Rahab cringed. Maybe that would be the case this day, but there was still the next and every day after that. And despite what she said, she had never met a man who, after sating his hunger, did not wish to indulge in other passions.

Still, lingering would only postpone the inevitable. Whatever that was.

"Let's take this to them before they seek us out." Rahab tucked the basket beneath her arm, out of Tanyth's reach, and turned back to the stairs. Pausing on the second floor, she could hear the men's hushed whispers carry from below with a sharpness that spoke of anger.

Instinct pulled at her, urging she slow and hide from a wrath which may find an outlet in her. Yet she stuffed the feeling down. Experience was a far crueler master to disobey, and it had taught her long ago that while arguing men could ignore a woman's presence in the room, they were unlikely to forgive the need to wait for her.

She stomped her feet before coming down and the conversation below ebbed away. Entering into the room, she found the men had moved as far apart as space would allow. The elder stood nearest to her and, when his gaze collided with hers, he stepped forward, reaching for the basket she held.

"I'll take that."

"Thank you," she let it pass from her fingers and then glanced to the other brother. The tension between the two kept the room stifling. She cleared her throat. "I've heard one of you called Einan, but you," she looked back to the elder, "I do not know your name."

For a moment, his shoulders bunched, and his lips pressed together. Then he sighed. "Salmon." He moved away, striding to the cushions laid out on the floor. Easing himself down, he claimed a seat in the midst of them. Then he set the basket in

front him and threw his immobile brother a glare before addressing her again. “I heard the soldier call you Rahab.”

She tipped her chin up, letting the slight movement of her veil answer for her.

At that, he smiled. “Well, Rahab, would you be willing to provide some water to wash down this bounty you’ve provided?”

Tanyth snorted.

Rahab startled, sucking in a gasp. For a moment, interacting with this strange man, she had forgotten Tanyth remained in the shadows behind her. She was trapped by Rahab, who had failed to step fully into the room.

Tanyth brushed past. “I’ll get your water for you.” She strode across to the empty jugs they had taken to leaving by the door. Grasping one by the rim, she disappeared out the front door.

Tense silence descended. Then, the basket lid creaked as Salmon lifted it away.

“I—” Rahab stared at him. What should she do now?

A crash sounded from upstairs.

“Is there someone else here?” The younger brother stalked toward her.

Salmon stood as well, though his wary gaze tracked his brother.

Rahab eased back onto the stairs. Only the truth seemed as though it would dull the rage she saw in Einan’s eyes. “The children.”

“What children?”

“Tanyth’s. They must have grown tired of hiding and decided to play with something.” Like her loom. A knot of dread tightened.

If they had gone to the second floor and destroyed the loom, she wouldn’t be able to get another. But more

importantly, she would have preferred these men had never known the children existed.

“Show me.” A threat rumbled in his words.

“Einan.” Salmon took a half-step forward. “Do nothing I will have to make you regret.” These people might be his enemy, destined to die by his sword, but he would not declare war on them until Yahweh did.

“If there are really children up there, then I’ll not have to.”

“And if there are? Will you continue to glower at her hospitality?”

Einan turned his head, meeting Salmon’s gaze. Something shifted in his features, a nearly imperceptible softening. He relaxed his fists. “If the woman speaks true, I will honor her and seek restitution for my mistake.”

Not that such restitution would ultimately amount to much. Not when she and everyone else was destined to perish. But Salmon said nothing, refusing to concern her over a future that could not be changed. Instead, he switched his focus to where she stood, her thoughts hidden behind her veil.

Why did she wear it?

Instead of inquiring, he instead asked, “Will you show us the children, please?”

After a moment of hesitation, she led them into the shadows of the house and through to the roof.

There were baskets stacked to his right and bundles of flax laid out on his left, facing the street. A chair and a stool were set in the center of it all, the chair lying on its side with wool carding brushes scattered around it. But there were no children.

Rahab spoke, “I know your ima and I told you stay hidden. But I need you to come out now.”

The brothers shared a glance.

On the farthest side of the roof, a stack of blankets moved. Stubby fingers appeared, lifting the woven covers off, followed by two thin and guilty looking faces.

An image of small bodies, flashed in Salmon's mind, crumpled and oozing red. His pulse spiked, thudding in his ears.

Soon, that would be these two.

Heat filled Salmon's chest, tightening like a vice and creeping up into his skull. He blinked, trying to clear his thoughts, but they grabbed him, cutting off air while his pulse thrummed loud in his ears.

“Salmon.” A hand grabbed his arm and he wrenched away, drawing his arm back in a fist.

And then everything snapped back into place. The roof, the children, his brother. The veiled woman, Rahab. The sun, sinking nearer to the edge of the city. He let his arm fall and sucked in a deep breath.

He had to go back downstairs.

“Salmon!” This time, Einan was chasing him.

Chasing him, running at his heels like when they attacked a new city or village, slaughtering everyone inside.

He had to stop. Stop remembering the past, stop envisioning it as the present. He was in Jericho, in the house of Rahab. And no one was dying. “Stop.” Salmon followed his own command, coming to a halt on the second level of the house, his knees buckling under him.

No one was dying yet.

“What is wrong with you?” Einan loomed over him, a dark shadow making the room feel smaller.

“I don’t know.” And he truly didn’t. Because if it was Yahweh’s curse on him then why would it strike him now of all times? When he could still return to Israel claiming that nothing had changed? That the people of Canaan were giants, crushing men like him as though they were grasshoppers?

“Look.” Einan crouched, bringing them to eye level. “You were right. It was only children, and I will apologize to her.”

A hollow laugh rattled Salmon’s chest. If only that were the cause.

Chapter 21

“Are those men Israelites?” Tallya had risen and now clutched the folds of Rahab’s garment.

A moment ago, Salmon had looked at the children with wide eyes, his features pale as though the children had arisen from a grave. Einan grabbed his brother by the arm, and it appeared as though the two would brawl there on her roof. But almost as soon as the sign of conflict came, the two disappeared down the stairs.

Now Rahab stared at the space they had occupied, her mind fumbling as though with the pieces of a broken jar she couldn’t hope to piece together. When she looked down, she found the girl’s upturned face and frightened gaze. “Wh-what did you ask?”

“Those men,” Tallya pointed to where they had been, “were they the Israelites Ima told us about?”

“I don’t...” Rahab shook her head. “Why would you think that?”

“Ima said that the Israelites are mean and those men looked angry.”

There were plenty of mean and angry people in Jericho without Israelites to worry about. “They didn’t say who they were. Maybe they were fleeing, just like you.” Except, these men didn’t seem frightened, at least not of anything outside the city walls. And they had made it through the gate without either one being taken away as Tanyth’s oldest son had been.

Fire built in Rahab’s gut. If Jilsen was using her again...

Tallya pulled on Rahab’s hand. “Where is Ima?”

A loud pounding began, heard more from where it echoed in the street as whomever it was beat at her front door. “Rahab!” The masculine shout rang out in a voice she recognized.

Jilsen. She thought her teeth might crack from the force of her jaw clenching.

Pushing the girl's grasp from hers, Rahab pointed her and her brother back to the blankets. "I need you to hide, one last time."

Without waiting to see if either child listened, she ran to the stairs and thundered down the steps.

Two looming men met her at the next landing. Einan reached for her, his face obscured without the light of a lamp, but she slapped his hands away, rage blinding her to the potential consequences of such an action. "Go, upstairs. Hide behind the baskets and place the flax over your heads if you need to."

"And where are you headed?" His tone accused, asking more as a warning than in any true ignorance.

The pounding resumed.

It didn't matter if these brothers were Israelites. She was not Jilsen's to use and manipulate. "I'm going to send that son of a cur away with his tail between his legs!"

"Who—"

"Einan!" Salmon grabbed his brother by the collar and thrust him to the stairs behind Rahab. "There isn't time. Do as she says."

Jilsen yelled again, his words muffled by the downstairs door and punctuated by the thuds of his fist. But the tone conveyed his irritation perfectly.

Once the brothers were out of sight, she continued her rush to answer Jilsen's summons. With a sharp tug of the handle, she opened her home to him.

And then stood in his way.

Behind him, filling the steps and crowding the street directly surrounding, were city guards. As though not expecting it to actually be her who answered, those nearest flinched.

Jilsen recovered first, lowering his arm. He moved as though to shove past, but she dropped her hands on her hips and filled the doorway. “Let us by.” He grabbed her arm to pull her aside. Then he hesitated, his gaze flicking to the side as if remembering their audience.

Ignoring him, she looked over his shoulder. The guards swarmed the base of her home, a few with lit torches and the rest with drawn swords. While most were grown men, there were still a few who couldn’t shave yet, just like Tanyth’s stolen son.

“What is it you want?” Rahab spoke loudly, so that her voice would carry despite the muffle of her veil. “You can’t all think to come inside.”

Jilsen’s breath was hot on what little of her skin lay exposed as he leaned in. “We’ve come for those two men seen entering your home. They are Israelites, come to spy out the city.” Unlike her, now that he had gained her attention, he kept his voice low.

Perhaps he thought it more intimidating.

“You mean the men *you* sent to my house?”

He only sneered. “I sent them to you to be entertained until I could alert the King. And it was *he* who sent us.” He dug his thumb into her wrist. “So, step aside.”

She tugged from him. “They’re no longer here, and I certainly didn’t know where they came from.” At least, not until Tanyth’s daughter had suggested it. “If you want to find them, run back to your post at the gate you deserted.”

Rahab pulled back, shutting the door as she did.

Jilsen stopped it with his hand. “How do I know you are not lying to me?”

“What reason do I have?” Other than to punish him for everything he had ever done to her. But even if he realized what she was up to, he couldn’t force her confession without also admitting he had started this whole charade rather than dealing with the Israelites when they stood before him.

And the men behind him were already ill-tempered.

Releasing the doorframe, she shoved Jilsen's chest. "If you hurry, you may catch them before the gates close for the night."

A growl rumbled in his throat as he thrust her hand away. Turning, he motioned to the other guards. "Hurry, before they get away!" The slap of leather accompanied them down and into the street, flickering torches illuminating the path they wove through the myriad of tents and bystanders gathered to watch.

Some of those people turned their gazes in Rahab's direction, fear reflected in widened eyes.

For a moment, guilt stabbed her. Women, children... whole families languished at her doorstep. There—a mother, and a short distance away, a man huddled with his children behind him.

She closed her door on all of them.

Salmon listened to the snippets of conversation which carried on the evening air. Rahab's voice carried louder than the rest, but even hers was obscured by both the distance and the bundles of flax overhead. Salmon laid on his side, knees hugged to his chest and his back pressed against the inner wall of Jericho. To his right, Einan huddled in a similar posture, with baskets stacked on either side and the flax pressed against his face.

The coarse stalks pricked Salmon's cheeks and clung to his hair, but it was the smell that made his position truly uncomfortable. Having been left out to collect each morning's dew, the stalks reeked of mold and decay.

He wrinkled his nose against the pressure of a sneeze.

"Why do we wait here?" Einan murmured. "If she tells them where we are, then we're trapped."

"We're trapped either way."

The heated exchange between Rahab and the man who had called to her continued for what felt like ages, his heart beating off the seconds. The sneeze built and he pinched a hand over his nose.

The voices stopped.

Einan stiffened beside him.

Faintly, the fall of one set of footsteps echoed, and Salmon doubted they belonged to a man. Still, they waited.

After a few moments, the footsteps reached them. “Come out, all of you.” Rahab’s tone was sharp and directly over his head.

Salmon released his nose. His eyes watered and the moment he started to move, the scent of mildew flooded his nostrils. The sneeze rocked him, sending his head against the wall with a sharp whack.

He grunted and then shoved his arm up, discarding the flax. Einan had already done the same and, from the corner of his eye, he saw the children moving about.

Though he couldn’t see any more than Rahab’s narrowed gaze, he could almost feel the irritation radiating from her.

Einan stood. “Has he left?”

“Have *they* left,” Rahab corrected. “And yes, they have.”

Salmon’s throat tightened. This small, veiled woman had just saved their lives. “Thank you.”

She didn’t answer him. Instead, she thrust a basket she’d been carrying into his arms and then tugged off the cover, revealing a mound of small loaves topped with caraway seeds. Then she crouched and pulled the children into an embrace.

Her behavior was like a dagger thrust into his chest. “I’m sorry.” Salmon watched, waiting for her eyes to meet his. “Forgive us for the harm we’ve caused you.”

“Harm?” Rahab laughed, though it sounded deep and bitter. “You have done nothing. The harm was caused by others.”

Perhaps not, but offense had most definitely been dealt to her by their hand. Rising, he brought his full height to tower over Einan's slighter stature. "Apologize."

Einan cast the woman a sideways glance.

"Now." Salmon moved closer, the basket tucked under his arm.

With a tilt of his head in defiance, Einan snatched a piece of the flatbread. Then he waved it as though in salute. "Forgive me, Rahab, for doubting your honesty."

Salmon scowled. Had Rahab seen his brother's act, Salmon would have hurt him. Instead, she was busy disentangling the boy's arms from around her neck. Releasing the children, Rahab shooed them down the stairs before speaking to the brothers once again. "I bear you no ill will and shall leave you in peace. Eat, then sleep. By morning, the guards will come again, and you will wish to be gone before they arrive.

Then she was gone herself, leaving Salmon to contemplate all that had occurred.

Had a foreign woman, an enemy bound for destruction, actually spared their lives? Or had it been the work of Yahweh, protecting his spies in a foreign land?

Either way, Salmon couldn't work out why he had been spared. Whether they were the woman's enemy or not, Yahweh knew Salmon's thoughts and for them, he should have been marched before the king of Jericho and slain for his sinfulness.

Instead, he had been offered a second chance.

A weight settled on Salmon's shoulders and chest, forcing him to the ground on his knees. He felt as though his lungs might close and his heart stop beating. But rather than well with fear, he could only gasp in awe and gratefulness as chills covered his skin.

He, a man great in Israel but worthless before a God who would not spare even Moses his wrath, had survived the sword

of Jericho. At least for one night, while its soldiers were locked outside and he slept safely within.

Chapter 22

Rahab's heart pounded furiously in her chest as she placed the children in her bed for the night. Her mind raced, forcing her to question her actions that evening. Had she made a mistake?

Come morning, when the soldiers returned to the city without the spies of Israel, they would come looking to her once more. How would she be able to convince them once again that her lie was truth?

If Jilsen saw through her deceit, what would her punishment be?

For the sake of two strangers and her own desire for vengeance, she had betrayed her people and allowed their enemies to linger in her home.

But did that matter? With or without these two spies, Israel would one day march to Jericho's doorstep. And by then, few of the city's inhabitants would be alive to fight. Already the city was starving, cramming more people than it could feed within its walls and giving what food there was to the soldiers who watched from the gates.

Her abba was right about one thing. Her work as prostitute would soon become the only thing of value she had. But how long would that last before even the most faithless of men took what little they had to their families rather than spend it on fleeting time with her?

Jericho was dying. And she had the only hope of escape up on her roof.

“Listen to me.” Rahab knelt at the edge of her bed, waiting for Talliya and Yassib to turn their attention her way. “Your ima will return soon. Until then, you wait here and sleep if you can.” She would need to talk to them later about keeping the secret of the Israelite spies.

Rising, she crossed back to the stairs which lead upward. There she paused, listening for the men's voices. But there was

only the sound of her own pulse, beating in pace with her anxiety.

Stepping into the twilight air, Rahab made out the dark forms of the men. One knelt over the other, who lay flat on his stomach, arms outstretched above his head. She faltered, and her foot came down on a piece of discarded flax. The resulting crunch brought up the face of the one who knelt so that it caught what light there was. Einan.

“What happened?” There had been no sounds of struggle, and yet she couldn’t fathom any other reason Salmon would be on the floor.

“I don’t know.” Einan’s hand hovered over his brother as though he wanted to help but was unsure what to do. “You left and he just... dropped.”

Then it hadn’t been a fight. Darting to their side, Rahab knelt as well. She placed her hand on Salmon’s head and he shuddered beneath her touch. Startled, she drew back.

“You should leave us alone.” Einan’s voice dropped low, carrying a warning.

Before she could stand, Salmon reached out, grasping her wrist. “No.” He tipped his head to the side, peering up at her. “Stay.”

At this angle, she had a good look at his face. His nose was larger than most, his beard long and tightly curled. Despite the shadows, there was gentleness in his expression, in the crinkle of skin around his eyes, that she had only ever known in Aram.

For that alone, she could not regret hiding him.

As though realizing he was still touching her, Salmon pulled away. He rolled onto his back, looking up at the ever-darkening sky. “I felt him, Einan.”

“Who?”

“Yahweh.”

A heavy silence lingered. It was Einan who broke it. “How could you feel the I Am? He lives in the tabernacle, in the

midst of Israel, not here in a heathen city.”

Something stirred in Rahab’s own chest. Did they speak of their god? Even with her time at the temple of Ashtaroth, she had never heard anyone speak as though a god could be known. That was the realm of the priests and priestesses to make the unknowable walk among men. And even in her time there, she had never seen it.

“I don’t know.” Salmon continued to stare upward, as though at something only he could glimpse. “But it was as if, for a moment... Yahweh was interested in me.”

The awe he exuded shook Rahab’s confidence and she drew away. Had she ever felt so sure of her goddess’s favor, even when serving patron after patron in Ashtaroth’s honor? The answer echoed within as a hollow *no*. Not a day since leaving the temple had she even considered Ashtaroth’s existence.

Seeming to sense Rahab’s retreat, Salmon sat up and turned his focus on her. “You didn’t come to hear me babble. What is it you wanted?”

Rahab shook her head. How could he do that? To go from speaking of a god who cared about protecting two men, to asking a woman what it was *she* wanted?

In this moment, could Israel’s god show care for her as well? She might not know much about the gods, but she knew about asking for their favor. And with how Salmon spoke of his god, he had to have some favor with the god of Israel.

Breathing deep, Rahab summoned the courage to speak. Words tumbled from her mouth, words she had never thought before, yet knew were somehow true, “I know that Yahweh has given you this land.” She closed her eyes, hands shaking at her sides. “Fear has overcome us, so that all who have come to Jericho, do so in terror.”

“Rah—”

“Please!” She looked up, staring into his eyes, willing him to hear her out. “The stories have spread of how Yahweh split the Red Sea before you, as well as what your people did to

Sihon and Og, the Ammonite kings east of the Jordan River.” At this, Salmon flinched, but she pressed on. “We fear you, and that fear has stolen our courage to fight.”

Like Jilsen, who needed a woman to do his job for him, and city guards who stripped children from their families. The hand of Yahweh was set against them and Israel had not even crossed the Jordan yet. What would the god of this foreign nation accomplish after these two spies returned to their people?

“Yahweh is a god above all others, both those of heaven and earth.” Rahab’s voice wobbled. Her knees collapsed, bringing her to grovel at the two men’s feet. “Swear to me! In the name of Yahweh, swear that you will protect me as I have protected you.”

Salmon could do nothing more than gawk. When he’d noticed Rahab’s presence on the roof, he had not imagined... For her to have threatened them would have made more sense. But she had made no demands. Even now, hers was a plea born of desperation and a humility few could manage.

“Give me a pledge,” the woman continued, leaving no room for him to answer, “that when you have conquered Jericho, you will allow me and my family, and all who belong to us, to live.”

The moment Rahab fell silent, Einan was tugging on Salmon’s arm and whispering in his ear. “We cannot do what she asks. Yahweh has declared that they all shall die.”

But had he? Up until now, Yahweh’s proclamation had been to spare the untouched women of cities far from the promised land. True, Rahab would not count as one of those, and Israel was also to kill everyone living in the land of Canaan. Yet Yahweh had also proclaimed a blessing upon those who blessed his people, Israel.

Did saving two of Israel’s spies not count as blessing Yahweh’s holy people?

“Our lives for yours.” Salmon spoke his vow in a rush, leaving no room for Einan, or Yahweh, to interrupt him. Even after experiencing the peace of the I Am moments before, he still tensed, waiting for the wrath of God to fall on him for disobedience and assumptions.

“Salmon!” His name lashed like a whip from Einan’s mouth. But even Einan could not undo what another man swore on oath. And Salmon’s words were no less than that.

Appeasing a slight niggle of doubt, Salmon continued. “If you tell no one of what we are doing, now or in the days to come, we will protect you and yours when we return and claim this land.”

And they would. For the God who shut the people of Jericho within their city long before Israel’s warriors had even arrived, wouldn’t struggle to bring his people to the land he had already claimed for them.

Chapter 23

Salmon and Einan's return to Israel went as unnoticed as their departure.

After climbing through the window of Rahab's home and disappearing into the desert, they had spent three days hidden away in a cave. Throughout that time, Einan refused to speak while Salmon played his final encounter with Rahab over and over again in his head.

Had he actually offered her, her life? Told her that so long as she hung from her window the red cord he had seen with her weaving supplies, that they would spare her?

Far from the city and the sight of the veiled woman housed in the walls of Jericho, he was reminded of just how little control he had over his own life. *He* was not the one who wished to be in Canaan, who wished to always move his people and family at the whim of a cloud he had followed since birth.

Did he honestly believe his vow would protect her? Or was it a desperate hope that Yahweh would honor this one wish? Because if Yahweh saw fit to spare Salmon from the maw of Jericho, could he not also rescue a woman like Rahab?

But these were not questions Einan had any desire to answer, nor did Salmon wish to voice them to Joshua once they returned to the camp at Shittim.

Still, it was there, in the tent of their leader that Einan's tongue once again loosened. "Yahweh has surely given this land to us." He bowed his head, his body angled away from Salmon. His voice rose in pitch and fervor. "The people melt in fear of us, barricading themselves within the city walls."

"I see." Joshua sat on a cushion before them. His wife crouched next to him, tearing bread and stuffing it with lamb and olives. She raised the first to Joshua, but he waved her toward the brothers. "Salmon," he said, "do you agree with Einan's assessment?"

“I do.”

Joshua closed his eyes, and his shoulders rolled back as though releasing some sort of burden. He raised his hands in supplication for a moment before lowering them and piercing Salmon with his gaze. “Tell me what it was you saw.”

Einan tensed.

Salmon let his focus linger on his brother while they both accepted the food Kali offered. The conflict between Einan and himself was too much to broach at the moment, but Salmon was still the leader of Judah... at least for now.

Addressing Joshua, he answered, “The towns and villages were empty, their livestock left in their pens. The people themselves were found lined up at the gate of Jericho or else already inside of it.”

“Inside of it?”

“Yes. We were able to find our way into the city.”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t have,” Einan mumbled.

“And why is that?” Joshua finally welcomed his wife’s offered meal, now that the brothers were served, and she left, the tent flap slapping behind her.

“Because Salmon made a vow which will ruin him, if not us all!”

“Einan.” His name came out as a rumbled warning from deep in Salmon’s chest.

“You promised life to one marked for destruction.”

“She saved us.”

“Yahweh saved us!” Einan thumped his fist on Salmon’s chest, emphasizing his words with a hollow assault that rattled Salmon’s core.

Joshua rose. “Einan, would you leave us?”

For a moment, Salmon thought that Einan would refuse. His lips settled in a harsh line and he pierced Salmon with a look of such disgust that Salmon felt it as a stronger blow than

the physical one moments ago. But then Einan raised his chin and stalked out, the slap of his angry stride creating far more noise than Kali's had.

“Now.” Joshua claimed the space Einan had just vacated. “Start from the beginning.”

Salmon bowed his head, heart racing. Would Joshua be convinced of the righteousness of his actions, or would he believe the same as Einan?

Jericho

When would Israel arrive?

That was one of many concerns Rahab had now that the two spies had left her home. Despite assurance by the one, she couldn't help the doubts that plagued her. Regardless of what Salmon said, she had learned not to trust the vows of men.

Still, she knew the Israelites would come. And when they did, she didn't want to be found outside, far from the scarlet cord.

“We can no longer go to the gate, Tanyth.”

“And why not?” The other woman placed her hands on her hips. “Are you afraid we'll have more visitors like those men you hid?” Her words were sharp and biting. After Tanyth had returned from the well that night, it hadn't taken long for her children to mention the city guards who had visited while she was gone, nor the reason they had been there.

When Tanyth found that Salmon and Einan had been hidden rather than turned over, potentially endangering her children in the process, she had dragged Rahab to the side and made clear her thoughts on the decision. Her voice had been pitched low only to keep those very same spies from hearing.

But now everything was over and done with. And Jilsen had never returned.

“You know that's not why!” Rahab's patience was wearing. For the past four days, she had remained cooped up in the house with an angry mother and two antsy children. And

though Tanyth had taken to entertaining the men who came to visit as well, Rahab had found the thought sickened her more than before.

What was the purpose in selling themselves, in Tanyth selling herself, when Israel could arrive any day?

Tanyth huffed. “I know you want to believe that somehow they will remember their promise and come for us. But that’s not going to happen.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Because without that promise, they were as doomed as the rest of the city.

“Move. We find another place to live. Somewhere farther from the wall and the fighting.”

“I can’t move, Tanyth. My abba owns this house and he will not allow me to go somewhere else.”

The other woman’s lips settled in a brittle line. “He’ll not appreciate discovering we’ve refused to go out in search of new customers either.”

“I will think of something.”

“Well, while you think, one of us must bring an income to keep us here. I’ll not have my children on the street simply because you could no longer stomach the one thing you have done for the past years of your life!” With that, Tanyth stormed from the house, slamming the door in her wake.

Rahab stared after her, wishing she could force her to return. They would find another way. But she understood fear was a gripping thing. It had led Rahab from the safety of her home the night her face was scarred, left her in Jilsen’s arms when no one else would love her, and had trapped her in her abba’s will ever since.

In turn, she had been afraid of living with someone, of living with no one, and of not living at all. But now, the god of Israel threatened the city of her birth and she found she wasn’t afraid of any of that any longer. She only feared the wrath of a god who slew nations and diligently marched a people through the desert for forty years.

If Yahweh's will could not be thwarted in that length of time, what was to make Jericho believe that it would survive now?

"Children," Rahab called and waited for their round faces to appear to the top of the stairs. When they did, she jabbed a finger to the ceiling above them. "Go back to the roof and stay there. Your ima has gone to the gate, and I must leave as well." Before Israel returned and it was too late to do what she needed to.

Departing the house, she set out—not for the gate, but for the opposite end of the city. Picking her way, she stumbled between families camped in the street, with the areas they had marked off for their tents creating a different maze than she was used to. Crowded as they were, she soon lost her way.

But there was no shortage of people willing to point her the right way if it meant she left them alone. Finding the temple of Ashtaroth was simple enough when nearly every man she met had already been there. However, the look of disgust in their wives' eyes nearly sent Rahab running back to the familiar streets where everyone knew and ignored her.

At the temple steps, Rahab stood and lingered. The sun was setting, the light striking the temple in much the same way it did the mountains she saw from her window. But whereas the mountains were beautiful and peaceful, the temple was garish, with gold designs worked onto the stone and reflecting the setting sun back in her face.

She turned her back and strode in a direction she had only ever traveled twice before. A nearly straight line into the wealthier portion of the city and the place her family called home. The dwindling number of people told her she was on the right path.

Eventually, she spotted the low wall where the dog had attacked her all those years ago.

A young boy played in the front yard, a broken reed his imaginary sword. Was this Duni, Shiba and Idrikan's son?

Stopping at the gate, Rahab called for the child's attention. "Could you help me?"

He froze, turning wide eyes in her direction. Rather than answer, he dropped his sword and ran, disappearing within the house.

Rahab waited.

A moment later, her abba darkened the doorway. "Who is coming to my home at—" He stopped, clearly having recognized her.

"Hello, Abba."

"Rahab." His voice rumbled and he crossed his arms over his chest. "What are you doing here?"

Seeing him, hearing the disapproval in his voice, caused her courage to sag. But this wasn't about her. It was about her family and the boy who had just run inside. "I need to speak with you." To warn him.

Chapter 24

Rahab had not set foot in her childhood home in three years. It was disorienting, to see nothing had changed despite how much she had. The rugs were still laid out in the main room, pillows situated for entertaining. And her brothers were there, grouped around a platter of spiced meats and bread.

Idrikan's eyes widened as she entered, while the boy from outside sat in his lap.

Striding to the place of prominence, Abba lowered himself to the floor. He reclined on a pile of cushions and said to her brothers, "You all recognize your sister."

"Of course." Idrikan shifted to his knees, with the boy tucked against his side. "Do you need us to leave so that you can speak with her?"

"I didn't ask her to come, so I don't see why she would stay long." Their abba waved his hand. "No. Sit, eat. We'll be done with this conversation in a moment."

A stab of pain fractured in Rahab's chest, settling into a sensation that felt much like being crushed. She stood before her abba, foregoing even the thought of asking for a place to sit. Instead, she straightened, meeting his gaze. Or... at least she tried to. But his attention was focused on the food set out before him, even as he motioned impatiently for her to speak.

"The Israelites have come to the city." There, let that draw his attention.

But he just snorted. "Your brothers would have been called to war if there was an enemy nation camped outside the walls."

His indifference sparked something in her. "You mean the wall I live in?" She was here, trying to help when she could have —had been tempted to— kept this knowledge to herself. And this was how he treated her? "I believe I would know something before you did." If not for the more innocent members of her family, she wouldn't have even come.

Her abba's hands stilled as his face tilted up toward hers, features thunderous. "Think before you dare speak to me in such a tone again."

Because he'd beat her? Her jaw clenched. The only thing that mattered to him was the money she brought in. And if he made it so she couldn't work, then there wouldn't be any.

Still, with the way the city currently was, there might not be enough to incite him to keep her whole.

Breathing deep, she clenched her fists at her sides. On her exhale, she said, "Israel is not camped outside. But their spies came four days ago."

"And how do you come by this information?" He returned to a platter of seasoned meat, picking through it with the same care he had for her statement.

"Jilsen sent them to me. They were inside my house."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Idrikan stiffen. "What reason did he have to send them to you? Why not capture them at the gate?"

"More importantly," their abba said, shooting a glare in Idrikan's direction, "what importance is it to us, since it was four days ago and they have surely been executed already?"

"They weren't executed." Rahab paused, waiting to see if her abba might now meet her gaze. He didn't. "The men escaped, but not before promising me that our family—and anyone dwelling in my house—would be spared."

"Spared from what?" Her abba dipped his hand into the plate, scooping the meat onto his fingers. "Those dogs will never make it past the guards."

Heat crawled up her neck. "The rest of Jericho disagrees."

"People have come to the city for protection. And within these walls, they will have it."

Silence fell, their abba's words ringing with finality. Inside, Rahab felt her ire clamor for release, but she only dug her nails into her palms. After a moment, Idrikan pushed the boy from his lap and stood. "I'll see Rahab home."

“She can get there on her own.”

“Not at this hour.” Idrikan grasped her elbow and nudged her from the room.

They took the long way out, striding through the kitchen and slowing at the sight of the women of the family. Gone were Rahab’s sisters, replaced by two women she had never met, but who were likely married to one or two of her brothers.

Or perhaps Abba had taken more wives.

Of those faces she did know, Rahab sought the gaze of Shiba, the woman who had been more sister, more family, than those of her own blood. Their eyes meet briefly before Ima stepped between, shooing Rahab as though she were a goat who had wandered inside. “Get that filthy creature out of here, Idrikan.”

“Ima,” he growled.

“No, I will not have her in this house.”

Rahab peered over Ima’s shoulder, looking this time for Zibqet, who had defended her years ago when her face was first maimed. But Abba’s second wife only stared down at her hands, working the dough for the next day’s bread.

More than anything, that lack of recognition shattered Rahab deep within. Tugging from Idrikan’s hold, she rushed through the door to the backyard. From there, she saw the cistern where Jilsen had used her. In the dark, it was like staring at a darkened pit, waiting to devour her.

Her breath came in sharp gasps and her vision blurred.

Why had she come? Why had she tried to save them?

Hands grabbed her arms from behind and she struggled, a screech leaking from her throat.

“Enough, Rahab,” Idrikan’s voice broke through the horror, silencing her voice though not her thoughts. “Please.” His arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her into a loose hug as though fearful she might try to break from him if he held too tight.

The contact was both soothing and smothering. For years, the only men to hold her were those who sought her trade. Even before then, she could not remember the last time abba or brother had held her close.

“I am sorry.” Idrikan was speaking, his voice low in her ear and the words graveled as though they pained him. “I am sorry I’ve not protected you.” He continued, his regrets spilling out in anguish. “Abba and Ima… I saw through Jilsen the night we first met him, but I said nothing. I let him manipulate your emotions, hoping he would at least take you as his wife.”

Her breathing grew more ragged. What was he saying?

“I should have stepped in, but I trusted Abba more than myself. And Abba….” Collapsing, Idrikan’s chest sank into her back, his face burying in the veil. He shook and the sound of his sobs stopped up Rahab’s ears to anything else.

They stood there, two damaged hearts. Rahab longed to turn around, to wrap her arms around her brother’s waist and cry into his shoulder as well. But it had been years since she had allowed herself to fall at anyone’s feet.

She pulled at his hands, disengaging his fingers from where they grasped the folds of her clothing.

He sniffed sharply, quieting as though he recognized she was pulling away not only physically, but emotionally as well.

“Bring them,” she said, her tone sharp. “When the Israelites come, no matter what Abba says, bring Shiba and Duni. Bring Zibqet and her child as well, if Abba allowed her to keep the last.”

“Rahab.” The regret pulling at that one word was enough for her to know. Abba had taken Zibqet’s last child as well.

No wonder the woman was broken.

Anger swallowed Rahab’s heart. She had spoken with her abba, offered him saving grace though he had done nothing but cast her life into shame. And he had thrown her warning aside as carelessly as he had his last two children, as though both were only meant to feed his ambition.

When the spies returned with their people, would he still be too prideful to come to her then?

Chapter 25

The leader of Israel had said nothing after Salmon recounted what occurred in Jericho. He'd offered no rebuke nor blessing, only asked for Salmon to return to the tents of Judah. And Salmon had done so, his steps sure while inside he warred with confusion.

Was it possible Joshua didn't have an opinion? Or was he waiting for Yahweh's spoken judgment as Einan did?

Returning to his tent, Salmon stood and listened for his daughter's voice. But the entrance flap swayed in the breeze without anyone inside. Shouts of laughter came from the fields beyond, where other men's children played near herds of bleating sheep and goats.

Having been gone for nearly a month, he had already forgotten that Jael would have brought Gavriila to her and Einan's tent. Yet Einan would be there now, and Salmon was weary of his brother's disapproving silence.

But he also could not forgo seeing his own child.

Girding his courage, Salmon strode across to where Einan's dwelling was staked, the eastern panel drawn open to allow for air and sunlight. He was nearly there when Gavriila came rushing at his legs. Her squeal pierced his ear as he bent and scooped her into his arms.

She clutched his neck while her feet kicked him in her excitement. "Abba's home!"

Her yell drew Jael from the tent, where the woman lingered, her expression unreadable. Einan didn't make an appearance.

Loud in his ear, Gavriila said, "Dohd Einan told me you might not come back."

"Did he?" A dart of pain slithered through his chest.

"Ah ha, but I knew you would. You always come back."

Salmon clenched his teeth together. What kind of life had he lived that his six-year-old daughter should have enough experience with his leaving to trust he would return for her? Yet he knew any child of Israel would trust their abbas the same way.

He'd had to learn the same at a young age as well.

Movement drew his focus once more in Jael's direction as the woman disappeared. When she didn't reappear, he drew a deep breath. Turning, he glanced back at his own tent, at the cold fire and lack of a meal waiting for him. He knew he wouldn't be welcome in his brother's home right now, but Gavriila would.

If Einan was right—if Joshua was waiting for Yahweh to speak Salmon's judgment himself, then perhaps it would be better if Gavriila were nowhere near him.

He tightened his grasp and Gavriila squeaked. "Abba, don't hug so hard." She squirmed and he held back tears as he slid her to her feet.

Nudging her chin up, he asked, "Do you like spending time with your dodah?" How he wanted to hear her say no, that no one was as fun as he was. But he knew her little heart could love far more than just him. And that in the end, she could learn to love him less and her dodah more.

Gavriila wrinkled her nose. "Dodah Jael made me help smack the blankets yesterday. I got sand in my face."

A smile worked its way onto his face at her description of the chore. "We live in the desert, yaldah. There is sand everywhere."

"Not in my eyebrows!"

He chuckled. "No, not in your eyebrows." Straightening, he squared his shoulders and let the grin slide from his face. "I know your dodah asks you to help her, but would you be willing to stay with her and Dohd Einan for a little while longer?"

His beautiful little girl scowled, her sandless brows pinching together. "Why can't I stay with you?"

Salmon hesitated. What answer could he give her that wouldn't make him a liar if the worst came to pass? Should that happen, she would be taught to think poorly of him. He wouldn't compound that with dishonesty. "Your Dohd Einan and I are not on speaking terms at the moment, and so neither is your Dodah Jael and I."

"They talk to me."

"Yes, yaldah, and I would like for them to keep speaking to you. So, for now, you must stay with them." His throat tightened. "This way, they can remember what a good girl you are."

"But I—"

"No arguments, Gavriila. Just go back with your dodah."

"No." She stomped her foot and glared at him. "I want to go with you."

"Gavriila."

"No!" She attempted to skirt around him, making for their tent.

He caught her around the waist and hoisted her to his shoulder. This time, her voice raised in a screech and her kicking feet sought intentionally to injure. Tears threatened to blind him and he blinked the moisture away.

Called from within by the child's distress, Jael reappeared. Her features were thunderous, but she said nothing as he came and passed Gavriila into her arms. "It is alright, yaldah. Your dodah will take care of you." He pulled his daughter's hands from his tunic, forcing the little fingers to let go.

Once free, he backed away. "I'm sorry." Turning, he retreated. Not to his tent, but to the wilderness he had left only that morning. Echoing behind him was his daughter's repeating wail, "No, no, I don't want to!"

He had told her it was alright, but that wasn't true. He would remember this moment for the rest of his life, her cries sure to mix with the other nightmares in his head.

Salmon didn't see his family for another three days, until Israel prepared to cross the Jordan.

As the head of the tribe of Judah, he led his people to the river's banks. Einan fell alongside on the march there, his allegiance to their tribe greater than the silence that held strong between them. And though Salmon could hear Gavriila's tearful voice from the carts being pulled behind them, he didn't turn around.

They were less than a half league from their destination when Salmon first noticed something was different. Below the din of an entire nation traversing from the mountains into the valley was the low rushing sound of water.

When he and Einan had last passed this way, the river had drifted lazily.

He picked up his pace, as did his brother, wordlessly racing each other. But before they should have arrived, he saw it.

The water had risen, overflowing the lower banks and flooding much of the gorge it dwelled within. The flow churned, pulling trees and plant life with it at a speed Salmon could not imagine fording.

What had happened to change the river in such a short time?

“No.” The word was an exhale to Salmon’s left. Einan’s face had paled, his eyes widening. As Salmon watched, his brother rushed to the edge of the water, his feet dangerously close to the rush that might suck him in and drown him. “No!”

Murmurs of confusion mixed with the roar of water. A donkey brayed and Salmon turned to look at the people who had followed him there, believing that this would be the start of their future. Had they been even a day sooner, the crossing might have been possible. But now the rains must have begun upriver, blocking the way for months until the desert sands claimed the excess once again.

An ache claimed the back of Salmon’s neck, spreading to the back of his skull.

Was this his fault? Was it punishment for his vow in Jericho?

The huff of a camel dimly entered his thoughts moments before the movement of the animal at his side. On instinct, he glanced to its rider. Joshua. The old leader stared at the river, his features drawn so that at last he looked his true age.

“What do we do?” The question worked its way from Salmon’s throat in a whisper, followed by its repeat as a shout to be heard. “What do we do now?”

Joshua shifted his gaze to Salmon’s. “We pray.” He tapped the back of the camel’s leg, commanding it to kneel. Once at ground level, he climbed off and stood at Salmon’s side. Joshua lifted his hands, turning his palms to the heavens as his lips moved in supplications Salmon couldn’t make out over the Jordan’s roar.

Shame tipped Salmon’s head. Had he already forgotten the peace he had felt in Jericho, surrounded by his enemies? Even if Yahweh had turned his face away from Salmon for the vow he had made to the prostitute, he would not completely abandon his people.

Salmon sank to his knees. He pulled the outer layer of his garments up, covering his head. Lifting shaking hands, he added his prayers to Joshua’s. “Yahweh preserve us.”

Time passed like the churn of the river, muddled and swift, until Salmon’s knees grew numb and his throat hoarse. He tilted his chin up, feeling tears in his beard. His eye caught on something to his right, and when he turned his sight that way, his heart leapt.

Whether following his lead or the prompting of their own conscience, his people had folded to their knees as well. Though he could never hope to see all of them in one glance, he knew that well over 70,000 men and their families prayed for Yahweh’s favor.

And perhaps forgiveness.

A hand settled on Salmon’s shoulder. He jerked, rising in a half crouch before remembering himself.

Joshua withdrew, his gaze leaving Salmon to trail over the people of Israel. Moisture clouded his eyes. “Take your brother and find the other tribal leaders.”

Salmon stood. Though he had already voiced the question, he still asked again, “What will Israel do?”

“We will wait to hear from God.”

“And what will... I do?” He had still not heard Joshua’s judgment of what happened in Jericho.

Joshua sighed. “You and I will wait the same.”

It was three days before Israel heard the will of the I Am. Early in the morning, before the sun had started to rise, Joshua sent his sons to the leaders of the tribes with a message. This was then passed from the leaders to their officers, and from the officers to the people of Israel.

That morning, with the Ark of the Covenant leading the way, they would cross the Jordan River.

When the word came around, Salmon and the rest of Judah began to pack immediately. Within the hour, possessions were stowed. And within the next, tents were collapsed and loaded into carts.

Salmon stood near the river with the other tribal leaders, staff in hand, when the Levite priests passed with the ark raised upon their shoulders. Their faces were red with exertion from the distance they had already come, the tassels around their ankles brown with the sand gathered in every step. The rising sun peeked behind the mountains at the priests’ backs, shining off the gold of the cherubim’s wings guarding the ark.

A shiver tracked down Salmon’s spine. The angels of Yahweh not only watched the children of Israel behind, but the Promised Land ahead.

“Abba?”

The small voice caused him to stiffen and his fingers to curl tighter on his staff.

As though sensing his withdrawal, little Gavriila tugged hesitantly at the hem of his clothes. “Abba, are the priests going to put that box into the water?”

That box.

A war battled in Salmon’s head and in his heart.

Joshua’s message that morning had spoken of the ark. Of how the priests would carry the seat of Yahweh’s presence into the Jordan. But he had said nothing about Salmon’s possible transgressions.

How could Salmon pass up a moment with his daughter and chance to teach her? “That box is the Ark of the Covenant, yaldah. The sign of Yahweh’s presence among us.”

“No, Abba. That is the cloud!” Her little fingers reached up, pointing at the sign she had known all her life.

Tears felt thick in his throat. He knelt, letting his staff slide between his fingers. “No, yaldah, come very soon, that cloud will be gone. But the ark will last as long as Yahweh’s people do.”

Her nose crinkled. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“None of us see it very often.” He turned his head, tracking the priests’ final steps along the bank.

Would it happen? Joshua said that the moment they entered, the river would be cut off and the Jordan would stop flowing. Salmon had seen enough miracles to believe it. But those had been proclaimed by Moses, not Joshua.

The lead priest touched the water.

At first, Salmon could tell no difference. The river raged as strong as before, licking at the priests’ clothing and tugging at their sandals. The urge to cover Gavriila’s eyes before the men were swept away grew until his knuckles were numb around his staff.

But as the last of the priests stepped into the river, Salmon realized that the first priests stood no deeper than the rest. The farther they strode, the farther the Jordan shrank from its banks until the water was rushing away faster than the men could

walk. And Salmon once again felt the crush of God on his spirit.

Blubbering like a fool, he pressed his face to his sleeve. A tiny hand brushed at his hair and a soft voice murmured in his ear. But an even greater hand brushed at his heart.

Jericho

For three days, the horizon swarmed with Israelites camped beyond the Jordan. Their numbers stretched as far as Rahab could see and she suspected much farther still.

She had sat on the roof carding wool that first day when she heard the angry shouts of soldiers and the stomp of hurried feet in the ramparts overhead. Dropping her tools, she ran down the stairs to her second-floor window, certain Israel had arrived at Jericho's door. She looked first to the lintel. Seeing the red sash still in place, she wilted against the wall in relief. But then she lifted her gaze beyond the city's walls and gasped.

The numbers of Israel had been greater than she had ever guessed.

Now, her bed was against the far wall and her loom was positioned near the window. From there, she could watch and wait.

And wait she did.

“Are you sure those people will come here?” Tallya had taken to staring out the window with her. Her small fingers worked to separate the fibers from the flax that the two spies had hid beneath.

“I’m sure.” Rahab repeated it, though Tanyth cast her a pitying glance from her seat beside.

The other woman still did not believe the spies would honor their promise.

“How long?”

“Soon.” Their sheer numbers would overrun the city in a matter of days, destroying everything and everyone inside.

“Better they turn away and leave us alone.” Tanyth yanked and bounced the fibers she was weaving together into yarn, spinning the whorl like a top in mid-air.

Rahab let her own work slow. Her mouth dried at the thought of broaching the subject she knew caused Tanyth’s anger. Tanyth’s other son.

The one who, should Israel come, would perish in the fighting. Even believing the spies’ promise, there was no measure of comfort for that knowledge.

Mindless, Rahab wove threads through her loom. The rows formed despite her unfocused gaze.

What of her family? If Abba caught wind of her and Idrikan’s plan... but surely Abba would never allow the other members of their family to come, and only those inside Rahab’s house at the time of attack would survive.

“Ima?” Talliya tugged on both women’s sleeves, her voice rising in pitch. “Are the Israelites walking across the river?”

Rahab’s gaze snapped back into focus. Dropping her yarn, she stood and twisted her way to the windowsill.

The dark mass of people which had camped out of reach beyond the Jordan’s flooded banks now swelled beyond them, crawling to Jericho’s side.

Chills skated up Rahab’s arms. She didn’t know if the Israelites had fashioned boats or if their god had worked a miracle. But they were coming. And only a force stronger than their I Am could stop them.

Part 4

Chapter 26

For seven days, the young men of Israel lay in anguish on the doorstep of their enemies. Camped at Gilgal, they followed the command of Yahweh to circumcise those who had not been during their wandering. On that day, every man accepted the blade as they committed themselves to the covenant passed through Abraham and now through Joshua.

For Salmon, the days were agonizing. Lounging in his tent without companionship left him far too much time to think and just as much time to regret.

He had lived so much of this life outside of Yahweh's promise. If not in deed, then certainly in his heart. He had longed for Yahweh's decrees to make sense, for them to offer mercy rather than bloodshed. But so far, he had not seen it.

Not unless Yahweh offered Rahab the forgiveness Salmon longed to see for both of them. Seeing would have to wait, however. For before Israel could claim Jericho, they first had to celebrate the Passover.

Seven days of feasting following these seven days of torment.

In preparation, Salmon left his tent early on the last day, the sun yet hidden beyond the neighbors' tents. He met Einan across the way, stopping some distance apart. They did not speak. Only stared until Salmon rubbed a hand over his beard to dispel his nerves. "For today at least, can we have peace?"

Einan's shoulders stiffened. His nostrils flared, but then his chin tipped up in assent.

Salmon reached his hand up to squeeze the tension from his shoulder, using the movement as a chance to look away first.

This time, Einan broke the silence. "I have already chosen the lamb."

Still raised to his shoulder, Salmon's hand stilled. Had this year been like the last, it would have been Salmon who chose the sacrificial lamb and cared for it. Now it was his brother's task.

One more regret to heap upon the rest.

Preparing for the chance that either Joshua or Yahweh should decide Salmon needed to pay for his vow in Jericho, Salmon had already begun to shift the responsibilities of leadership to his brother's shoulders. The first had been for Einan to be the one who claimed their tribe's stone from the floor of the Jordan River, adding to those of the other eleven tribes which made up the altar Yahweh had commanded be placed there in their camp at Gilgal.

When he had made the decision, Salmon had thought it would be a relief to have his own burden lessened; for Einan to take on the role they both knew the younger was more willing to fill. But on the heels of that thought had come the realization Salmon had failed his people in more ways than one.

It was time to fix that mistake. "I can carry the animal."

A silent battle seemed to play out behind Einan's gaze, his brows pinching in thought. Then he raised his hands in a shrug. "We are both still healing. But if you would like to hurt yourself instead of me..."

"I would always rather the harm come to me."

Einan scoffed, though the new slant of his lips was more brotherly than disdainful. "I'll bring it out and tell Jael that you will be joining us." He stopped, halfway back to his tent. "It will be good. The more mouths, the less lamb that is wasted."

Einan's words were a peace offering. Jael would have planned, inviting enough people to make the Passover sacrifice go around. Salmon would only have what scraps were left, what was offered to him out of politeness.

But he would not pass up this chance to be with his family.

Moments later, Einan reemerged. He held a lamb's tether, the rope slack as the creature followed. "Just so you know, I chose a fat one."

Salmon chuckled, the sound coming as easily as it once had. But the moment ebbed. "Thank you, Einan."

His brother clasped his hands at his back. "For the sheep...?"

"No." Salmon knelt and hefted the lamb onto his shoulders. "For speaking to me again."

Einan sighed and shook his head. "Yahweh hasn't rained brimstone on your tent yet. So, I thought that perhaps I should reserve my temper for when he does." A smile tugged at his beard.

"And then you'll dance on the ashes?" The lamb bleated in Salmon's ear as he adjusted his grip.

"No!" Einan waved his hand. "I'll just hire half the traditional number of mourners for your burial."

"Dress me in fine robes and then leave me uninterred out on the desert sands?"

"There wouldn't be enough of you left to do that."

The reminder sobered him. This was the reason Salmon had stayed away from his family, his daughter, even though it pained him. If he were to incur Yahweh's wrath, then only he would be the one to pay the price.

But now he saw that wasn't true. No matter what he did, those he cared about would always feel the cost. Whether he distanced himself or stood in their midst, he couldn't hide from his responsibility. Gavriila was his daughter, just as the clan of Perez and the tribe of Judah were his to lead.

His. Not Einan's.

At least not yet.

Slaughtering the Passover lambs took nearly all day, with every priest and Levite working from dawn until just before

dusk. Salmon and his brother were late to arrive, falling far back in line despite having left their tents as early as they had. The metallic smell of blood hung thick in the air around the tabernacle, the bleating of lambs a low drone every shepherd knew.

The sun was receding by the time the brothers returned to their dwellings. In a rush to finish preparations before night fully blanketed the land, Jael swept both brothers aside, ignoring Salmon as she focused on the lamb that would need to be fully cooked before any could eat.

As Gavriila was not at the woman's side, Salmon ducked inside his brother's tent in search of her. The space was dark, the lamps not yet lit. But he could still make out the shapes of jars and baskets around the tent's edges, as well as other mounds he couldn't quiet name.

Einan came in behind him, carrying a smoldering twig from the fire outside. In moments, he had lit lamps around the space which gradually brightened as the wicks caught and flared. That was when Salmon noticed his daughter, curled in a heap atop a mound of cushions meant to be placed out for guests later.

The way her face twitched against the light told him that she had been asleep. But then she opened her eyes, blinking.

Hesitant, he moved to stand over her. "Did you have a good nap?"

Her head tilted up at his voice, her eyes widening. "Ab—" she hiccupped. Then her features scrunches up and she rolled over, hunching into the cushions as though to hide from him.

Salmon brushed the back of her head. "Yaldah—"

Gavriila flinched away, making a scream of protest that was muffled by the pile beneath her.

Startled, he drew back.

Was she still angry at him?

This time, he didn't try to touch her. "Your dohd and I need to get ready for guests. Do you think you might like to

help us?"

Seconds went by without her response. But with her small form held perfectly still and tense, he knew she hadn't fallen asleep again.

"I'll be here in the tent tonight. I hope that later you will want to talk to me." Left without an answer, he sighed. "I'm not going to leave again... not tonight anyway. And even if I am gone during the day, I'll be sure to come back every night."

When she remained silent, he stepped away. With both men working, they cleared the family's possessions and stowed them out of sight. At some point, Einan talked Gavriila out of the cushions she laid on and the brothers scattered them about the floor while Gavriila darted outside to be with her dodah.

Emptiness swallowed Salmon's gut. His Gavriila hadn't even looked at him.

Soon, night fell and their guests began to arrive. The scent of roast lamb hung heavy in the air, mixing with that of freshly made flat breads and spices. A sense of joviality lifted Salmon's spirits, though an ache he couldn't define still hovered over him.

Eventually, Jael announced the food was ready. Female cousins came in carrying platters and children rushed to their abba's sides, smiles wide. As head of their tribe and of their clan, Salmon led their prayer and then repeated the story of why they all were there, celebrating.

Gavriila oohed and aahed over the story of their grandparents, just as all the other children did. For those moments, she watched him with wide eyes, the past weeks forgotten.

When he finished, they all broke bread and passed the lamb, scooping the meat as it came around. They ate the bitter herbs and stuffed themselves until the food was gone, laughing and celebrating until the children had fallen asleep. The adults soon followed. No one went outside that night, staying inside

the tent flaps just as their parents and grandparents had remained within their homes in Egypt.

The next morning, people rose with the sun. Abbas and imas prodded children awake, shuffling them back toward their own dwellings. Salmon awoke before the rest of his family and saw off the guests with hushed whispers. Outside, the sun peeked over the horizon, its bright rays shooting like spears between the tents.

A thin layer of manna coated the ground, the dried gum like pellets trod with footprints.

The morning was eerily quiet. Though most of Israel was out, marching in filed lines back to their tents, the only raised voices were those of sheep and cattle.

There were few other men and women of Israel truly alert at this hour. Most blinked against the light and rubbed their faces as though they would rather still be asleep. Like Salmon, a few had taken baskets and were now scooping up their daily manna, saving it from between the feet of their neighbors.

It was sometime later, after Einan and Jael had risen, that Salmon noticed people departing their tents once again. Rather than stooping for manna, they strode away from the tents and gathered in groups that made their way to the edges of camp.

Salmon called out as one such group drew near. “Where are you off to?”

“To the abandoned towns.” A man grinned. “Since the people of Canaan have already fled, we won’t have to fight for the spoils this time. It’s all for the taking.”

“There’ll be food,” another said. “Fresh from the orchards and vineyards. The first bounty we’ll taste from the Promised Land!”

The Promised Land. Salmon had almost forgotten that so far this camp was all that the rest of Israel had seen of it.

Now that they had recovered from the renewal of their covenant with Yahweh and celebrated the Passover, the people of Israel would be eager to explore. By noon, many would

have come across empty towns with the herds and orchards left behind by those who had fled.

Salmon remembered what it was like, knowing everything he had seen was left to them by the I Am. What was found today could be enjoyed without conflict. Without killing.

But that still would come later. After Joshua had gathered the men of Israel and told them it was time to claim the rest of Canaan.

That announcement came the very next day.

Following the discovery that no manna had appeared with the dawn was a messenger outside Salmon's tent. The man of Ephraim relayed Joshua's instructions before nudging his camel forward, intent on his mission.

Around him, Salmon could hear the murmurs. Worried voices wondering what the lack of manna meant and what Joshua's messenger had said.

A young boy of twelve, one of Salmon's distant cousins, watched Salmon from the path between dwellings, his gaze then drifting after the rider. Salmon waved the boy over. "Go, tell your abba to call my lieutenants. We have to prepare."

The boy raised his chin and then darted off, weaving through the way he had just come.

Salmon glanced at his brother's tent and found Einan standing in the entrance. His mouth was set, eyes solemn.

The loss of the manna was a hard blow to all of them, but to Einan it was surely more so, due to the faith he had placed in Yahweh's signs.

After jerking his head in a motion for his brother to follow, Salmon ducked back inside his own dwelling. Moments later, the swoosh of fabric announced Einan's arrival behind him.

"What did the messenger say?"

Needing a chance to compose his thoughts, Salmon reached for his armor and then held it out between them. "Help me with this."

Einan hesitated a breath before accepting the burden. “Does this mean it’s time to fight?”

That was just it. Joshua’s message had been confusing. Less a battle tactic and more of a hope. But he’d said that the strategy came from Yahweh, and if this was what their God said to do...

“We’re to march. For seven days, once around the city each day.”

“But that’s insane!” Einan hefted the breastplate, fitting it over Salmon’s head. “Jericho isn’t the first walled city we have taken. Why not wait and lay siege the way we always have?”

“Because this time, Joshua says that Yahweh wants us to march around the city while we wait.”

Maybe it was intimidation. Maybe it was foolishness. To lead an entire army around a city was certainly either one or the other, if not both, as movement cost energy that had to be replenished with food and water. And while the Jordan lay within easy reach, the water would still have to be carted miles from the river to where Israel’s army camped around Jericho.

Though Joshua said this would only last for seven days, everyone knew a city’s resources took far longer to dwindle.

“After the seven days—” How was it that the messenger had phrased it? “No, on the seventh day, we will march seven times around. And on that day, Jericho’s walls will collapse.” Seven times on the seventh.

Perfection and completion.

Einan fell silent as his gaze lowered to the laces of Salmon’s breastplate. He gave the ends of the knot a sharp pull, testing that they would hold. When he looked back up, his gaze was piercing. “Do you believe that Yahweh will do as he says?”

Something in the way he asked the question gave Salmon pause. He bent down to grab his belt, then felt the press of his sword against his hip as he fastened it in place. Even after years of wearing the weapon, it was as uncomfortable as the

implication in Einan's words. "I saw the Jordan divided the same as you did, Einan."

"But both the cloud and the manna are gone."

It was true. And Salmon had heard the whispers that morning of those who wondered if the I Am had abandoned them. Perhaps over incorrect observance of the Passover meal which commemorated their freedom from Egypt. But Salmon expected to be dead the moment Yahweh's wrath was turned against him. If Yahweh had abandoned Israel after forty years of leading them through the desert, then there would have been destruction like the night Moses returned from Mount Sinai to find the people of Israel worshiping a golden calf.

And since that hadn't happened yet... "We'll have to trust." He clapped Einan's arm. "Besides, weren't you the one who reprimanded me not a month ago to do that very thing?"

"I didn't think you would take my advice." Einan retreated a few steps, crossing his arms as he did. "And what about the prostitute? You remember that she lives in the wall. Its destruction will kill her."

And Yahweh's will would have been decided. "Then my vow will be broken, and there will be no more questions as to whether or not I did the right thing." A memory of her dark eyes, peering at him through her veil tore at him with regret. But he had tried. And unless he somehow stole into the city to save her before then, there was nothing more he could do.

"At least, for her, it will be swift."

For her and the family she'd gathered to her, believing that the people of Israel would be true to Salmon's word.

Chapter 27

Within hours of Israel's crossing of the Jordan river, Jericho had sealed its gates. Barely two days after that, fights were breaking out in the streets. People who had lived peaceably for months now stole and quarreled, as though shutting the gates had somehow shut their hearts to each other.

In response, Rahab and Tanyth boarded up their house, barring both the door and the windows that faced inside the city. For nearly two weeks, they and the children existed in the light of one window which looked out over the Jordan River Valley, fearing the violence outside more than they feared the dark.

But even keeping inside, the four of them were not able to hide from all that being trapped within the city of Jericho meant.

Though Rahab and Tanyth had gathered stores of food and water, both knew it would only last so long. The jars of water and lamp oil would run out first. That was why they sat in the dark, throats parched even with full jars lining the wall behind them.

Reduced air flow had made them all irritable. Tanyth lost her temper more frequently, and the children, who were usually loud and boisterous, retreated into silence. With Rahab's own frustration mounting, every noise outside was like a pick across a broken cord, causing her to wince.

Her veil, which had always been a shield, now smothered. It stuck to the sweat on her cheeks while its weight seemed to grow by the day. But habit kept it in place, as did anxiety over what Tanyth's biting tongue would say about her scars.

Although they had lived together these few months, Rahab had yet to let the other woman see her face. Even she avoided her own reflection.

Like any scar, it had healed, but the ache in her heart had not.

With nothing but work to occupy their hands, Rahab and Tanyth sat below the one open window and spun yarn. For the past few days, their whorls had spun in rhythm, dipping up and down as the women fed the fibers between their fingers.

The yarn built into small heaps they gathered into bundles each evening. Depending on how long the conflict with Israel lasted, they would save the bundles for dyeing or else wind them into spools for weaving.

“Ima?” Tallya sat on Rahab’s bed. For the past hour, she and Yassib had amused themselves with a game the girl had devised using a small jar, a handful of lentils, and a few olive pits. Now, they both stared at their ima.

Tanyth frowned. “Yes?”

The boy spoke up, “We’re hungry.”

Tanyth’s frown deepened. “You’ll just have to wait until later, when it’s time to eat.” Her hands never slowed, her whorl spinning... spinning.

“But there’s never enough.”

Rahab winced at the whine in his voice.

He was right though. Her own body felt as though it were ready to consume her from the inside, the gurgle of her stomach burrowing deep. But there was nothing they could do about it. Not if they wanted to live long enough for the Israelites to spare them.

Their ima might have answered, but a knock on the door froze them all.

Both women’s hands stopped. The rhythm of their whorls broke, the weights spinning backward, unwinding their yarn.

Rahab bent and grabbed the tool where it hung by her feet, stilling the motion. She pressed her forearm against her knee, stopping the quiver in her hands as she pushed down the apprehension that rose in her veins.

The sound came again, sharper and with more force.

Yassib curled into his sister's side, a whimper breaking from him as she buried her chin in his hair.

As if nothing had happened, Tanyth returned to her work. "Don't you dare answer that."

The knock became an insistent pounding. And then the person yelled Rahab's name, the syllables of which were muffled but still distinguishable.

A numb sensation traveled through Rahab's fingers and arms, as though she were still working the flax fibers. She shuddered and rubbed her hands together, trying to disrupt the feeling. But it had sunk beneath her skin, more a response to the noise outside than her ceased labor. If it were her abba, keeping him out might be worse than letting him in.

She inhaled. "I have to see who it is."

"But—"

"I'll check before I unbar the door."

Tanyth's gaze flickered to her children. "If anyone comes to take them..."

Rahab balled her hand into a fist. "I won't let that happen." The fires of Molech might burn with new lives sacrificed to it each day, begging for Israel to pass them by, but those flames wouldn't touch those in her care.

Jericho's gods had already claimed enough.

While the person continued to beat on the door, Rahab set aside her work. Then she made her way down the stairs, hand trailing along the wall.

The lower room was cast in a darkness made hazy by the soft light coming through the window on the upper floor. And with every pound of the stranger's fist against the door, faint cracks of sun could be seen through the weathered boards.

It was by these cracks of light that Rahab made her way to the entrance, reaching the threshold as the man called her name again. This time, the cadence of his voice sparked familiarity. "Idrikan?"

Immediately, the beating ceased. “Rahab! You have to let us in.”

But if he were here, that meant...

Excitement, as well as a new fear, mingled in Rahab’s veins. For her brother to have come now meant that Israel was on its way.

She fumbled with the knot Tanyth had worked into the latch. The rough strands scraped the pads of her fingers and tore at the chapped skin, but the knot finally came loose and the door swung in.

Sudden light blinded her as she was forced aside and three different forms brushed by. She blinked, bringing into focus the last of the group and saw her brother. As she opened her mouth to speak, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her farther from the threshold.

He used his other hand to push the door closed all but a sliver while he peered through it, back into the street. With his face and torso pressed against the opening, there was barely enough light to make out where he still grasped her arm.

His caution made her pulse race against the press of his hand. She shifted her gaze, seeking the dark shapes of those who Idrikan had brought with him.

Though she could hear their sharp breaths of fear and unease, she couldn’t make out who they were. But she could guess who would have come.

Idrikan turned from the door, opening it a little more as he did, though he still held tight to the latch. “I don’t think he followed.”

“Who?”

“One of the city guards.” Idrikan winced. “Rahab, the king has sent around a declaration. Every able-bodied man is to prepare to fight, which includes me.”

“But I thought we were preparing for siege?” The guards had already stolen Tanyth’s eldest son. Would they take Idrikan too?

A tightness wrung her chest. This wasn't what was supposed to happen. Her family— her whole family— was supposed to be with her inside her home within the wall. She had been going to save them. But her abba denied her, and now Jericho would claim her brother as well.

Idrikan sighed and shook his head. "We still are, but that doesn't mean the city can be unprepared. Not when the men of Israel have been spotted marching in this direction."

So, she had been right. Yet somehow that knowledge didn't please her the way it had a second ago.

"Jericho is already unprepared." This from Shiba, just off to the right. She shifted, a dark bundle in her arms that was likely her son.

Idrikan turned that way, his features softening. "Shiba—"

"No!" Shiba's distress was palpable, gripping through the darkness. "Why can't you stay with us? You already said the guard from the city gate didn't follow."

"He didn't need to because he already knew where I was headed!"

Dreaded realization dawned and Rahab sucked in a breath. "Jilsen?"

Her brother jerked his chin up. "He knows who I am. If I don't come forward, then he'll come here. Or worse, he'll go to Abba and Abba will come here."

"How would that be worse than you dying?" Shiba's question came out sharp. In her arms, Duni yelped as though she had squeezed him.

Rahab stretched out her arms. "Why don't I hold—"

But the distraught wife and mother wasn't finished. "What could possibly be worse than you being separated from us?"

"There's no time for us to argue." Idrikan strode away from the door. The dark made his movements difficult to see, but Rahab thought he grabbed Duni and shoved him into the arms of the second figure standing to Shiba's right. "Behind

you are stairs to the upper room. Go there while I speak with Rahab.”

While the second figure immediately turned, hurrying farther into the dark and toward the faint light of the stairs, Shiba hesitated. Idrikan ignored her, instead opening the door and standing in the light of the threshold. Turning his head so that one half of it was cast in shadow, he said to Rahab, “Don’t let anything happen to them.”

“I won’t.”

“I mean it.” His brows pinched together. “If Abba finds them here, especially Duni, we’ll all pay.”

Time hadn’t lessened the memory of what that meant. For Idrikan to have smuggled away his small family against their abba’s command would result in nothing but bruises if they were ever found. “You don’t think Jericho will survive this fight either, do you?”

He sighed. “For our sake, I hope not.” Then he brushed a kiss across her forehead. “I’ll try to come back. But if you don’t see me, then keep safe.”

Out in the street, a man hollered. “You! What are you doing? Don’t think you can hide behind your women’s skirts.”

Idrikan winced. “I’m sorry, Rahab.” He pushed her farther inside and slammed the door in her face. A moment later, the wood shook with what sounded like his body being shoved against it.

Shiba screamed.

Used to the force of disgruntled customers, Rahab fumbled for the woven latch. Her fingers shook as she knotted the ends back together. Then, heart racing, she cast about until her hand collided with Shiba’s arm. Grabbing the other woman, she hurried them both up the stairs.

There, she was met with expressions of terror from the home’s other inhabitants, their features pale and eyes wide. Framed in the light of the window was Zibqet clutching Duni to her chest. She stood in the place Rahab had vacated, with Tanyth and the other children huddled around her.

Tanyth scowled, her arms clutched tightly around the shoulders of her children. “What just happened?”

Rahab opened her mouth, but no words came out.

With a sob, Shiba ran across the room. She joined the huddle, her arms around both Zibqet and Duni, her face pressed into her son’s small chest. The boy only stared, eyes wide and confused.

After so many years of not speaking to the women from her family, Rahab couldn’t make her mouth form any words. Not for them and not for Tanyth either.

The city she had always known was gone. Replaced with something darker.

What she had told the spies was true, Jericho was afraid. But even she hadn’t realized how much. And now she knew that if she didn’t see Idrikan again... it would be because he was dead.

Four days passed without hearing anything from her brother. In that time, the tension inside Rahab’s house built, a mixture of strangers and friends and family. Only Rahab bound them. That and the promise of salvation in the midst of chaos.

Before the sun had set on the first day, the army of Israel had reached the city. But rather than camp or stand and offer threats, they had marched. Once in a seemingly endless tramp of men around the walls of Jericho. The sheer number of them was enough to bring Rahab to her knees in disbelief. By the hundreds and the thousands, they were a nation on their own with far more might than one city of Canaan. Even one such as Jericho.

For the hours that Israel marched, it was as though all of Jericho held their breath. Those inside Rahab’s house took turns at the window, staring down at the men who trod below. The red cord on the sill fluttered in the breeze and with every flap Rahab wondered if any of the men below noticed. Wherever Salmon was, could he even see it?

In that time, the women in Rahab's household grasped hold of a tenuous peace. The first few days passed awkwardly, each adjusting to the others' presence. After so many years apart, it was a struggle for Rahab to remember what being a part of her own family meant. But being trapped in a small house while the army of Israel moved around the city each day quickly forced them to reconcile or go mad.

Now, on the fifth day, Rahab leaned against the window, shoulder pressed to Shiba's. They had stood like this for over half an hour. Neither moved or, as Rahab was sure, swallowed. The action was too costly when lips were cracked and water low, so that it felt like the front of their throats stuck to the back.

Five days.

Already Rahab knew what chaos lived in the streets. That the fight for water would leave long lines weaving between the hastily pitched tents.

“Why can’t we go outside, Rahab?” Shiba’s voice scraped across Rahab’s ears, rough and unexpected. The same thought was likely on everyone else’s mind. “Why can’t— we get water?”

The well wouldn’t run dry, not for months yet. Not when the flood season had begun. But that didn’t change the sense of desperation everyone felt, nor the instruction Salmon had given Rahab before he left.

To keep the cord in the window and, once their army arrived, to not leave her home. It was the only way he could guarantee they would be saved. But had he realized just what he was asking?

It wouldn’t matter if they were all saved from the sword if they had already perished from thirst.

Caught in her own wandering thoughts, Rahab forgot to answer until she heard a familiar drum on her door below. And from the way the air stilled of even their breaths, it seemed the rest of the women had heard the sound as well. Not the knock

of a customer, for they had not had one in the five days since they locked themselves in, but of someone else.

The sound came again, and Rahab found herself shoving from the window, fear and habit leading her though her thoughts had stalled.

Still propped against the window, Shiba stared up at her with widen eyes. “He wasn’t supposed to find us here.”

They both knew who Shiba meant. The patriarch of their family and the one person no one in that room wished to ever meet again. But why would he have come now? And would they be able to keep him away?

This time, the knocking came as a thunderous beat, the person below giving no quarter to those inside. And soon, it was followed by the sound of a body ramming into the wood.

Across the room, Duni began to whimper and Yassib soon joined him. Talliya’s voice joined with a quiver, “Ima, have the Israelites come?”

While she gathered her children to herself, Tanyth hissed in Rahab’s direction. “Do something.”

But what was there to do? Either to let him in or wait until he broke the door, the result would be the same.

Looking around the room, there was nothing they could use to protect themselves. Just the stairs and the hope that if her abba thought to take out his anger, that she would be able to stand in his way while the rest hid somewhere else. “Get to the back of the room.”

Shiba spoke up on confusion, “What will—”

Rahab stopped her, time short and her nerves already spent. “I will keep him at bay, but if I can’t, take the children and Zibqet to the roof.”

As she went downstairs, the dark room felt cavernous and empty, filled only with the crack of wood and curses of the men outside. Voices she recognized and wished that she didn’t.

Before the next bash could shake the door, she called out, assuring her presence. Then there was silence as she struggled

with the knot. Once she had it undone, the door swung in on its own, revealing the scowling faces of her abba and brothers.

Not Idrikan though, who would still be with the soldiers.

Shoving past Rahab, her abba spoke more to the room than to her. "Finally let us in."

She didn't answer. Couldn't think of anything worth saying and certainly nothing he would hear. Instead, she stood to the side as her brothers came in as well, followed by their wives. Last was Ima, her expression sour. All snuck glances to the street behind as though they feared they had been followed.

"Where's the lamp in here?" One of her brothers said, while another kicked one of the many pillows stacked against the wall, their actions charged with nervous energy.

"I've been trying to save the oil." And there was no reason to light a room not being used.

Her abba laughed derisively at that. "At least one smart thing that you've done." Then he was moving to the stairs and the people he had unknowingly trapped up there.

Hoping to stall him, to delay the inevitable, Rahab found herself asking, "What are you all doing here?"

Rather than stop him, this question only brought her ima's rounding wrath. "Do you think this house really belongs to you? That only you can be safe here?"

For a moment, the comment slowed Rahab in her tracks. Had she not done enough to consider this her home, her place? And hadn't she offered it as a refuge to them long before? But she had also lived so long without answering to her ima that she no longer felt an obligation to do so.

It was her abba she needed to worry about.

In a move that probably should have landed her on her backside, she sidestepped her family to leap over the many pillows and reach the stairs at the same time as he did. And there, in the dark, she stood in front of him, her chest rising and falling with the quick intake of her breath.

Startled, her abba stared at her, his features largely obscured by the shadows. “What are you doing?”

“Why are you here?” She wouldn’t let him pass. Wouldn’t let him find the people in her house who so desperately needed to be protected from him.

Instead of answering, he chuckled. The only one seemingly unaffected by the fear the rest exhibited. “So, this is where Idrikan decided to hide.”

“He was taken by the soldiers to guard the wall.”

At that, a moment of silence settled around them, her brothers stilling as though only then realizing that the same could happen to them. Then her abba made to push her aside. “Serves him right, running away instead of sticking around like your other brothers. Now the soldiers are too transfixed by the marching outside the city to worry about what happens inside.”

She refused to budge. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“And I’m not obligated to.” He pressed in, allowing his full height to intimidate. “Am I not allowed to stay in my own home? One with a view?”

So he had come, not just to hide, but to see what was happening outside the city for himself. “There’s no room upstairs.”

“Don’t lie to me.” At this, he reached out, snagging hold of the ring in her nose and pulling until she followed, tears welling in her eyes from the pain. And over the sound of her own increasing pulse, she heard him laugh. “Like leading a bull.” Then he was beyond her, taking the steps two at a time.

She followed, sniffing against the pain in her nostrils and shoving away the hands of those who tried to grab her from behind.

At the upper landing, she found her abba’s back. Across the room were those who had been gathered in her home for the past week, huddled close like sheep guarding against a

lion. And like an ill-prepared shepherd boy, she stepped in between.

They stared at each other for a time, her abba's gaze dark with anger. Behind him, her brothers crowded the stairs.

“I said, there is no room for you.”

“You think that I won’t cast your friend out?”

He meant Tanyth, the woman who had become more family to her than any of the blood relatives who were now gathered before her. Shiba or Zibqet would not escape his wrath either. And where in the past, Rahab might have cowered before him, this time something else rose inside her.

Something she hadn’t felt except for when she stood up to Jilsen.

Maybe some of that showed on her face, because her abba shifted, drawing back as though to consider her. But as with Jilsen, she wasn’t ready to give him the last word. “You came here, and you can stay. But on the first floor, away from us.”

“And if we don’t?”

Then there was not much that Rahab could do. Her abba knew that. But it wouldn’t stop her this time. If she were to meet her end, whether by thirst or by her abba’s hand, she would do so protecting those who stood behind her.

And she would wait for the deliverance Salmon promised.

For Israel, the seventh day started early, before the sun had fully risen. For the first hour, Salmon struggled to stay awake. His feet dragged beneath him, his body and spirit weary of their daily trek.

It wasn’t just Jericho. It was forty years of wandering, of never having a home. And the knowledge that while Yahweh had placed time limits on some things, there were far more that he didn’t. This city might be conquered in a week—but how many more cities would they have to march around?

Pressed tightly together, the heat built between the men as they marched, increasing as the day wore on. The atmosphere was subdued, the jovial faces of only the day before now set in stoic lines.

Seven times around. That was what Joshua said. Then the walls would come down.

On the fifth pass, Salmon tipped his face upward, searching for the scarlet cord that marked Rahab's home. With the glint of sun and the cloud of kicked-up sand, he never saw it. And maybe that was for the best.

One less image to haunt his waking nightmares.

Six passes.

Seven.

Their pace increased, though no one spoke a word.

This was it. The last hour before Israel claimed their first whole portion of the Promised Land.

A new body came alongside him. Salmon turned his head and met Joshua's profile. The leader of Israel was marching beside him, silent as the rest, neither turning to the right or to the left. So, Salmon did the same.

His pulse climbed, anticipation and dread warring for prominence.

Seven passes.

The line slowed to a stop. Without the sound of drumming feet, the valley was eerily silent. And then there was the creak of shifting armor, the rustle of clothing, the murmur of wondering voices.

Joshua moved, brushing his way through the ranks until he stood between them and the city. The old war hero raised both his arms and his voice. "Shout!" Voices echoed his words, carrying his commands to those too far away to hear. "For Yahweh has given you this victory! The city and all that is in it is devoted to him." His eyes scanned the crowd before locking on to Salmon, though he continued to address the whole of

Israel's army. "Only Rahab the prostitute, and all who are in her house, are to be spared."

The proclamation stole Salmon's air and he coughed, drowning out the rest of Joshua's words.

How could Rahab possibly be spared? Her house was in Jericho's wall. And even if that were not the case, Joshua had just announced to all of Israel that the woman they were to let live was a prostitute!

Trumpets blared around him, shaking him from his thoughts. Sucking in a breath, he raised his shout a second later than his brethren. The noise grew, until even the ground seemed to shake with their fury.

It was then that Salmon heard the roar of falling stone. His cry died in his throat as the archway of one of Jericho's gates shattered from three stories high. Next the walls cracked, splitting stones that crumbled like hardened sand.

Israel fell silent.

The city continued to fall, the screams now originating from inside rather than without. But they were the cries of fear and death, not triumph. And even as the dust settled, they didn't cease.

"Salmon." Einan knocked against his side. "Rahab."

Rahab.

As Salmon raised his sword, motioning to his men, his tribe, his family, there was only one destination he had in mind.

Chapter 28

As suddenly as the quaking had begun, it stopped, leaving devastation in its wake. At the corner, near the stairwell, most of Rahab's ceiling had collapsed. Dust floated in the air, casting a haze, while a ringing settled in Rahab's ears, like listening to the world with her head tucked inside a jar. A jar filled with distant screaming.

A hand grabbed hers.

Tanyth had crawled near, her youngest clutched to her chest. Dirt covered her face, but her eyes glared bright and her grip on Rahab's hand tightened. "They mean to kill us."

Feeling numb, as though she floated, Rahab looked around the room. To Zibqet, who had moved to a sitting position, and Shiba, who lay curled around her son. To Talliya, who now stood in the center of the room, her hands clenched into fists while large tears rolled down her cheeks.

But while the others continued to fall apart, Rahab was pulling herself back together.

She flattened her hand against the floor and tugged from Tanyth's hold as she shoved against the ground. Her legs wobbled beneath her as she stood.

From this vantage, she could see through the window. The valley that had been packed with Israel's soldiers was now empty but for a few stragglers.

As the ringing in her ears died, she picked up on the shouts coming from within the city. Not just of people who had been crushed by falling stone, or who had witnessed the destruction of their home, but also of voices exultant and victorious.

And the voices downstairs, raised and angrier than she had ever heard them before.

"Didn't you hear me?" Tanyth snagged the edge of Rahab's clothes. "Those spies lied to us."

"We're not dead yet." But others were or soon would be.

It was then that a flash of pain stabbed her chest. Idrikan had never returned, while the other members of their family huddled safely on the first floor of her home, having come to her in the end through a mix of curiosity, fear, and a conviction that should the worst come, they might be able to escape the city through her home.

As with the rest of Jericho, including Tanyth's oldest son, Idrikan would surely be lost to the sword of an Israelite soldier if he hadn't been already. The only member of her family who in the end, she was not able to save.

From the corner of her eye, Rahab noticed Zibqet stir. The woman shuffled across the room, reaching the place where Talliya stood. "Shh," Zibqet's hand brushed the top of the girl's head. "It'll be alright."

Tanyth launched at them and smacked away the other woman's hand. "Don't tell her that!"

Rahab's mind warred within itself. Though Zibqet's assurance had not been spoken to her, it still rang hollow, voiced by a woman who had hardly said a word in the past week.

Duni, who had only just settled from screaming to wracking sobs, wasn't old enough to understand that he was now fatherless. He only knew the fear of a world shattering around him. And Talliya and Yassib were the same.

Their lives had been—*would be*—spared, but in a sense, their grief would still feel like they were dying.

The lives and the people they had lost could never be replaced. But that wasn't something she could dwell on. Not now.

"No, Tanyth." Rahab met her friend's gaze. "That is the only thing we can tell each other. *It will be alright.* To say anything else is to give up."

Tanyth's scowl deepened. "You still think they will keep their word."

"As I said, we're not dead yet." And what could they do if Salmon chose not to come for them? Israel was already in the

city. An army that had spent seven days walking in circles had defeated Jericho.

Only a promise could save those in Rahab's house now.

Seeming to have recognized this, the voices downstairs quieted. As though her abba and the rest listened to the outside noise as well as she did.

Eventually, those sounds dwindled, the shouts turning to those of men locating their friends in the destruction. To the ebb and flow of conversation. Of an occasional burst of distant laughter. As though destroying a city were a common occurrence. And for the Israelites, it was.

As time passed, their small group moved into a silent huddle against the wall. At first, Rahab watched the stairs. Expected to see the rest of her family eventually come up them, or to hear their screams before someone else did. But after an hour, when no one had yet come and no sound was made, she drew her knees to her chest and buried her face in them. And once she heard Shiba sniffle, she allowed her own tears to fall.

The shadows stretched long when Rahab summoned the courage to lift her face. Her veil had dried, leaving no sign of her distress for the others to see. But she still felt it. And the nerves were more than she could continue to handle sitting down.

Rising, she strode to the overturned baskets of her clothing. Coated in dust, the bright fabrics had lost their vibrancy, which somehow felt right. Sniffing, she bent down to rifle through them.

Near the bottom, she found a dull, sand colored veil. Turning toward the far wall, she lifted the one she currently wore and unhooked it from the ring in her nose. Then, she let that fall to the floor before draping the new one in place.

When the spies did come, this was the only outward sign of mourning she could afford. Anything else would reveal her face.

A prostitute was one thing. A deformed one was another.

“Rahab?” Shiba’s hand settled on her shoulder. Then, as though sensing she needed it, the other woman was kneeling, enveloping Rahab in her arms. It was the first hug they had shared in years.

“I’m sorry,” Rahab voice was hoarse, scraped raw by tears and dust. “I’m sorry, I thought...” She had believed Idrikan would return, that he at least would be saved from the horror that befell Jericho.

“No,” Shiba’s arms tightened. “No, it’s not—” But she couldn’t finish her thought either.

Their grief was too much.

Rahab wasn’t sure how long they stayed there, clutching each other. For once, Tanyth kept silent as well.

They were all caught in their own anguish. Homes, families... *everything* outside that house was gone.

Sometime later, she recognized her name being called, offered up almost as a plea from the street below. Seconds later, her abba was calling her name as well, his voice far more demanding though it held a strain of fear.

Drawing back, Rahab untangled herself from Shiba’s hold. Speaking so that Tanyth and Zibqet could hear, she said, “Hurry, grab what you can. I do not know what time they will give us.”

After checking that her veil was in place, she descended to the lower floor. The stones were loose and cracked, making it so the journey took twice as long. Cowered around the base was her family. And the door that should have been in place, keeping anyone else out, hung from its hinges, revealing the man who stood in the threshold.

Salmon watched her. His face and beard were coated in dust, his armor splattered in blood.

He’d never know the names of those whose lives he’d claimed, but a small part of Rahab would always wonder.

A whimper escaped her. In a blur, she pitched forward, his arms catching her before she could meet the ground. He

murmured words with his cheek pressed to her head, his tone comforting though she understood none of it.

Beyond him, the street lay in rubble.

The condescending wives were gone, buried inside their homes, alongside husbands who had often betrayed them. Everything was brown and red, a kaleidoscope of death.

Salmon's relief at seeing Rahab was shattered the moment her eyes grew unfocused and she began to topple toward his feet. He caught and tugged her to his chest, muscles crying out from hours of swinging a sword.

Behind her, half hidden in the dark room, were the people he presumed to be her family. People who he had only noticed moments before calling her name.

Regret pinched his chest. Upon entering Jericho, he had come to her door, standing guard against his own and cutting down anyone else who stumbled across his path. And the evidence of his efforts lay all around him, surely witnessed by those hidden inside, though he had never heard a sound from them.

If he could have, he would have waited to call her until night hid the massacre. But with the city defeated and the sun setting, the men of Israel now carried torches, prepared to light what was left of Jericho aflame.

All that was left was to remove those whom Yahweh had spared.

From behind, Einan cleared his throat and Salmon jerked. Rahab slipped in his hold and he realized that he had been grasping her for a while, muttering words he couldn't remember.

When he jostled her, her eyes fluttered open and slowly focused on his face. He couldn't see the rest of her features through the veil, but the skin around her eyes tightened as awareness stole into them. Shaking her head, she pulled. "We — we're nearly ready."

From the hesitation in her voice, he wasn't sure that she actually was, but he kept the thought to himself. And as of that moment, he didn't even know how many would be included in the "we" she spoke of.

"I know you have already seen it, but if you have any children in there, you should cover their faces." There was no need for those as young as the two he had seen before to have the image of the city seared into their memory. Not the way it, and every other place Israel had defeated, would live in his.

Rahab tipped her chin upward and then disappeared into the house and up the stairs while those before her parted way.

The air hung heavy with silence, the wide eyes of those family members on the first floor watching him. Soon murmuring voices descended from upstairs. After a few moments in which the shadows continued to lengthen, the stern-faced woman he had first met with Rahab at the gate emerged. She held a basket under one arm and a jar on her head. A young boy with a cloth tied around his eyes held on to her belt.

Close behind her was an older woman, face wrinkled, and the young girl he remembered from before. Each held a small, dust coated basket of their own, while the younger clutched the elder's hand, her eyes also obscured by a length of fabric.

Behind them came a younger woman, her only burden a blindfolded child who could hardly have been weened.

And lastly, Rahab.

She carried a bundle of ropes, wood, and yarn—the loom he had seen before. When she reached the open doorway, one of the men who had hidden on the first floor gripped her arm. She instantly stiffened, causing a similar reaction within Salmon as well, though he couldn't name why.

Before Salmon would have been able to do anything to help her, she pulled her own arm free. "This is the one I told you promised us our lives."

"And what does he want in return?" the man asked.

“I already told you.” Rahab moved beyond him, her eyes lifted to Salmon’s face. To the man behind her, she said, “It is your own fault you cannot listen.”

Chapter 29

That night, they walked into the desert, following at Salmon's heels. The ruins of Jericho burned behind them, a bright torch in the darkness which lit their way for miles.

In the mountains, near where Salmon claimed he and his brother had hidden in the caves, were homes built against the cliff faces. Stones piled and mortared together, creating three walls against the mountain side. It was there that Rahab and her household were placed, far away from the tents of Israel.

Few words were exchanged and, exhausted, they collapsed into the first dwellings they came upon. Cloaked in the haze of sleep, Rahab watched Salmon linger outside her doorway, finally leaving as her lids pulled themselves closed.

It wasn't until she woke again, sun lighting the sky rather than flame, that she realized how much danger she and the other women could have been in, left alone as they were with her abba and brothers only one dwelling over.

Now that they had escaped Jericho, who knew when her abba might attempt to exert his authority once more.

Wary of lying vulnerable any longer, she stood. The muscles in her back and arms ached, the pain compounded by the throb at the base of her skull. She licked cracked lips with a dry tongue as she swiveled her head, hoping against reality that there would be water somewhere.

The space was tiny, the size of one level in her home in Jericho. A portion of the back wall had been chipped away to create a shelf, while the floor was nothing but hardpacked earth. There was a fine coating of dust, the rough cured skin that was tacked over the threshold doing little to protect the structure against nature without the presence of man.

Empty and broken jars occupied one corner, a well-made chair that was too heavy to carry sat in another. A pile of dried grasses had been tucked in the recess of the shelf, where desert mice had likely made a nest. All that remained of whatever

family had lived there before. A family who would have fled to Jericho, believing the city's high walls would keep them safe.

Rahab shivered. If not for her promise given by those spies, she would have perished as well. But even such a promise couldn't have spared her if her home crumbled.

She had seen the rest of the walls, shattered and collapsed on themselves so that not one stone remained intact. It wasn't just the spies she owed gratefulness to. Her house had stood amidst the rubble of a city in which she should have died. If nothing else had shown her the god of Israel was real, this would have. And she would never stop worshiping him.

Yahweh. The god who saw her.

Rahab breathed deep, savoring that thought, when from the corner of her eye, she noticed a shadow move. Her gaze flashed to the doorway as her pulse flared. Had her abba decided to threaten them now that they were outside the city?

But after a moment, there came the scrape of leather on stone and a man's sigh. As though he'd wearily claimed a seat somewhere.

Carefully, she tip-toed to the doorway, head tilted so she could see without alerting him to her presence. At first, there was nothing other than the browns and tans of stone and sand, along with the dry and withered plants which struggled to reclaim the pathways.

Then she pivoted farther out.

To the side of the dwelling was a bush, its branches full and green compared to the rest. Settled at its base, in the small patch of shade, was a man. One whom she didn't recognize.

At Rahab's soft gasp, his gaze jumped to hers.

There were wrinkles around his eyes and a long beard that hid most of his face. He wore the same armor she had seen on Salmon, though he was clearly much older. Probably more than her abba.

“Are you Rahab, the prostitute from the walls of Jericho?” he asked, as though there might have been another he could have met there.

She tipped her chin up.

“Good.” He motioned to her. “Come, let’s talk.”

Rahab hesitated, her gaze flashing to the area around him, half expecting her abba to be lurking somewhere near as well. But the men of her family must have still been sleeping and the command of this man seemed like something she shouldn’t ignore. Coming as close as she dared, she settled cross legged before the stranger.

He studied her, taking in her veil and her rumpled clothes. “I’ve heard of you, from Salmon. He says that you saved his life.”

She kept silent, unsure if she was meant to speak.

“Why did you?”

Why did she protect her enemy? Even now, the choice was one she hardly remembered making. But once done, it was a decision she’d clung to. “Your people would have destroyed us whether I helped him or not. So why shouldn’t I have let him go?”

“You did not trust in the strength of Jericho?”

“Those walls were my prison.”

“Hm.” He leaned back, using the bush as though it were some form of cushion behind him. His focus drifted.

Inside the house behind her, there came the whimper of a small child threatening to wake. And once he was, soon everyone else would be as well.

The old man spoke again. “I’m told you brought no wealth with you.”

“*Eh*,” she breathed the agreement from the back of her throat, more a sigh than an actual word.

His perusal seemed to reach inside of her. “And are there any skills you and your family can offer to sustain you?”

Her cheeks burned beneath the veil. “I’m a weaver. Not as good as many, but decent enough that I shouldn’t have to rely on my other profession.” There were two skills she could claim, but only one which she would ever do again.

Her hands curled tight against her knees. No matter what her abba did to her, she wouldn’t go back to obeying him.

The walls of Jericho had fallen. She would not live as though she were still trapped inside them.

“Good answer.” He slapped his thighs and stood. “Such a profession as you had before, it against our laws, and so I have ordered the men of Israel not to harass you. You should be safe here, but I would still watch for the wild animals.”

What, he— “Forgive me.” She raised a hand between them. “But how can you...?” She didn’t even know how to ask the question. It was said that Israel had no king. And for one man to command another...

“I am Joshua, son of Nun.” The man chuckled. “Though that name may mean nothing to you.”

Yet, somehow, the name struck her as familiar.

“I have led the armies of Israel for many years now, and more recently, our people as a whole.” He motioned his arm in the direction of Israel’s camp, still in the area of Gilgal to the North. “As for the two men you saved, Salmon and Einan, they are brothers. And Salmon, the eldest, leads the people of Judah. The largest tribe of Israel.”

Rahab’s lips parted in shock. A tribal leader had been a spy?

“Believe me,” Joshua started away, down a path which led into the valley that had once held Jericho, “you have made for yourself a very strong ally.”

She stared after the man’s retreating back.

An ally? As though this Joshua anticipated that she would need one.

And as though he had just given her permission to linger near the chosen people of his god. A people who also might

not want her there.

“Prostitution is against their laws?” Her abba’s voice came from the dwelling beside her, startling her. She rose, spinning to find him standing in the doorway. How long he had been there, she didn’t know. But obviously long enough to hear the part of her conversation that affected him.

Though she had made her decision before Joshua even told her of the law, Rahab still felt her chest tighten with anxiety at how her abba would respond.

Gazing down the now empty path, he said, “Then you would be worthless to me, wouldn’t you?” He didn’t look at her, not even after he spoke, as if he had already disposed of her. And then he walked away from her and the dwelling, as though there were nothing left between them to say.

Even with their victory the day before, or more truthfully because of it, the men of Israel rose well before the sun. As the first rays warmed the air, their grunts rang with the clang of their swords as they practiced in the same place they had slept the night before.

Having claimed the first of their promised land, they were eager to continue the fight.

Like the rest, Salmon had never even made it back to his tent. Sprawled at the foot of the mountain where he’d left Rahab, he had fallen asleep wrapped in his cloak, his brother at his back. And when the sounds of a waking army hummed through the valley, he’d risen as well.

Now, Salmon strode back and forth among the men, watching them perform drills perfected over a generation of war. So long as he focused on their actions and the air of comradery among them, he could ignore the nagging memories that always longed to pull him under.

But even tasks of leadership could not drown the tug he felt to leave his duties and move back up the mountain path to check on Rahab and her family.

Though Joshua had declared before all the men of Israel that Rahab and her household were to be spared, Salmon knew Israel had a long history of defiance. And even Joshua's blessing might not be enough to defend a Canaanite woman with a history of sin which most were stoned for.

"Einan!" Salmon shouted at his brother above the noise of clanging swords. "Have your man perform their drills again."

His brother scowled yet still raised his arm, giving the command.

Salmon's own sword had yet to leave his scabbard. He couldn't touch it. Not after the length of time it had taken to clean the night before. With every swipe of the cloth, he had pushed away thoughts of the lives he had claimed, of who they might have been.

Now, as the sun moved across the sky, the fighting men grew more sluggish and Salmon called out among his officers for a rest. Immediately, the din settled as everyone dispersed, seeking waterskins and shade.

In the distance, a man on a camel was winding his way down the mountain path. The color of the animal and the posture of the rider could be none other than Joshua. Unsure whether Israel's leader meant to speak with him or another, Salmon reached for his water as well.

A large bunch of milkvetch grew from the crevice in a large, crumbling mound of stone. Its cream-colored flowers offered greater shade and far less danger than the other plants nearby, most of which were armed with numerous sharp thorns. It was beneath the long leaves and stems of this plant that Salmon had stacked his belongings. At the bottom of the pile lay his water, hidden from the heat of the sun.

After the first few swallows, a huff from Joshua's camel announced the man's arrival. As their leader reined in, his gaze passed over the valley. "I see that you've wasted no time in your training."

"We have to remain prepared." Even without the cloud of Yahweh's presence to guide them, they all knew Joshua could

call them to battle at any moment. He need only tell them which direction to walk.

“I appreciate it.” Joshua slid from his saddle, kicking up a puff of sand as he landed. He called for one of the younger men to hold the beast and then hunkered down at Salmon’s feet, motioning for Salmon to join him. “I have just come from visiting the family you brought from Jericho.”

Of their own accord, Salmon’s eyes focused in that direction.

“That one,” Joshua continued, “Rahab. I see why you like her.”

Salmon turned a sharp glance at him.

Joshua laughed. “Don’t think these old eyes are blind. When you first met her, I am sure you felt the same way as I did with my Kali.” Then, he sobered. “But this woman is different. She is not a fit woman to be your wife.”

“Did I ask to make her so?” Indignation warred with respect, both in his tone and in his chest. “The thought hadn’t crossed my mind.”

“Then why rescue her?”

“So that she could live!” Salmon spread his hands in frustration. “You’re the one who gave me permission to save her life, along with everyone in her household. And now you say that I shouldn’t have? It’s too late for that.”

“I don’t know what to believe.” Joshua’s face bloomed red. He glared off into the distance, his hands clenched at his sides. “Yahweh’s voice is not as clear to me as it was to Moses. I don’t—” His voice broke, crumbling along with the image of Israel’s perfect leader, “I don’t always know what to do.” He waved his arms in a jerking motion. “I’m just a man, whether or not anyone wants to view me that way.”

Salmon lowered his head.

For a moment, they remained in silence. Here Salmon was, with the leader of Israel, only to find that the oldest man in

their nation, who yet had the strength of his youth, held no more confidence in his decisions than the rest of them.

Joshua sighed. “What is done, is done. And if we were wrong, I shall bear the blame as well as you.”

“That’s not exactly comforting.”

“It shouldn’t be.” Joshua pinched the bridge of his nose. “I learned well from watching Moses and Aaron, that it is easy for a leader to follow his own will rather than that of Yahweh. And the more people you drag with you into your sin, the harsher the punishment.”

Salmon winced. That wasn’t comforting either.

Joshua continued. “But I didn’t just come to speak with you about Rahab.”

A gust of wind blew, rustling the milkvetch. It rubbed against his head and Salmon twisted, allowing the excuse of freeing himself from the plant to hide his fidgeting. What else could Joshua have to say to him?

“You were the first leader I saw when I descended the mountain, so that is why I tell you this first. And I would like for you to pass it on among the tribal elders, that tomorrow we will meet to discuss Israel’s next course.”

The news should have been a relief, and in a way it was, that for the moment Joshua had ceased to condemn him. But it also caused the muscles between Salmon’s shoulders to bunch with tension.

This was their life. To fight and train, until all of Canaan lay in Yahweh’s hands. A holy promise for a chosen people. But how long would it be before any of them truly saw peace?

Chapter 30

Salmon was there in the meeting of elders when Joshua announced that he had sent two of his sons to Ai for the same purpose as he had sent Salmon and Einan to Jericho. And when those men returned a week later, Joshua, Salmon, and the other elders met once again.

The oldest of Joshua's sons, a man near Salmon's age, stood before them. His broad smile flashed at their questions and he waved his arm dismissively when asked what the men of Israel should expect. "There's no reason to send the entire army. A number of two or three thousand can take it, without wasting the energy of the rest. Only a small number of people live in Ai."

His brother joined in with a sharp laugh. "Certainly not as many as had been in Jericho. And if Yahweh can bless us with the victory over a walled city, he'll do the same for an open one in the valley."

And so it was decided. Each leader of the tribes of Israel would take 250 of their soldiers, creating an army of just over three thousand. Because no one doubted that such a number could defeat the sum of twelve thousand inhabitants of Ai.

The small army set out in the cool of night, marching until they reached the valley as the sun was rising. Despite the drum of their feet in the sand, not a man or beast moved in the city of Ai.

Salmon led his troops on the most northern side of Israel's army. From there, he and the few men of Judah would conquer the outskirts of the city, stopping those who fled, while other tribes cut through the center. It was a simple plan for a simple task.

Until they reached the gates of Ai.

Whereas moments before, the only sound had been the clomp of their own feet as the sun blazed at their backs,

suddenly a fierce roar echoed across the valley. Enemy soldiers spilled from the gates. Not to flee, but to attack.

And the men of Israel were outnumbered.

The tribes answered with their own yell, one that was swallowed whole. Within moments, those in the front met with the men of Ai, swords clashing.

Salmon blocked a swing meant for his head. A drone sounded in his ears, the beginning of an attack he knew was coming but could do nothing about. Because if he lost control of his mind now, it would be the end of him.

So, he fought, pushing through the claw of panic. He swung and his sword cut air, while his shield deflected far more precise jabs from his opponent.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw a spurt of blood.

Like a fly, his attention was drawn, tracking the source. As though witnessing it at half the speed, he saw Izhar, son of Kileab, fall beneath the sword of a man of Ai. And in that moment, Salmon knew.

The favor of Yahweh had passed from them. For never had a man of Israel been lost when the I Am fought beside them.

A scream tore from Salmon's throat, such that his own ears didn't recognize it at first. It was a keen of defeat, of fear. And then he bellowed, "Withdraw! To the mountains. Go!" Then he repeated it, and around him, others gradually took up the refrain.

Similar cries could be heard from each of the other tribes.

Turning, Salmon ran. His pulse thundered in his ears, masking the sounds of Israel's retreat. His vision narrowed until all he saw was a pinprick— its center, the distant hills of Jericho.

"What is that sound?" It was late in the evening when Shiba stood by the door of their small dwelling, her hand grasping the threshold where she had stopped herself from entering and instead turned her face toward the Israelites' camp.

It was in this small dwelling that their tiny group had found refuge from the rest of Rahab's family, their fragile truce growing thinner every day.

The children rushed to Shiba in curiosity and Rahab followed at a slower pace. Joining them, she listened as well. Carried on the wind was a stream of voices. Though disguised by the distance, Rahab still knew it for what it was. A cry of loss.

She had heard it enough times in the temple of Ashtaroth, but she could not imagine the cause was the same. And it stiffened her to the core.

Zibqet came and grasped Duni's arm. "Come away from there." She tugged, drawing the child deeper into the house.

Rahab met the older woman's gaze. The woman who had been her abba's second wife knew this sound as well, had surely made it herself with the loss of her two babies torn from her arms.

Moving deeper into the shadows, Zibqet warned, "Nothing good will come from this."

Silently, for she couldn't imagine adding her voice to those cries of pain, Rahab agreed.

Thirty-six men were dead. It was the greatest loss of life since their fathers had fought the armies of Amalek.

And Israel wept.

Returned from their alarming defeat, Salmon and the other tribal leaders sent their surviving men home to spread the news. Then they, along with the elders, made their way to the Tabernacle.

For the rest of the day, they lay prostrate in the courtyard before the ark of the covenant. They tore their collars from neck to navel and gathered the dust of the earth to their heads. The grit chaffed in Salmon's beard, but he welcomed the irritation.

Though none had voiced it, he knew they would all be thinking it. That Salmon himself had caused this. That with his actions in Jericho, Yahweh was now punishing them for those seven lives saved.

Over their loud wailing, Joshua's anguished cry rang out, "Why, Adonai? Why did you bring your people across the Jordan only to hand us over to the Amorites?" His voice seemed to crumble, sinking into a bare whisper. Salmon, close beside him, heard the rest, "If only we had been content to stay across the river."

Salmon inhaled sharply through his nose, the breath clearing some of the fog in his head. He looked at Joshua, noting the shudder of their leader's back. Had he truly questioned whether Yahweh had intended for them to have the Promised Land?

But as soon as the thought formed, Joshua's voice rose again. "Forgive your servant, Adonai. What can I say now that we have been defeated by our enemies? For surely the people of Canaan will hear of this and they will come and destroy us, wiping us out. What then will you do?"

A discontented hum worked its way through the elders.

Had any of them ever heard Joshua speak this way?

Then another voice answered. This one came from behind and when Salmon turned, it was to see a man dressed in priestly robes speaking. "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face, Joshua?"

The courtyard fell silent.

The priest continued, tears sliding down his cheeks though his words rang with indignation. "Israel has sinned. They have violated my covenant, which they were to keep. They have stolen that which they were meant to destroy."

A pit widened in Salmon's stomach.

"They have stolen, they have lied, and they have placed them with their own possessions."

Salmon gave a start, his brows knitting. Rahab and the others were outside the camp, not with his or anyone else's possessions.

"This is why the Israelites cannot stand up to their enemies, why they run. Because they have been made answerable to destruction. Know that I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is meant for destruction."

For some time, no one spoke. As though they all waited for the priest to say more. And the man wasn't finished. He collapsed to his knees and raised his arms in prayer over his head. "Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, 'Consecrate yourselves for Adonai, the God of Israel, says that there are devoted things among you. And you cannot stand against your enemies until you remove them.'"

Then the accusations rose from the crowd of elders and Levites.

Paltiel, leader of the tribe of Issachar, stood and jabbed a pointed finger in Salmon's direction. "It is those people from Jericho!"

Kemuel, of the tribe of Ephraim, joined him. "We never should have allowed them to live. And now we have suffered for it."

Bile clung in Salmon's throat.

But while they accused, the priest yelled over them, "In the morning, present yourselves by tribe. The one Adonai chooses will come forward by clan, the clan Adonai chooses will come forward by family, and the family Adonai chooses will come forward man by man. Whoever is caught with the devoted things will be destroyed by fire, along with everything that belongs to him. For he has violated the covenant of Yahweh and done a terrible thing in Israel."

The condemnation burned through Salmon's chest. Had he truly done something so wrong against the I Am? He had only thought to protect someone who had aided them!

Distantly, Salmon recognized that Joshua now stood, arms held out at his sides as though he needed them for balance. Their leader shifted his gaze from elder to elder, his tone carrying all the warning they needed. “Yahweh has spoken. Tomorrow we will find out what has been done to break the covenant. Until then, keep your speculations to yourselves.”

Then he left, brushing past those who sought to speak with him.

Salmon followed. He held his chin tucked to his chest and strode in the direction of his tent. The time to separate himself from his family had passed. No matter what, they would now share his fate.

And tomorrow he would know once and for all.

Chapter 31

The word spread, drawing people from every tribe to gather around the Tabernacle. Those who led the tribes moved to the front, along with their families, to stand in a crowd around the entrance, while Joshua and the High Priest stood just outside the courtyard.

Voices rose in ebbing whispers, alternately raising and then shushing.

Salmon's palms were slick. His focus shifted in and out, a buzzing in his ears claiming the forefront of his mind. He wanted to pay attention, needed to, but his mind fought with itself over two different thoughts: one devoted to the outcome of Joshua's lots and the other grappling with a dust storm of self-condemnation.

In the former, he saw Joshua raise his arm for silence. But when the leader of Israel spoke, his words were lost to the maelstrom in Salmon's head.

He was finding it hard to breathe.

Something brushed his hand, and he flinched, his thoughts drawing back into one. Looking down, he found Gavriila at his side, her small fingers grasping his. A swirl of urges pressed at him—to send her away, to chide her... to pull her tighter and never let go.

If this was to be their last day alive, did he want to spend it away from her?

Ignoring the glances of the other tribal leaders, he bent down and scooped Gavriila into his arms. Then he hooked her legs around his waist and tucked her head beneath his chin as she wrapped her arms up and around his neck.

When he peered back at Joshua, Israel's leader had his hand deep inside of a pouch. He held it there, eyes closed. Then he drew a stone from within and held it up to the light.

A hush fell, as if all of Israel held its breath.

Joshua's eyes opened; stare fixed on the stone in his hand. Then his gaze shifted, meeting Salmon's in the crowd. "Judah."

Salmon's stomach clenched.

A murmur started around him and the other elders shifted, stepping to the side as though his proximity would doom them as well. From farther out, a voice yelled, "It's those women! They're the cause of this."

Gavriila's hold tightened. "Abba?"

He kissed the top of her head, tears pricking the back of his eyes. "I'm sorry, yaldah."

There was nothing he could do now. Though the lot had not yet been confirmed, it had been his decision to offer Rahab her life. And if that were the cause of Yahweh's wrath, then it would seem that the I Am blamed Salmon, who made the oath, more than Joshua, who enforced it.

"Enough," Joshua bellowed. "The lots are not finished. We will let Yahweh tell us who is to blame in the way he has declared."

But the rumors had already spread and the voices would not be silenced. The people were moving back, leaving only those of Judah behind to face Yahweh's judgment.

Einan shifted closer and the brothers locked stares. Einan's was harsh, his brows drawn in anger, though he said nothing. He didn't need to. Not when he had already spoken his thoughts long before.

Salmon faced the High Priest once more and watched as the stones of the twelve tribes of Israel were discarded and replaced with three others. The clans of Judah, the Shelanites, Perezites, and Zelahites.

Joshua reached once more into the bag. Time crawled as he drew forth the lot.

"Zelahites!"

In an instant, Salmon felt as though someone had struck him in the chest, knocking the air from his lungs. The

Zelahites were not his clan.

Next to him, Einan slouched. He dropped his head into his hands and groaned deeply. “Forgive me, brother.”

Salmon had no answer. His thoughts were still reeling, desperately trying to make sense of the fact that it had not been the clan of Perez that he had heard called. Because if Zelah had been called, then... he couldn't be the one to blame.

“No,” he at last croaked out, releasing Gavriila with one arm in order to clasp his brother's shoulder, “we all wondered.” But this was it, the confirmation he needed that Yahweh had not held his actions against him. He, his family, and that of Rahab, were safe.

But someone in the clan of Zelah was not. And though not a member of their clan, he was the leader of their tribe.

“Here,” Salmon began to pry Gavriila's arms from himself, striving to pass her to Einan.

In that moment, she screeched and clawed, bringing more chaos to a moment already full of strife.

“Enough, yaldah! Go with your dohd.” At his harsh tone, she stilled. To Einan, he said, “I will be home once this is settled for all of Israel.”

Einan nodded, his attitude solemn.

Though they had been spared, thirty-six other men had not. Restitution would need to be made.

This was no time for rejoicing.

Salmon stepped up to the High Priest along with the heads of the families of Zelah. He watched their expressions, hoping for a glimpse of who the offender might have been.

Whereas the High Priest already possessed the stones of the many clans of each tribe, each family head had to offer his own. They were the stones which were meant to help determine where they and their wives and children would live in the Promised Land. Instead, their first use would be to find a traitor among them.

Salmon reached into the pouch at his waist and smoothed his fingers across his own family's stone.

"Are these all of them?" Joshua drew Salmon's attention to the bag the High Priest held and the lots hidden inside.

"It is." Salmon responded. There had been no one missing.

"Good." Joshua heaved a sigh. Then he reached in once more. After a moment's hesitation, he drew the third lot. "Zimri."

A group of some twenty men were jostled to the front. Most were those Salmon recognized; cousins and officers in his own ranks. Men whose character he never would have doubted.

Who among them would have angered Yahweh so much, that he would suffer the fate Salmon had feared?

It had been many days since Rahab had seen either Salmon or the Israelite leader, Joshua. What food stores her family had managed to bring with them had drawn low, the majority of it stolen by her abba and brothers for their consumption. And without anyone to barter with for more, Rahab was now forced to make her way through the abandoned village and mountainside in search of what edible plants there were.

High up in the crags, plant life grew in clusters, most covered in spines that punished anyone who came too close. But hidden among these were marrow, asparagus, and mustards, all of which could fill an aching stomach.

Rahab carried a basket partially filled with the morning's finds. The collection of herbs and leaves would suffice for a meal, maybe two. But how far would she need to travel in order to find more?

And how long before there simply was no more for them to eat? They might not need to compete with anyone else here on this mountain, and the original owners had built a well that still provided more than enough. But the season for farming was past, the terraced garden beds left fallow when the people had fled.

Now she shaded her eyes and peered up to the distant cliffs. Sheer walls towered in places, making passage impossible for any but the wild goats.

Her stomach rumbled. If only she could hunt. If only the spoiled men of her family *would* hunt. They could eat roast goat legs, seasoned with the mustard greens in her basket, or some sort of fowl, scared up by her wandering.

Balancing her burden with one arm, Rahab reached in with the other and pulled out two broad leaves to munch on. But between the crisp sounds they made as she chewed, she heard that of skittering stones and raised voices.

She turned, looking back the way she had come. Stones jutted into her view, blocking the house she and the other women and their children now called home.

A man's voice bellowed, answered by another.

Without a moment to think, Rahab dropped her basket and ran. Not away, but toward, while her heart thumped wildly in her chest.

“Achan.”

The final name was proclaimed with an air of solemnity and Salmon felt a pang in his chest hearing it. Achan, son of Karmi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah. Even though his own clan and name had not been chosen, Salmon still felt the pain of it.

This man was his family, if distant. Someone Salmon had celebrated with on holy days, fought alongside, and called friend.

As men hastened away, leaving Achan alone before Joshua and the priest, Joshua himself stepped forward. “Son, honor Yahweh, the God of Israel, and tell me what you have done.” The anguish in Joshua's voice was palpable.

Salmon felt the emotion echo in his own chest.

If the rescue of Rahab and her family were not the cause of the I Am's wrath, then what could Achan have done? What sin

could this son of Israel have committed to cause the deaths of thirty-six men— brothers through the line of Abraham?

Achan's features twisted, as though these thoughts were finally occurring to him as well. He buckled, falling to his knees in the sand of the Promised Land. "It's true." The man reached for his collar, tugging at it until a loud tear rent the weave. "I have... sinned against God." Those last words were garbled, strangled by large tears that rolled into his beard, streaked with gray. "What I did— when I saw the plunder... A beautiful robe from Babylon," Achan's voice came as a harsh breath as he recounted his transgressions, "two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels."

A fortune. Enough to set him above his clansmen and his tribe.

It was a prize any number of them would have been tempted to claim.

A murmur passed through those men in the other families who'd had to stand in torment while they waited to learn if their own names would be drawn.

"I coveted them." The tears were now coated in the dust Achan had clawed from the ground and scrubbed into his face. His chest rose in a deep breath, exhaling his next confession. "I took them! They are buried in the ground beneath my tent, with the silver buried deepest."

Silver meant to be delivered to Yahweh's temple, both to feed the priests and their families and to provide for the upkeep of the Holy of Holies.

The symbol of Jericho's might, claimed by the God of Israel.

A power that one man had decided to take instead.

The horror of such an action caused Salmon to turn his face away. No one, not even a heathen priest, would dare steal from their god. And yet Achan had born enough pride to steal from the *El-Elyon*, the God above all.

When Salmon found the stomach to look again, Joshua was reaching out as though to touch the man, but then stilled

his hand.

For a moment, the leader of Israel hesitated. Then, he stepped away. “Even the earth cannot hide what is wrong from the eyes of Adonai.”

Though Joshua’s back was turned, Achan’s shame was still bared to the men of his family. Salmon studied the expressions of Achan’s brothers and cousins, all under the headship of Karmi. Their features bore a mixture of stoicism and grief. Anger lit the eyes of a few, their judgment like Einan’s had been.

But in this case, Yahweh had decreed their anger justified. And they would need to hold on to that feeling. Since they, along with Salmon, would be the ones who cast the first stones.

Tightness squeezed Salmon’s ribcage.

Today, he would help kill one of his own, and thus turn away Yahweh’s wrath from Israel. He felt as though his world staggered, though his muscles tensed to hold him in place. Didn’t he deserve this punishment just as much as Achan did? The lots had not chosen his name, but...

“Salmon.” Joshua’s voice snapped him from his thoughts. “Send men of Judah to Achan’s tent. Find the items and bring them here.”

“I will.” He stumbled, feet slipping in the loose sand as he turned to those still gathered. He searched for faces with names readily recalled and sent them away, knowing they had already heard Joshua’s command. Then he turned his focus back to the condemned.

Achan had sunk even lower, his chin bowed to his chest in grief. What were the thoughts running through his head?

Salmon thought of his instinct to pass Gavriila into Einan’s care. Achan had two unmarried daughters and three young sons, all by the wife of his advanced years. An age which numbered greater than Salmon’s.

Sometime later, the men Salmon had sent returned. Each carried a sack which, along with their clothes, was covered in

dirt. The first man stepped forward and upended his. Silver coins spilled onto the ground and scattered around his feet. The next set his down, lifting out a gold bar, then a bundled robe of deep blue.

Joshua's face turned red. "Bring Achan's family and their possessions to the Valley of Achor." Then he pointed to Salmon. "And you bring Achan himself."

Dread curdled Salmon's stomach. He moved forward, stopping at Achan's side. The man was shaking his head and mumbling low. At the touch of Salmon's hand, he shuffled to his feet, head never raising.

Salmon gripped his arm loosely. Without a word between them, they followed Joshua and the priests toward the west, where the Valley of Achor wove its way through the mountains.

In all his years wandering the desert, Salmon had never walked a longer path.

Chapter 32

Gravel and loose stones shifted beneath Rahab's feet, rolling down the slope to race her. Soon, the path opened up, diverging between the abandoned cliffside homes in a web of disappearing trails.

A child's scream ricocheted off the mountain stones.

Rahab's breath came in thick gasps, sucking her veil into her mouth and covering her nose. Her toes caught against something sharp, pitching her forward, arms outstretched to catch herself. The edge of the veil came up over her head in the descent, casting the world in a blur of gauzy fabric. Her palms slammed against hard ridges, quickly followed by her knees. Pain lanced through her bones and she hissed air between her teeth.

There came the man's shout again, along with the echo of fists pounding on wood. So similar to the drunken patrons who used to demand access to her home long after midnight.

Resentment curled in her chest, clutching her breastbone. "No." Joshua had said that they were protected here. That no one was allowed to harm them. She wouldn't allow the exception to be the men of her own family. If her abba wanted to push his claim over them, he would need to deal with her first.

But there was nothing Rahab could do if she couldn't see. She yanked the veil away from her eyes and then held it tented away from her face. Her chest heaved, siphoning in the air her lungs craved.

Reaching the house in time would require her to run again. And the veil...

It had to go.

Hands quivering, she fumbled to unclip the ring from her nose and then slid the fabric from her head. Red smears stained the light-colored weave. Glancing down, she saw the

color also lined the crease of her palm and bled through at her knees.

At the realization, pain flared like fire through her skin. But the fear and anger pumping through her veins allowed her to shove it away. The time to feel would be after she stopped what was happening below.

She let the veil slither from her fingers and then grasped hold of the nearest boulder to steady herself as she rose to her feet. She teetered. Her right sandal folded over, the thong broken between her toes.

A moan slipped from her throat.

But she pressed forward, ignoring the needling signals her body sent.

Around the corner, the house they had claimed came into view. A group of men stood outside, two of them beating on the door, neither of whom she recognized. The wood shuddered, the stone around it crumbling with every vibration, about to give way.

“No!” Rahab screamed, stopping them mid swing.

They all turned, six pairs of eyes searching until their gazes fell on her. Then they were shouting.

“There she is,” one bellowed. “Don’t let her run.”

But she couldn’t. She sidestepped, her legs refusing to move. Who were these people? Where were the men of her family?

Looking around at the space around their dwellings offered only the signs of struggle. Of scuffed earth and trampled shrubs, a trail through which lead over a nearby ridge and then disappeared in the open, barren ground. And in the distance, the fleeing forms of her family, her abba and brothers and their wives.

Leaving the most vulnerable behind to fend for themselves.

There wasn’t time to reflect on how this made her feel or to dwell on the burst of laughter that escaped her lips. On

whether it was relief or despair that filled like a bubble of air in her chest.

Because there before her were two of the invaders, one grabbing her arms and the other her waist. Their fingers pressed into her skin, not in passion but in hate. “This is the one!”

“Rahab!” Shiba’s voice.

“Grab that one too,” a deep voice said.

“No!” It was the only word she had spoken in the past hour, and it was still the only one that she could think to utter now.

Where was Salmon? Where was Joshua? And why were neither man there for them when they had promised?

A hand slapped across her face, forcing her head to the side and sending a ringing through her skull. Claiming the moment, one man thrust a shoulder into her stomach and hoisted her. It drove the air from her lungs in a dazed gasp, and it was only after they had passed the house and gone some ways down the path that her wits returned.

But even screaming in his ear and clawing his skin did nothing to slow him.

Behind them, there were more screams and wails. Held as she was, she saw only the sandaled feet of her captor, her twisting and writhing allowing small glimpses of an upside-down world. But sounds carried, letting her know that each man had nabbed a woman or child.

In a symphony of yelps and scuffing feet, they traversed the mountain trails until they reached the valley. There, Rahab was dropped on the ground and a rope was quickly tied around her wrists. Then she was hoisted once more and dumped in a wagon, much like the one her abba had used to cart her, first to the temple and then to the house in the wall of Jericho.

The rest of the men soon joined them, doing the same to the other women. Tanyth yelled curses down on their heads while Shiba held silent, her son haphazardly grasped by the man leading her.

Tanyth's children rushed close to their ima, as both were prodded from behind and Rahab was forced to the back of the wagon. Then Zibqet was tugged forward, her expression fierce though she climbed in without a struggle.

Once they were all loaded, the oldest of the men moved to the front and clicked at the donkeys tethered. The rest fell in alongside. The cart dipped with the terrain, bucking them as it traveled away from the mountain and toward Israel's camp, taking nearly an hour to reach the ridges.

Over the edge of the cart, Rahab caught glimpses of people stopping and staring. Women tugged their children out of the way while their husbands merely watched.

Rahab stopped looking. She hunched with her knees drawn up, her head resting on them as the women and children were jostled side to side.

No one seemed interested in helping, so why should she look to them for hope?

After another hour, she felt the wagon slow and tipped her face to peer over the front. A man walked toward them, hailing the driver. Another man broke from alongside the wagon to meet him and the two slowed to talk. Their words were jumbled, each speaking over the other. But she heard Joshua's name and that of Salmon.

Where these men being warned of their leader's declaration regarding her and the others?

Anger suffused the men's tones and the one who had been with the cart gave a shake of his head. He waved the driver forward and moved away from the one who'd come to speak with him. That man raised his arms in frustration and then took off at a run ahead of them. Toward what, Rahab didn't know.

“Joshua!”

Salmon turned his head at the sound of their leader's name being called, and around him, everyone else did as well. Everyone except for Achan.

He still held the man's arm, more a guide than a guard. Achan was already a shell, his fate sealed in the hollowness of his eyes. If they nudged him in any given direction, he would likely walk on his own, numb to the world around him.

But the man running toward them, his arms waving over his head, was very much still alive. "Joshua, you have to do something!"

Their leader's face scrunched, highlighting the few wrinkles around his eyes. "What is it now."

The other man slowed, then came to stop. He bent at the waist, resting his hands on his thighs. "There— men from—the clan of Shelah. They've gone to right Judah's wrong."

"What are you talking about?" Joshua's question resonated in Salmon's thoughts as well.

"The prostitute. They didn't wait until the lots were cast. Instead, they brought her and the others down from the mountains while the names were still being drawn."

Salmon's grip tightened reflexively on Achan's arm as his alarm spiked.

Those men had assumed, just as he had, that the sin lie with the clan of Perez. With Salmon. But they had not waited to see Yahweh declare otherwise.

Salmon met Joshua's gaze. The elder jerked his chin in the direction their messenger had come from. "Go, I'll take this one." He reached for the mute Achan.

Salmon didn't have to be bade twice. Because any hesitation could mean he was too late.

The numbness had returned. It distilled in Rahab's veins, a heavy sensation she had never thought to feel again.

On either side, her small clan of a survivors cried, their tears reaching her as though from the distant hills. Her vision shook with every rattle of the cart, but her body could no longer feel it. Her mind would not take it in.

One tragedy, one abuse, time and again.

She tipped her face upward, focusing on the empty, blue sky. A faint thread of clouds wove its way like flax fibers in a shallow pool of water.

It was like her hope. Frail and fading.

Yahweh, the cry came from deep in her heart. It called out, a whisper of thought and prayer. Because hadn't he saved them? Not just from the falling walls of Jericho but from the manipulations and misuse they had all seen inside?

Was this I Am there now? Or was he as absent as Salmon and Joshua?

“Stop!” the command rang out, an echo in Rahab’s ears that didn’t truly register until after, when the cart slowed and then ceased moving altogether.

She pulled her attention from the sky and focused instead on the faces around her.

Tear-streaked and dust-coated.

“Let them go!” It was a voice Rahab had thought would never come; Salmon’s authoritative timber, as clear as it had been the day he first offered her the lives of her family. And here he was to do it again.

Chapter 33

Six angry countenances met Salmon's. The faces of his brethren. His tribe. But their expressions seemed to peer through him, as though they could only see their own hatred.

He raised his arms as they stopped before him, heart aching, imploring with his every word. "What are you doing?"

Their spokesman stepped forward, a white-haired family head named Teman. "We're fixing the mistake you made."

Matching anger seeped into Salmon's chest. "What mistake? Did you not stay to hear the I Am's proclamation?"

"We didn't need to."

"You did!" Salmon balled his hands into fists. Behind the men, in the cart, he saw the tops of scarf covered heads. The children had to be there as well, out of sight. But the number of heads was not nearly the full number of their family. Where were the men? "What evil have you done?" He glared at Teman. "Had you stayed, you would have heard that it was Achan, son of Karmi, who brought Yahweh's wrath on our people, not me."

A few in the group shifted uneasily, but their elder only spat in the sand between him and Salmon. "I don't believe you."

"Believe these people." Salmon jerked his arm, motioning to those who had gathered to watch in the crowded camp. No one stepped up, but he refused to lower his arm.

He would never stop demanding that they do what was right.

Finally, a man came forward. His clothes were well-kept and the tassels on his hem fluttered. "It's true. Achan of the tribe of Judah was found with gold and silver beneath the floor of his tent."

"That's not possible." Teman scowled. "The leader of these women has lain with more men than can be counted,

none of whom were her husband. She's more than marked for destruction.”

Salmon's throat tightened. “No. She has been forgiven.” Moisture clouded his eyes. Hers was a mercy bestowed that he had only ever dreamed of seeing. And now this man, in his zealousness, wished to take it from her. Salmon widened his stance. “You must let her go.”

No one moved.

A roar built in Salmon's throat. “If not, then you ignore the will of Yahweh and risk his wrath upon us once again.”

Teman wavered. His gaze shifted, trailing over the bystanders who neither supported nor opposed him. Then he spit once again. Turning, he spoke to their clansmen. “Get the Canaanites out of the cart.”

“No.” The one-word declaration tore from Salmon, his blood heating. “You've caused enough damage. Your cart and donkey are your payment to them, your restitution.”

“But—”

“As the leader of the tribe of Judah, I have seen this case with my own eyes. You did not obey Joshua's warning to wait until after the full lots had been drawn, and instead pulled these innocents from where they had been promised safety.” Ire was coursing through him now, sending heat into every limb. “I am more than justified to demand more from you.” He tromped near, placing himself within arm's length of Teman. “But I will only require this, since they have been humiliated enough.”

Scowl affixed on his face, Teman motioned behind him and then strode away, kinsmen in tow. Salmon waited until they had disappeared into the crowd of onlookers. As soon as the last one was out of sight, he rounded the cart.

A range of expressions met his. Anger, terror... a faint glow of tears.

It was Rahab's gaze that arrested his. Her eyes were the same deep brown he had always known, but her face...

Wheat thin scars crisscrossed the lower right side of her face, the ridges a faint white that came to a pucker above her jaw. And as his study lowered to the marks, Rahab's skittered away. She turned her head, tucking her chin against her shoulder.

Salmon swallowed. "I'm—" He cast about for something to say, looking to the other passengers for help. "Where are the rest of your family?" But Tanyth only glared while the other young mother rocked her child. And their matron sat unmoving, her stare lost in the horizon.

Rahab's voice finally broke the stillness. "They fled."

"And left you?" Had the men of her family no courage? When Rahab failed to answer, he prompted, "Where do you think they went?"

"Who cares where they went!" Tanyth spoke with the same force as her glare. "They are gone and will hopefully stay that way."

Neither Rahab nor the other woman showed any reaction to this, and Salmon could only assume that they agreed. He sighed. "I will get you somewhere safe."

"We were already supposed to be there." Tanyth flung the accusation at him. "You told us those cliff dwellings would keep us away from men like that." She jerked her chin in the direction their captors had gone as she lifted her bound wrists before him.

He had no answer, only regret. Instead, he quickly cut the rope and passed her his knife before moving around to the front of the cart, hesitating near Rahab's downturned head. When she refused to look at him, he sighed again.

The men of her family having abandoned her wasn't his fault. And neither were the scars on her face, their discoloration letting him know she'd had them for many years. But the way she hid made him feel as though they were his responsibility. To make those wounds vanish, or at least take the shame from her eyes... But how could he further heal wounds already sealed over?

Grabbing the nearest donkey's halter, he clicked his tongue and tugged it in the direction of his tent.

Tanyth was right. The place where he had left them was already supposed to have been safe. But that had been too far away for him to protect them. He would not make the same mistake again.

The sun was setting by the time they reached his family's camp. Jael had a fire going and was tending the flames while Gavriila played silently off to the side. At Salmon's approach, Einan emerged from his tent.

Noticing his arrival, Gavriila leapt to her feet and raced to him. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she stopped before him, arms crossed over her chest.

His gut cramped. Releasing the halter, he dropped to one knee and held out his arms. Immediately, she plowed into him.

Scooping her to his chest, he buried his face in her mane of hair, so much like the ima she had never met. He lifted her, setting her on his hip as he came around to let Rahab and her family out.

"What is this?" Jael stood and set her hands at her waist. Her tone burned like hot sand in his sandals.

Einan's approach was far less hostile. "What happened?" He came around the other side of the cart and offered a hand to Tanyth's daughter as the child jumped down.

Salmon moved aside. "Some of our tribe's men attempted to take vengeance without hearing the will of Yahweh first."

Einan made a hump in his throat. "Whose name was actually drawn?"

"Achan, son of Karmi." He was tired of repeating the name, of bringing up the man's disgrace, as though no one else had committed wrongs before him. As though their abbas and imas had not been barred from the Promised Land for disobedience as well.

Even Moses had never set foot in the land he had long been leading them toward.

“And where are the rest of them,” Einan asked, clearly referring to the missing people whom they had brought out of Jericho with them.

“Fled.” Wishing to not sound harsh in front of those still remaining, Salmon chose not to dig into the questions in Einan’s eyes. Instead, he spoke to Jael. “See that they have whatever food they wish. They’ll sleep in my tent tonight. I’ll be elsewhere.”

He’d sleep in the desert beneath the stars if it made them more comfortable.

Slowly, the Canaanite women moved toward the fire, drawing their children with them. Rahab sat the farthest away, as though afraid to show the flames her face.

Guilt plucked him. Salmon wished he could compel her to look at him. But he sensed, no matter what he said, she wouldn’t meet his eyes again so long as her scars were uncovered. For her peace of mind, he would have to find her a face covering and soon. For now, the hour was late. No one would appreciate his moving around the camp in search of a veil.

Though he strode to the far side of the fire, his thoughts remained with her. What had happened to give her the scars? And why did she feel the need to hide them? Surely the men who paid to share her bed had wanted to see her face.

Or had covering her face made their deeds easier?

Gavriila’s arms clung tight around his neck. Her weight pulled at him, a physical reminder of all he had to lose. So many people relied on him, from his family to his tribe, and now these foreign women who Yahweh had dropped in his lap.

He would never be able to do perfect by all of them.

“Shh, yaldah.” Salmon clutched the back of his daughter’s head, pulling her tighter. If nothing else could assure her of his love, then he wanted his hug to speak the words his tongue could not. “Have you eaten?”

Her nose rubbed against his neck in denial.

“Then why don’t we get something in that little stomach of yours?”

She shrugged.

Far out of reach of the women, he sat. A chill had come through the valley with the sun setting, so he tucked Gavriila close even as he untangled her arms from around him.

Shifting his focus across the way, he sought another glimpse of Rahab’s face. But she had pivoted, leaving the scarred portions to the darkness of the night. Her eyes studied her hands, as though unsure how to engage the world without the protection of a cloth about her face.

When was the last time someone had seen her without it?

Jael hissed as she drew a hot, stone vessel from the flames. She kept the folded excess of her dress between her hand and the heat as she heaved the pot over, dumping a portion for four into a waiting platter.

Even to Salmon’s untrained eye, he knew that it would not be nearly enough for everyone. “Yaldah, why don’t you help your dodah while I go into the tent to find food for our guests?”

Her fingers slipped around his wrist. “Please, Abba...” Though she didn’t say it, he heard her begging that he not leave her.

Again.

“All right.” He kissed her forehead. “You can come with me.” He tapped his knuckles under her chin, hoping to banish her frown. “I’m sure you know where the best of the food is anyway.”

She offered a wobbly smile and his heart broke.

Rahab had never felt such humiliation sweep through her as at the moment when she’d realized that Salmon could see her full face. He was a leader of Israel, one of the conquerors of so many lands, and the protector of her little band. And he had

seen the scars that had marked the beginning of all her suffering.

Not only that, but he had seen how her abba, brothers, and even ima, had abandoned her.

She couldn't look at him or his family, couldn't lift her face to see the disgust in their eyes.

Her own ima hadn't wanted her, why should these people be any different?

In her misery, Rahab was only vaguely aware of the movements of those around her. But when she did dare to glance up, to see what was happening around her, her attention was arrested by the sight across from her. Of Salmon, seated with a child in his lap, the little girl wholly focused on him and he on her.

Their features were similar enough that Rahab could guess their relation.

She had never seen such affection from a man to his daughter. Not in her family. How might her life have turned out had her own abba felt even half as much regard?

Her gaze shifted, looking out into the night, where the walls of Jericho had once stood.

One thing was for sure, if her abba had loved her, then she and those with her would have died in the city's collapse. And Salmon... Salmon would have left his own daughter without an abba.

Without Rahab's past, there would have been no one to sneak Salmon from the walls of Jericho.

A choked laugh forced its way from her throat and she caught Tanyth's glare. She covered it by drawing her knees to her chest and resting her scarred cheek against them. But her thoughts would not be covered as easily. Because growing inside her was a burning question, one where the answer might reshape her very being.

Had the pains of her past been a blessing? One that allowed not just one, but nine people to survive Yahweh's

wrath?

Chapter 34

Salmon woke to an elbow shoved into his cheekbone. He snorted and jerked away. Then, blinking, he finally made out his daughter's form sprawled out on the blankets beside him.

Faint light seeped from under the edges of the tent and, across the large living space, he could hear his brother's snoring. The morning chill sent a shiver down his spine, but he shrugged it off and stretched his arms over his head. With a yawn, he pitched himself to his feet.

Outside, he stood alone in the morning quiet. The sun was only just rising above the horizon and around the camp, those who had already begun their day did so in a hush.

Even if mornings were not normally quiet, the day after a stoning called for reverence. And the punishment for Achan would have been carried out even though Salmon hadn't been present. In the days to come, he would need to make sure to speak with Gavriila, to ensure that she understood the importance of what had happened to the son of Karmi and the sin which caused it.

If not, then who could say whether she or her future children might repeat it?

Across the way, the flap to his own tent shifted and a woman stepped out. It was the old matron, the one whose expression had remained dead all evening. Even now, her actions were slow and methodical, as though she behaved by instinct rather than will.

A moment later, a little boy stumbled out after her. He was naked and made a run for the shrubs around the tent as soon as he cleared the old woman's skirts.

Salmon chuckled.

Soon, he was going to need to make a similar escape.

But before he could decide on a direction in which to walk, Rahab slipped from the tent as well.

Her face was down, her head still uncovered. His own feet were rooted in place, though he imagined walking over to her and raising her chin so that she met his eyes. In his imaginings, she would tell him how the scars happened. Then he would assure her that they didn't change who she was.

As though sensing his gaze, Rahab's attention shifted to his. For a moment, she regarded him with all the courage she'd had before and something seemed to be going on behind her eyes. His own heart thumped in anticipation... of what, he couldn't name.

Then she turned away and went after the boy in the bushes. Salmon sighed.

He had no reason to want to talk to her. What could he say that hadn't already been spoken before? Or that she would be willing to hear from him?

Instead, he turned in the opposite direction. As he did, he noticed the scent of smoke on the air, thicker than that of a campfire. Looking to the south, he noticed a dark smudge over the valley.

His stomach hardened.

Achan and his family. Their remains would smolder into the early morning; it was the only way to dispose of those who had committed such a sin.

Knowing he had lingered long enough, Salmon set out for the Valley of Achor, hoping to find Joshua still there. Along the way, he wondered what excuse would have been given to the people of Judah when their tribal leader had not dispensed justice, but had instead left to defend an outsider?

Whatever the consequences of gossip or hearsay, Salmon had done as he knew he should. And he could only hope that before Yahweh he stood righteous.

Even at that hour, a few still gathered in the valley. All were men with dark bags beneath their eyes and a thick stench of burning upon their clothes. A number of them watched as he passed, weariness tugging their feet as they accepted his

arrival as a sign to turn back toward camp. He moved against the tide, pushing toward those gathered at the front.

Joshua stood among them, bracketed on either side by priests clothed in white.

Or at least what had once been white, but was now a darkened gray.

Joshua stared into the valley. His gaze seemed unfocused, though his face was toward the remains of Achan and his family.

Salmon's own stomach churned at the sight. Ashes and bone charred like that of a sacrifice. But there was no rejoicing in this. No feasting or joy, only deep sorrow and regret.

Their death was not something to be cheered.

“Did you find them?” Joshua spoke, his head never turning.

The group of priests looked amongst each other and then to Salmon, likely assuming his arrival had prompted the question.

“I did. The women seemed dazed by the experience, but the children have already recovered.” At least it seemed that way.

A scowl deepened the lines on Joshua's face. “What kind of people are we if we cannot listen to Yahweh's instructions? Even the pagans listen to the words of their so-called gods!” He turned then, storms and thunder brewing in his eyes. “Bury the ashes,” he said to those gathered. “Cover them in stones and let it stand as a reminder, never to be destroyed.”

Then he stomped past, leaving the men of Israel to linger in shame.

As Salmon looked around, the expression on every face was stricken. By guilt, by remorse.

By fear of judgment.

It was a fear Salmon knew well. One he had only just begun to overcome with the realization that Yahweh knew his

name. "Come." He stooped and, from the ground near his feet, grasped a stone half the size of his face. "The sooner we go about this, the sooner Yahweh and Joshua's wrath will be turned away."

Murmurs shifted through the group. They had been out all night, guarding Joshua and ensuring that the fire burned bright. And though there had surely been thousands at first, then hundreds, now there were thirty at most. Men who were weary of their task.

So, Salmon turned and began the work on his own. He fit another stone into his other hand and then strode out to the burning ashes. The wind kicked up, sending plumes of black into the air which stung his nose and eyes. He tipped his face into his shoulder and coughed, tasting the ashes on his tongue.

With a heave, he thrust the first stone out into the center of the heap. Then he threw the other. They landed one after the other, sending puffs into the air as they thudded beside each other.

The black settled, covering them.

It would take far more stones and far more time to cover what had been done. Even then, it could be days before the wind did not whistle through the cracks and carry the scent east, toward the camp.

How long before the memory of what lay beneath these rocks left their thoughts?

Another stone crashed into the heap. Salmon jerked to the side, startled by the sudden action. Beside him stood one of the priests. There was dirt smudged on the man's face, along with the gray of smoke.

Beyond him, another man stepped forward. He carried a large boulder on his shoulder, the size of a lamb, and heaved it with both arms. With the impact, the earth seemed to shake beneath their feet.

Slowly, more men fell in beside them, taking the stones which had been used to exact judgment on Achan and his family to now bury their memory above the ground. They

moved at a pace born of weariness, but with every rock, Salmon felt as though a burden fell from his shoulders.

This was Yahweh's judgment. Fierce and inescapable. But for the first time in his life, Salmon could see it was not without mercy.

Years past, when Korah and his kind turned against the will of the I Am, they and their families had been swallowed by the ground, their followers swallowed in flames. Their arrogance claimed their loved ones along with their lives, just as Achan's had. But that was where Yahweh's anger died.

As a God who could wipe the world from existence and start anew, he instead allowed Israel a chance to right their wrongs. And when it came to their enemies, he allowed redemption for those who would claim it.

For the first time, Salmon thought of his own abba's death without a flicker of anger. Though Nahshon had died young, he had lived long enough to see his granddaughter and to lead his people through the desert. And with Yahweh's blessing, Salmon would live longer still. He would take the I Am's commands to heart and clear the land for the people of Israel.

And he would claim nothing that was not promised him.

The sun had risen high overhead by the time the ashes of Achan and his family had been buried. Salmon and the others shuffled from the valley, traversing the long distance to the camp and their tents. A few gathered their donkeys from where the animals had been tethered, but since Salmon had walked, he had no choice but to let his tired feet carry him back.

At the edge of camp, he came upon chaos. Men hurried from tent to tent while others buckled swords to their belts. Women yelled from around cookfires, their children huddling close.

One of those who rushed between the dwellings recognized Salmon's approach and called to him. "Joshua has heard from Yahweh. We are to attack Ai once again."

Dumbfounded, Salmon could only stare as the man then ran on to the next tent in line.

Already? Achan had only just been buried and the men who had undertaken the task returned in hope of sleep and food.

But though there were those who were exhausted, there were even more who had already rested. And based on the commotion, were ready to restore the honor lost at the hands of Ai's soldiers.

Without slowing, Salmon reached between his legs for the back hem of his tunic and then pulled it forward to tuck in his belt. Legs free, he quickened his pace until his tent came into view.

Einan was already standing outside, garbed in armor. Salmon's gear lay at his feet and Jael stood beside him with a platter of food.

The moment she spotted him, Gavriila was running from her place near the fire, along with the little girl who had arrived from Jericho. His daughter grabbed his leg. "No, Abba!"

This time, rather than offer sympathy, Salmon knelt and unhooked her fingers. "I have to, Gavriila."

"You have to stay. You always leave."

How could he explain things to a child so young? "Yahweh requires it, yaldah. I do this for you and all of Judah."

"Well, I hate Yahweh!"

He steadied his grip on her arms and waited for her to look him in the eye. "Never say such things."

"It's true."

Guilt swarmed his chest. "You do not hate Yahweh, you hate that I leave. But Yahweh has never taken me from you. I am still here."

Tears coursed down her cheeks. "Neriah's abba did not come back."

“Neriah?” Salmon glanced about, struggling to remember the identity of his daughter’s friend. And then it dawned. “Libni.” Neriah’s abba and one of the two men from the tribe of Judah who died the first time they fought the city of Ai.

Salmon drew Gavriila against his chest. “Libni died because one of the other men of Judah disobeyed Yahweh. Do you want me to disobey Yahweh as well?”

Her fingers clutched at the fabric of his collar. “I want you to stay.”

“I can’t.” And no matter how much he wished for her to understand, he could not waste time trying to convince a child of his need to obey the will of Yahweh and fight Ai once more. So he gathered her in his arms and stood.

Looking around, he knew that he could not hand her to Einan. Nor to Jael, whose hands were already full and who had watched the child through every battle Salmon had ever faced. But Rahab...

The woman stood just beyond, where the two little girls had been playing in the sand. Her face was no longer downturned, instead meeting Salmon’s gaze. There was no shame in her expression, only a softness he could not explain. An urging deep inside said that it was she who would guard his daughter this time.

Moving to stand before her, Salmon allowed his silence to beg his question.

Rahab held out her arms, hesitating only a moment before accepting the burden of his child. The girl screamed, her fingers clawing at his neck until he pulled free and issued a sharp command. Then she stilled and turned her face into Rahab’s chest, unheedful of who held her.

Salmon took a step away. To Rahab, he mouthed, “Thank you.”

Then he strode to Jael and Einan. The sooner he and the rest of Israel were ready to leave, the sooner they would be able to return to the ones they fought for.

Chapter 35

This time, the entire army of Israel marched out against the city of Ai. When Joshua came through the ranks, choosing thirty thousand who would move beyond the city of Ai to lie in wait, Salmon watched as Einan was called among their number.

He was also present when Joshua outlined their plan of attack. They would use their previous defeat in their favor. Under the cover of night, Einan and the rest of the thirty thousand would wait behind the city, out of sight. Come morning, the rest of Israel would march on the kingdom's gates. And when the men of Ai came out to fight... Israel would run away.

Grumbles passed among the ranks, though no one raised their voice any louder. Because while running spoke of disgrace, the rest of Joshua's plan made up for it.

When the sun rose the morning of their assault, Salmon strode at the front of his tribe. This time, with the might of all Israel marching as one, the ground shook as the drum of their feet sounded like thunder. Long before they reached the valley of Ai, he spotted the glint of metal in the morning sun as the city gates were shoved wide and armed soldiers spilled out.

Their enemies' voices rose in a vicious bellow, the slap of their armor against their thighs an answering thunderclap. And as the men of Ai came near, Salmon, along with the other tribal leaders, called for their own ranks to slow.

Salmon tensed, his breath quickening. For a moment, his vision wavered, his usual weakness threatening to claim him. But he forced it down, as pure belief in his cause at last gave him ammunition with which to fight.

This time, Yahweh was with them. And nothing, not even his internal battles, could undo that.

Soon, the enemy soldiers were close enough that he could discern the slight difference in the brown of their armor and

the tan of their skin. In that moment, he ground to a halt and yelled, “Hold!”

The men of Ai continued to advance, each face now discernable from the next.

Salmon raised his voice in a roar and his people answered. He set his feet apart, preparing to meet the sword of whomever reached him first. His heartbeat quickened. The clash would be brief, but that did not mean everyone would come out unscathed.

At last, the enemy arrived, swords jabbing with the full momentum of their sprint across the valley. Salmon deflected the first blow with his own and slid a step back as he did. The men behind him followed his lead.

When a triumphant grin split the face of the man before him, Salmon knew that Joshua’s plan would work. Salmon and the rest of the troops would run, pursued by Ai, while those thirty thousand set behind Ai ransacked the city left open and unguarded.

Salmon offered a few more blows, feinting and retreating. Sweat trickled from his brow and his arms ached from the abuse they absorbed. Then the enemy’s sword swooped low, across Salmon’s stomach, the cut stopped only by the thickness of Salmon’s own armor.

Ai’s confidence had built high enough.

He reached out, shoving the man away. While the enemy recovered, Salmon raised his sword and bellowed, “Fall back!”

He turned and ran, grabbing the arm of the tribesman beside him, propelling them both from the fray. Before him, the rest of Israel fled, most without ever having engaged their enemy in the first place.

Behind him, the men of Ai cheered. Their pursuit was close, their confusion at the retreat short-lived. But Salmon and his troops were not the ones winded from a mad dash across the desert sands.

After a count to a hundred, he glanced over his shoulder and found the men of Ai more than several paces away.

Too far.

He slowed, as though he had tripped on a stone and a few huffed laughs sounded behind him.

For what seemed a full watch, the only sound that could be heard was the drum of feet and the skittering of stones as the men of Israel escaped. Then the smell of smoke carried through the air, so faint that at first Salmon thought it a wishful trick of the mind. But then the burning stench grew.

A shout went up from behind and Salmon looked again.

The men of Ai were stopping, their heads turned toward the plum of black that rose from their city. One of the men wailed and then another, as others bellowed and all gave up on their previous course.

A tightness settled in Salmon's gut. How would he have felt to see the place where his family lived go up in flames? To know that those he loved were still there?

But this was not the time to dwell on such thoughts. As the men of Ai turned to rush back toward the city they had left defenseless, Salmon, along with the other officers, called the men of Israel to turn once more.

This time, they would all fight.

Until there was no one left in Ai for anyone to wail for.

Rahab had never been more uncomfortable in her life. Left in charge of Salmon's daughter Gavriila, she'd no choice but to interact with the woman who seemed to be Einan's wife, Jael. The woman Gavriila called Dodah.

Whereas Rahab had intended to stick close to the tent Salmon had allowed them to sleep in the night before, now she sat at the cookfire with Jael. Both women watched as Gavriila tried her hand at mixing the daily bread. But what the child had made resembled soup more anything that would bake into a loaf.

“Not that way.” Jael shooed the child away before adding more flour to the mess. After a moment of kneading, the ball solidified.

Unperturbed, little Gavriila shuffled the few steps to Rahab’s lap. There, she plopped down and started playing with the edge of Rahab’s flowing tunic. “This is pretty.”

Something warm settled in Rahab’s chest, its weight as substantial as the child. Reaching down, she grasped her hem near where Gavriila’s fingers rested. “It’s a simple weave. Perhaps I could teach you some day.” Her loom was already set up. All she needed—

The reminder brought a bubble of panic that stole her breath. Her loom was back in the abandoned home in the cliffs. Anyone could happen by and take it. She would have to find a way back to reclaim it, along with their other possessions.

Maybe Salmon could help her when he returned?

If he returned.

Oblivious to Rahab’s inner turmoil, Jael snorted. “What could a woman of Canaan teach Israel about weaving?”

“I don’t mean to teach all of Israel.” Just one little girl.

Gavriila spoke up as well. “I want to learn, Dodah.”

“And why?” Jael tore the dough into smaller balls and then set to smooshing them flat with the palm of her hand. “You have enough chores to do here. And when you are older, I will teach you to make clothes.”

“But Rahab’s are prettier!”

Rahab winced. It was true. Though Jael’s garments were well-woven, the patterns were the same in each garment and most were the same color. At least so far as Rahab had seen.

Jael’s cheeks pinked. “It doesn’t matter. You cannot make Canaanite clothing anyway. Yahweh will not allow it.” She gave a viscous slap to the dough and cast a disapproving look at Rahab. “You will need to find new clothes soon, before

something happens to the camp for allowing garments of mixed fabrics among us.”

Mixed fabrics? Rahab rubbed her thumb across her hem, feeling the thickness of the woolen fabric mixed with linen threads to soften it, as well as offer a contrast in shades. She didn’t need to touch either Jael or Gavriila’s garments to know that theirs were made entirely of linen.

“It was a command given years ago, along with many others,” Jael continued, her ire made apparent by the force which she continued her bread making. “Not to mix fabrics, seeds in the fields, or different animals for breeding.” She slapped the flattened dough inside the rim of a large, clay vessel resting on the edge of her fire. “It is to remind us that we are separate. Lesser than God and better than the peoples around us.”

With that last comment, she met Rahab’s gaze.

Rahab’s spine stiffened. Though Gavriila shifted in her lap, clearly tired of the conversation, Rahab refused to flinch away from the woman across from her. She had done enough flinching from the wives of the men who came to see her. “Maybe the people of Jericho were lesser, but if Yahweh saw me that way, why did he allow Salmon to rescue me?”

Jael scowled.

Gavriila jumped up, grabbing hold of Rahab’s hand as she did so. “Come on. Let’s play.” She tugged with one arm, reaching out with the other as though she could use the air to pull her and Rahab in the direction of Taliya and Yassib who’d gathered beyond the tents.

Removed from the conversation which had quickly turned sour, Rahab allowed her shoulders to relax. Jael could think whatever she wanted. All the people of Israel could. None of their opinions would change what their I Am had done for her.

Chapter 36

For the first time in Salmon's life, he was returning from a battle, spattered in blood, and feeling... exultant.

The battle over Ai had been an amazing success. Once their enemies turned, running back to protect the open gates of their city, the men of Israel fell on them from behind. Energized by the knowledge that Yahweh had given them the day, Salmon quickly overtook first one, and then another.

Eventually, those thirty thousand men who had laid in wait behind the city to ransack it, emerged, trapping the soldiers of Ai between two fronts while their city burned out of reach. Though they fought in desperation, the sheer number of the Israelite soldiers overwhelmed and wiped them out.

Then, the men of Israel turned their sights once more to the city, marching in and slaughtering any who had escaped the flames.

With every swipe of his blade, Salmon fought the dizziness and nausea tightening his stomach. He pictured Achan. Saw the man's stricken face when he'd been called by name for his sin. Then he saw the pile of ash and the raising heap of stones.

By the end of the battle, tears had washed all the soot from the lower portion of Salmon's beard and left his eyes swollen. If any of his men noticed, they wisely decided not to question.

How could he express the realization that none of this had been Yahweh's desire? Yahweh—who saw Salmon, saved Rahab, and called out Achan by name. The I Am who made the earth and knew everyone in it. He did not kill on a whim, he did not find gladness in their demise, only justice.

Just as Egypt paid with their firstborn, as Achan paid with his life and that of his family, so must Canaan pay for rejecting the God who spoke to Abraham in their very midst.

When the sounds of death faded, Salmon forced himself to take a deep breath and wipe the moisture from his face.

He looked around, through the bruising of his eyes, noting the home in which he stood.

Earthen vessels lay turned over and clothes spilled from an overturned basket. At his feet lay a statue of a large breasted woman, molded from clay.

A huff of anger leaked from him. This was the cause of Ai's destruction.

He kicked the idol, casting it against the wall so that it shattered. Then he moved about, doing the same to any others he found, including the earthen vessels painted with scenes best left unseen. By the time he finished, the floor was littered with sherds of pottery and his frustration had ebbed.

His lungs burned, as did his nose, from the stench of death and smoke.

Outside, the noise had turned to that of plundering. Baaing sheep and shouting men, exultant cheers and boisterous conversation. While Jericho had been meant for total destruction, the wealth of Ai was free for the taking.

If only Achan had been willing to wait.

Salmon brushed a sleeve across his face. With the idols destroyed, he looked at the interior of the dwelling in a new light.

Most of the items he wouldn't take. He could not separate them from the thought of the previous owners of the house, now dead by his own hand. But there were things...

Traveling from Seir to Ar, when they had peace with the descendants of Lot, had drained the wealth of Judah along with that of the other tribes. And though much had been reclaimed since then, there was still much his people needed. Especially now that he had to look over Rahab and her family as well.

A quick pass over the home revealed a handful of coins stuffed under a bed and a necklace of gold which was hidden behind a loose stone in the wall.

In the next home, Salmon found a bundle of flax and a jar of oil. Both he knew were far more useful at the moment than any wealth he could acquire.

Ignoring the grisly sights in the streets, Salmon went about until he found an unclaimed camel and loaded it with his plunder. Content with what he had and ready to return to his family, he left the city, bypassing the body of the king of Ai which now hung from a pike in the center of the city gates.

Night was setting on the second day of Salmon and Einan's absence. The women had called a form of truce, with Jael begrudgingly sharing some of the stores which Salmon had offered their guests. Following the spirit of that truce, they had all shared one fire, both for cooking and for warmth as darkness set in.

The longer the men were absent, the more agitated Gavriila became. By the time the stars shone overhead, the child moved about the fire in a strange, dancing motion which concerned Rahab, though Tanyth never flinched.

“When my daughter was that age, she danced like that for the fun of it,” Tanyth said, her own hands full holding her son still in order to eat. “She’s anxious and has a lot of energy to show for it.”

“Gavriila, enough,” Jael snapped. “This is not the first time your abba and dohd have been gone for more than a day, and it will not be the last.”

“I don’t want Abba to keep leaving!”

Jael stood, her mouth pinched as she snatched for the girl. But Gavriila ducked out of her reach and rushed to stand behind Rahab.

Rahab froze. Small hands pressed against her back and she turned her head to see the girl as well as she could.

“Gavriila!” When Rahab jerked her gaze back around, Jael had set her hands at her hips.

Unease scraped Rahab's nerves. She didn't want to be caught in this position, between the child and her dodah, especially when she knew Jael didn't want her there either. But it was a responsibility Salmon had placed upon her, and Gavriila seemed determined to make sure she fulfilled her duty.

Twisting her arm at an awkward angle behind her back, Rahab found one of Gavriila's hands and tugged. "Come on. Sit in my lap. You need to do as your dodah asks and not run around."

The child came around, head downcast. "I don't want to listen to her."

"Would your abba want you to behave this way?"

Gavriila rubbed her toe in the sand. "No."

"Then maybe we can act the way he would want, so he sees how good you have been when he returns."

From a few feet away, Zibqet muttered, "Your own abba never noticed or cared."

Rahab shot her a glare. All day the woman had refused to speak, and this was when and how she chose to open her mouth?

"My abba doesn't care either." This time, Gavriila stomped her foot. "He never stays. He's always gone."

"That's not true." Jael wagged a finger. "Your abba is a good abba. It has only been for the past year that he has been gone more often, so you could have a future. One in a land promised to us."

Gavriila's frown only deepened and Rahab wondered just how many years the girl had seen. A year might not be long, but to someone only five or six years old, it was a lifetime. And the reasons why mattered little when a child felt abandoned.

Rahab's own childhood had been a lonely one, despite the number of people who had lived in her home. Without the love of her parents, and with the constant fighting amongst her

brothers and sisters that was often fueled by their quarreling imas, there had been little connection between anyone.

Even Zibqet had remained aloof, afraid to show affection too often for another wife's child.

Sympathy tugged at her chest and Rahab gathered Gavriila into her arms. "Maybe we can tell each other stories while we wait for your abba to come home?" Her throat tightened. She had no stories of her own, at least none that hadn't been learned in the temple. "Why don't you start? You can tell me your favorite."

For a moment, the girl's only movement was to swing her arm back and forth in Rahab's grasp. But then the swinging slowed and her little face came up. "There is one Abba used to tell about a pretty coat."

Jael offered a strangled noise, but turned away quickly when Rahab glanced her way.

"Is that so?" Rahab turned her attention to the child once more. "What is the story about the coat?"

Gavriila bounced on her toes, new excitement raising in her voice. "That there was a man, and he—he was his abba's favorite. And so his ima made a pretty coat of all colors."

"All colors?" Rahab allowed a slight chuckle. "What were those?"

"Red!" Gavriila jumped, pulling Rahab's arm with her. When her feet reached the ground once more, she crouched low, tugging Rahab's arm around her waist. "And green and yellow."

"And blue?"

"Yes! Blue and all the other colors. Even the icky ones."

Rahab cut her gaze toward the other women. Tanyth offered a shrug and a smirk as she wrapped her arms around her son, who'd finally settled down, his focus intent on Gavriila and her tale of many colors. Unaware that he was being watched, he offered in a shy voice, "Icky colors like brown?"

Gavriila's head rocked back. "Brown mixed with green!"

The story about the coat had become a competition to name the most colors, or at least the most hideous. "Was there red mixed with brown?"

Gavriila offered an emphatic *yes*. As she proceeded to name every other color that mixed with brown, a noise drew Rahab's attention to the darkness outside the ring of the fire's light. Just within the shadow's reach, so that only his features were cast in the flickering fire light, stood Salmon.

Rahab held as still and silent as he. And after another brush of light, she realized he watched her with his daughter.

Her emotions muddled, mixing relief at seeing him alive and seemingly unharmed with a strange bashfulness she had not felt since Aram. But unlike with Aram, who she had tried so hard to please, she was uncertain what to make of Salmon.

He knew who she had been, yet he still placed his daughter in her arms. There had been nothing else he'd asked of her.

What was she to him? And how long would their relationship, whatever it was, stay this way?

"The point of your abba's story was not how many colors were in Joseph's coat," Jael butted in.

Salmon tugged his gaze from Rahab, looking instead to the judgmental stance of his brother's wife who stood with her hands on her hips. Irritation pinched. Gavriila was a young child. Couldn't Jael let her have her own version of the story for the night?

Behind him, the camel huffed. Then it shuffled and moaned, lowering to its knees as though it couldn't be bothered to move another step.

"Abba!" Gavriila's happy cry drowned out the voices of the women. When Salmon looked her way, she was running to him.

Dropping the animal's tether, he opened his arms. It wasn't until she crashed into him that he thought of the blood crusted

in his clothes. He winced and offered a prayer that she wouldn't notice.

“Where is Einan?” Jael demanded. Her frown had vanished and she was instead biting her lip. Her eyes searched the darkness around him.

“Still in the city of Ai.” Salmon stood, leaving Gavriila on her feet. “Don’t worry, he is safe.” Or at least Salmon assumed he was. The report being passed around was that no one had been lost. And since Achan’s sin had been dealt with, Salmon was inclined to believe it.

But he didn’t want to think about the war or even Einan.

Returning to his family’s fire had been his only goal. He’d not anticipated the emotion that would flood him upon seeing Gavriila holding tight to Rahab, enthusiastically telling the woman a story. And Rahab... when she had faced his way, face uncovered, scars bared, and hadn’t then quickly hidden herself from him...

It was foolish to deny that he was interested in her. He had never met another woman who had suffered as much as she, nor one who had proven her courage so well. Her faith— both what she had in him and in Yahweh— humbled him. When had he ever trusted so completely, even when being led by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night?

He had always questioned Yahweh’s mercy and sought small means of defiance... ones that followed the letter of Yahweh’s laws but deviated far from a contrite and obedient spirit. It was a miracle he had not stumbled his way into Achan’s punishment.

“Well,” Jael said, breaking his reverie, “since you decided to abandon my husband, I can only assume you did so for a reason.” She raised a brow. “Are you going to actually come to the fire?”

“I—” He looked at Rahab. “Yes.” He took a step forward, then remembered the camel and everything he had brought. The animal now chewed its cud, with no obvious intention of moving.

Salmon stepped around it and reached into the basket tethered there. In it were the bundles of flax stuffed on top of clay vessels which he could sort later. Hesitation overtook him. He had intended the majority of the items for Rahab and the other three woman who had come with her. But could he actually give them to her?

There was a tug on his leg. When he looked down, he found four sets of eyes staring back at him and his heart gave a start. He had forgotten about the children who had arrived in Rahab's care until they stood before him. Had the three of them already become so comfortable in his camp after what had happened only days before?

Gavriila slapped her hand against his knee, demanding his attention. "Did you bring presents?"

The other three rocked on their heels, curious eyes watching his hands, though none of them said anything.

Mischief was far too tempting. In an exaggerated, booming voice, he said, "I did." He pulled out the flax and held it high over their heads. "Can you guess what this is?"

Three of the four stared mutely while his own answered. "That's not a present."

"It is." He'd need to work with her on gratefulness. "But who said it was for you?"

"You did."

"I said I had presents, not that any were for you." He moved to step around them. A whine built in Gavriila's throat but he silenced her with a pat on her head. "None of that."

She followed close at his heels, hands grasping the edge of his tunic as though it would help her keep up. He slowed his pace but still marched steadfast toward the fire and one particular woman.

Rahab ducked her head as he approached, and her cheeks pinked. He didn't know if it were due to the flames, but he hoped it was a reaction to him.

"I thought you might need this." He set the flax in her lap.

Slowly, her hands moved to run across the fibers as though feeling their texture. At last, she shifted her eyes to peer into his. “Thank you.”

Her cheeks were definitely red. Though whether she was truly grateful or merely embarrassed, he couldn’t tell. Nervous, he glanced from her and caught the raised brow of her friend who he had first met, along with the speculative looks of the other two women.

Heat climbed his throat. He coughed and raised a hand to brush at his beard. Thankfully the hair covered his embarrassment. “I, uh, you’re welcome.”

“There is an issue, though.”

Rahab’s proclamation flushed the nervousness from him and he shot his gaze back to hers. “What is it?”

“My loom was left behind when we were thrown into that cart.”

Regret pinched. She said it as though his tribesmen had not been responsible—as though *he* had not been responsible the moment he left her without a protector. “I will be sure to retrieve it for you.”

He turned away before she could thank him. The praise would be undeserved and he couldn’t help but dwell on his own failings. At being an abba, a brother, a tribe leader, a provider. He had spent too long grappling with Yahweh and neglected to focus on his own faults.

That would need to change or he would only keep making mistakes.

Chapter 37

While the men of Israel trickled back from the raid of Ai, Salmon traveled up the mountains to the cliff-dwelling house where he had first left Rahab and the others.

The moment he stepped through the door and swept his gaze over the destruction, his palms became sweaty. Articles of clothing were scattered, what remained being torn and covered in dusty footprints. He tried to breathe deep, but the rapid rhythm of his heart pounded in his ears.

He had allowed this.

The loom was gone, as were any possessions they may have had of any value. Just a few empty jars remained, most of which appeared to have been dropped and cracked, along with the soiled garments and a single intact basket. Whoever had come through had done as thorough of a search as any man of Israel invading an enemy home.

Anger flashed through his veins and his hands tightened into fists. Because the women who had a lived here, however briefly, were not dead.

He stormed into the room, catching his foot against one of the jugs which he promptly kicked against the far wall. It hit and shattered, sherds flying.

It was like the sound broke something inside him. The weakness he had pushed back every time they went into battle flooded through him in an angry, panicking haze; his actions those of someone else. With each sharp crack of the pottery kicked against the wall, his agitation grew. He wasn't sure how many of the vessels could have been salvaged before he got to them, but by the time he was done, none could be.

He stood amongst the remains for some time, panting.

As he came to, regret slammed into his chest. He gripped either side of his head and groaned. What was wrong with him?

His sandals crunched over the sherds, and blood trickled from a small cut on his toe. He slouched, hands shaking as he allowed the wall to catch his weight. Then he sank down, sitting on the floor with his feet sprawled out.

Disgust burned as acid on his tongue. Disgust in himself and in those who had ransacked the dwelling. Why was he unable to control his own mind? This may have been the first time he had acted so violently, but it wasn't the first time he'd lost control of *himself*. It was as though his emotions belonged to someone else, commandeering his body and clouding his thoughts so that they could do as they pleased with him.

Wind whistled through the open door. It tugged the women's discarded clothing, buffeting the edges with sharp gusts. Salmon trained his gaze on the movement, processing as though the action happened in the past rather than the present.

Slowly, his heartbeat returned to its normal rhythm and his breathing evened out. His muscles relaxed, allowing his shoulders to droop.

Still, the cloth fluttered. An undulating ribbon of dusty green.

Eventually the sound of footsteps penetrated his thoughts and he realized that the wind had stopped some time ago, while he had been staring at the cloth, unseeing and uncomprehending.

“Salmon?” It was Einan. A moment after his voice penetrated Salmon’s ears, his brother stepped into the doorway. He blocked the light with his body, but enough filtered in around his form to reveal the destruction. He breathed sharply through his nose. “What... happened?”

Was it not obvious?

Einan stepped in farther. His sandals crunched on the broken pottery, though he kicked aside the biggest pieces. Then he loomed over Salmon for a moment before sinking down to the floor beside him.

Silence stretched.

At last, as though broaching a painful subject, Einan said, “Was it like this when you arrived?”

“Most of it.” Salmon tipped his head up to look at the ceiling. There were slivers of orange light shining through the woven grasses.

“How often... does this happen?”

So Einan had noticed as well.

“More than I would like to tell you, though not usually this destructive.” Salmon rocked his head back to rest on the wall. The jagged edges of stone pushed uncomfortably at the back of his skull while exhaustion pressed heavily from the inside. “Sometimes... it is like being caught up in a fight, whether because of a smell or something I saw. And then there are times...” His throat tightened. “Other times it’s panic and fear.” His pulse sped just thinking about it.

He cleared his throat, ignoring the pain, and shoved against the floor so that he could stand to his feet. “I don’t really want to talk about it.” The only thing that separated him and his freedom from the conversation were his brother’s legs, so he stepped over them.

But Einan stopped him with a hand on his raised ankle. “You may not wish to speak to me, but you should probably tell Joshua.”

Salmon yanked free, nearly wrenching Einan so far forward that he would have faceplanted into Salmon’s knee. Instead, Einan sprawled out on the ground. Guilt drove Salmon to kneel and offer a hand up.

His brother waved him off.

“I’m sorry, Einan.”

“You can say that,” Einan snapped, his voice sharp. But when he stood, he sighed. “I’m sorry as well. I just—I’m unable to comprehend what is happening to you. First, you collapse in Jericho, and sometimes I see you flinch when there’s nothing there.”

“I don’t understand either.”

“So talk to Joshua.”

Salmon grunted. “You said that already.” He turned and strode out the doorway.

It was now nearing sundown. No wonder Einan had come to find him. He hadn’t even realized he’d been gone for so long.

But at least it explained part of the weariness pulling at him.

Seeming to notice that Salmon watched the horizon, Einan spoke up. “Everyone was worried about where you were. And since I hadn’t seen you since Ai...”

“Was Gavriila crying again?”

“For a little while. Rahab ended up distracting her with the flax they said you brought back.”

The return journey would to be a long one, with far too much time to dwell on his mistakes. “Her loom is gone.”

“Whose loom? Rahab’s?” Einan glanced over his shoulder. “Is that why you—”

Salmon spoke over him, not wanting to hear how his brother would choose to describe his lapse in judgment. It was one thing to think in such terms on his own, another to hear someone else say it. “That was part of it, yes. But also anger at seeing what our people have done to her.”

They continued on, traversing much of the path in silence, until Salmon felt that if he were left to his own mind, he might drown in it. But no topic of conversation would spring to his lips.

Mercifully, Einan didn’t have the same problem. “What are your feelings for Rahab?”

Well, perhaps not so merciful. “Why do you ask?”

“There were four women we brought back, but you only ever speak of the one.”

“She’s the one we know the most.” The whole reason that the rest had been saved at all.

“And the one you risked so much to save. After everything that has happened, I’m beginning to wonder if part of the reason was because you were interested in her.”

“Joshua said much of the same.” Salmon clenched his fists. “Are you concerned that I’m going to join myself to a prostitute?”

“No.”

“Because I assure you, I am well aware of what she is.” Or was. He did not actually know whether or not she intended to continue her trade. Not that she would be allowed to so long as she remained near Israel. But if she tried to...

He couldn’t bring himself to think on what would happen if Rahab turned to her old life or of what it would do to him.

Einan stopped him with a backhanded slap to his arm. When Salmon jerked a glance at him, Einan was shaking his head. “I don’t know if I will ever understand why Yahweh allowed us to spare her. But after Achan...” His brow pinched in a frown. “If Yahweh would give her a second chance, then I don’t see how I can do any less. Even if that second chance is spent with you.”

Salmon huffed.

In order for Rahab to live a second life with him, *he* would have to be better than her first. And while the life of a prostitute was less than what Yahweh would have for anyone, Salmon wasn’t sure that he would make for an improvement.

He was weak. There were times when his memories plagued him, igniting his tempers and turning shadows into enemies. He might be a leader of Israel, but he was a disappointment to his family... his daughter most especially.

Though— from what he could tell, his daughter adored the woman who’d suddenly entered their life.

Einan elbowed him. “What has your face set in such a far-off gaze?”

A few more steps passed before Salmon answered. “Do you think if I married Rahab, it would make Gavriila happy?”

“Your daughter will be happy either way. It’s you I’m worried about.”

He scowled. “I’m not concerned about myself.”

“Well, you should be! Do you think you’re the only one not due another try at happiness?”

“Ensuring Gavriila’s future will be my second chance.” And securing protection for Rahab could be part of it as well.

For the first time, the thought truly bloomed in his mind. Rahab was in need of a male protector, someone who could prevent such scenes as had occurred when those men pulled her and her family off the mountain.

She couldn’t remain in his tent forever. Not without his marrying her.

Still, his temper from hours before flashed through his mind. What if his weakness was growing worse? How long before he lashed out at someone? As his wife, Rahab would be the one closest to him, the one most likely to be hurt.

A hand waved in front of Salmon’s face and he flinched, stumbling over a loose stone in his path.

Einan ignored the blunder. “Would you mind listening when I talk to you?”

Salmon stopped and bent at the waist, lifting his leg to his other knee to rub at the toes that smarted from connecting with the stone. Couldn’t Einan leave him to his own thoughts for once?

“I’ve been trying to tell you that if you’re still alive after all this time, when I thought Yahweh would surely have—”

He straightened with a snap. “Is this supposed to brighten my mood?”

“I’m just saying, not everyone has a chance to do better in life!” Einan was yelling now, his cheeks flushed.

Somehow, the sudden shift in temper flattened Salmon’s own. He had never seen his brother like this, the one who

brooded in silence instead of raging. Salmon's shoulders drooped, hands lifting in supplication. "I'm sorry—"

"You can start over. A new wife, a bigger family to look after, while—" Einan cut himself off with a shuddered breath. He blinked and seemed to return to his normal self. With a shake of his head, Einan continued to speak, his voice even. "Achan never had such an opportunity."

Befuddled, Salmon gaped. What was this conversation really about? "Achan had time to repent long before his name was drawn. And when he was found out, he had time to ask for forgiveness. You know as well as I that spilled blood requires the same in return."

Einan turned, continuing down the path. "Achan spilled no blood."

Salmon fell in alongside. "Yes, he did. He was warned the same as all of us, told what would happen if he disobeyed. But he didn't listen. Just because we believe the punishment harsh doesn't mean it wasn't deserved." He fell silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts, addressing himself and his own failings. "We all have to bear the repercussions of our actions."

Einan squinted. "Are we still speaking of Achan?"

"I've never trusted Yahweh. I've never followed his will with everything in me. What if this," Salmon jerked his arm, motioning back up to the home he had left devastated, "weakness is my punishment?"

"You said that Yahweh gave Achan a second chance, and that Rahab is a sign of his mercy." Einan reached out and wrapped a thick hand around the back of Salmon's neck, pulling him in so that their heads clacked together. "So shouldn't the head of the tribe of Judah hope for mercy from this as well?"

Salmon shoved him away and gripped the side of his head. "Why would you do that? It hurt!"

"That's because your skull's thick."

"Yours is the one that's—"

“Are you even listening to me?”

Heaving a sigh, Salmon released his head. “Maybe.”

“Maybe you’re listening to me or maybe I’m right?”

He scowled. “Maybe if you keep bothering me, I’ll smack your head against that rock over there.”

Einan scoffed, “Like you could.”

Salmon snatched his brother’s shoulder and grinned. “Sounds like a challenge to me.”

Early that morning, after Rahab watched Salmon depart for the mountains, intent on returning with her loom, she’d turned to the tent he’d lent her and the others. Dim light filtering in, she located the bundle of flax from the day before as well as a patched-up blanket she hoped he wouldn’t miss.

Taking both, she moved a short distance beyond the tents, where the shade of a small tree made her feel somewhat hidden from the world. There, she spread the blanket and dropped the flax onto it. She then set to sorting the stalks, pulling out any that had already mildewed or been attacked by insects.

An hour passed before she noticed a small presence hovering over her. Peering up, she found Gavriila, watching.

Neither of them moved.

After an awkward stretch of time, Rahab asked, “Would you like to help?”

The child rocked back on her heels. “I know what you’re doing. I’ve seen Dodah do it.”

Rahab hesitated. “That wasn’t—”

“Can I play with these?” Gavriila shifted her gaze to the discarded flax.

At Rahab’s affirmative response, she dropped into a crouch. Lifting a stalk in each hand, she began coiling one

around the other. Once that was finished, she grabbed another to repeat the process.

It was strange, seeing this girl so calm. With the energy she had shown the night before, Rahab would have expected her to be playing with the other children, or else telling another story that Rahab would have to listen closely to follow.

This... this was somewhat unsettling.

In an attempt to draw the child out, Rahab decided to speak as she resumed to her own work. “Have you had a good morning?”

“No.” A simple answer. One without any emotion to hint that it was true.

But Rahab knew what a veil looked like. Even if it wasn’t made of cloth. “Hm.” She pulled a few more strands from the bundle and moved the perfectly good stalks to Gavriila’s pile. “Is there any particular reason?”

The girl dipped her chin and then sniffed.

“I see.” Rahab looked away. For a moment, she sorted in silence, before adding, “I don’t always like to talk about things that upset me either.” Really, there had never been anyone to listen. But this girl had a whole family. One that was far more loving and open than Rahab’s had ever been.

And though she wasn’t family, Rahab knew she was willing to listen so long as she was able.

They sat like that for another hour, Gavriila winding all her flax into a rough ball shape before she decided to speak. “Abba’s gone again.”

Rahab felt the simple words as a stab in her own heart. She’d seen the child’s previous reaction to her abba’s absence, knew how much it hurt the girl to be separated from the only parent she had. One who actually loved her.

But Rahab also knew that not all of Salmon’s absences could be helped. He was a tribal leader and a warrior. He had responsibilities outside of his family. Still, it didn’t mean he could neglect his home and the people who lived there.

There was also the small fact that his current absence was partially Rahab's fault.

"He's always gone." Gavriila drew back her arm and flung the ball away. It traveled a short distance before hitting the ground and rolling. "I want him here." Her face screwed up, eyes tearing.

It was the same thing she had said before, each time Salmon had left since Rahab had come to stay with them. And, she was sure, many times before that. For a child, there were only so many words to express how she felt and what she wanted.

There were also only so many things that could be said to make her feel better, all of which had already been said as well.

"Would you like to play a game?"

Gavriila glared at her. "What?"

"A game." Rahab nodded to the ball. "We could use that, toss it back and forth to each other."

"Why?"

"Because it's fun." Rahab stood and brushed the dirt and dried grass from her backside. Then she strode the few paces to where the ball lay. "My brother and I used to play with something like this when we were little." The last word nearly caught in her throat.

Idrikan. She hadn't thought overly much of him since they had fled Jericho, afraid that if she did, then she wouldn't be able to stop crying.

He was the one thing about her past she would always miss, the one thing she didn't want to forget. Thoughts of their abba, their ima, the many other wives and step siblings, the men who had come to see her and their wives who whispered about her—she could do without them all.

She wanted to erase them from her memory.

But Idrikan had been a bright point. The brother who loved her, even if fear of their abba had kept him from always

showing it.

A small hand slipped into hers. “Are you alright?”

Rahab swallowed a sob. “No.” She felt her hand tremble over that of the little girl’s and drew her other hand to cover her face.

Already, there were tears trailing down her cheeks.

Gavriila tugged at her fingers. “We can play the game, if you want.”

A laugh shook Rahab’s chest. “Yes.” She wiped at her eyes. “I do.”

She felt the stray edges of flax prick the palm of her hand as Gavriila placed the ball there. With one last swipe, she forced her eyes open and her lips into a smile. “Now, you’ll need to run over by the tents, and I’ll throw this to you.”

Obediently, Gavriila did as she was told.

Beyond her, Rahab noticed Jael had come out, likely searching for her niece. With Jael’s back to the sun, Rahab couldn’t see her expression, but she doubted it was welcoming. But, after a moment of watching, the woman turned away.

Rahab took it as permission to keep playing.

They tossed the ball for a while. Eventually the other children joined them and Rahab gratefully relinquished her place. It had been years since she’d engaged in such an activity and her arms ached from the repetitive movement.

After moving her blanket to where the shade had drifted, Rahab settled down to watch. Her fingers plucked lazily at the strands of flax while the children kept up their game long into the afternoon. After a short respite around noon, growling tummies drawing them away, they were back, stacking stones atop one another just to knock them down.

At some point, first Tanyth and then Shiba joined Rahab, their conversation raised to be heard over the children’s laughter.

For the first time in a long while, Rahab felt a deep sense of peace. It was a day spent with friends, surrounded by laughter, without fear or shame weighing on her. The future was uncertain, but she had a God who was with her.

Chapter 38

Salmon sported a new set of bruises along both his shoulder and side by the time he and Einan returned to their tents. Einan had a scratch across his cheek and, Salmon was sure, a knot on his head.

He hadn't actually bashed his brother against a rock. But they were two grown men who had tussled as though they were still boys. And they had more injuries to prove it than either had received from the battle with Ai.

So, when they arrived at their dwellings, Jael took one look at them and rolled her eyes. But there was a hint of smile there, one that Einan had obviously noticed by the way he stared at her.

She was busy pouring a cardamom fragrant broth into a vessel held by the elder woman, Zibqet. Tipping her head toward the jugs set out alongside her and Einan's tent, she said, "You should both wash up, and call the children to do the same. They've been back there, making a racket most of the day."

As she said it, Salmon realized he could hear a few young voices screeching.

While Einan continued to study Jael, who seemed calmer than she had been in many days, Salmon ambled in the direction of the shrill voices. He found the children on the other side of the tent, clustered in a circle and focused on something between them.

Beyond sat Rahab and the other two women. They were laughing, hands waving animatedly, as though they had long forgotten the chore that lay in piles around them. And Rahab... she was smiling. With her features bunched as they were, the scars were smaller, so faint that if he hadn't already known they were there, he never would have noticed.

Then the girl of Tanyth's screamed, drawing everyone's attention.

Salmon flinched and rushed forward on instinct. A blur raced around the girl's feet, and her brother took off after it. But Salmon had already recognized the creature. A lizard, harmless but obviously frightening to the girl.

Gavriila was standing beside her now, reaching up to pat the older child's back.

No longer on course to intervene, Salmon slowed and let his focus drift. And then collide with that of Rahab and the other women.

Tanyth frowned at him. "I see you're back."

Unsure if he was to take that as a true welcome or not, he tipped his chin. "I am. But..." He met Rahab's gaze. "I don't have the best of news."

"Salmon!" It was Einan, calling from between the tents. "Are you planning to have everyone come eat or not?"

"Food!" The youngest boy in the group raised a fist as he jumped to his feet. Then he was running and chanting, "Food, food, food."

His ima followed quickly, shushing him. And Tanyth's children were not far behind, with Tanyth muttering under her breath as her son grabbed her hand to tug her along.

Then it was only Rahab and Gavriila. Two weighty sets of eyes that rested on Salmon.

For the first time he could remember, his daughter didn't run to him. She edged to Rahab, tucking herself against the woman's side. Rahab flushed, as though uncomfortable, but she slipped her hand into Gavriila's. "Well," she said at last, "what was it you had to tell me?"

Salmon had been too busy staring. Though there was no blood between them, it was obvious his daughter had already bonded with the woman from Jericho. And seeing them together made Einan's suggestion all the more bearable.

Could he marry her?

It was a question best pondered later, when he could be by himself to think. Not when he was supposed tell her that

everything she had thought to bring from her old life was gone.

He came to a stop in front of her. “I couldn’t find the loom.”

Rahab’s brow furrowed.

“The home had been ransacked, everything either stolen or destroyed.” Salmon winced. There was no easy way to tell her, but he still wished that his words could have been more comforting.

“I see.” Rahab glanced away, her features impassive. Then she listed, catching herself a moment before he could. But her gaze was clouded and distant, as though she didn’t actually see anything.

“Rahab, I know this is a blow. But I promise— no.” It was more important than that. “I swear to you on my family, I will see that you have a new loom. And I will care for your needs until I do.”

Nothing about Rahab’s expression changed. She murmured something, but her words were low and he couldn’t understand.

“Excuse me?”

Her eyes flickered to his, voice firming. “What do you want from me in return?”

He stilled. “I don’t want anything.”

The situation was his fault, the repercussions his burden to bear. But even if they were not, he would *never* ask of her what she seemed to be implying. “You will never have to do that again, Rahab. I will not allow it, and neither would Yahweh.”

Beside them, Gavriila twisted, awkwardly fidgeting.

Rahab’s gaze shifted across Salmon’s face for a long moment. Then her features softened and her cheeks pinked.

Some of his irritation ebbed. “I understand that you have reason to fear. But believe me,” he pressed a hand against the

center of his chest, willing her to understand the concern he held for her there, “I will not ask such a thing of you.”

Her eyes held his, searching. “I believe you.” She took a deep breath and then exhaled. “I’m going to trust you.”

With herself.

He knew that she was. It would be far too easy for him to take advantage, to press her into something she didn’t want. In this situation, without her loom and without a male relative, she was on her own among a strange people. Most of whom hated her for what she had been.

He was not a stranger to the role of protector. He fulfilled it for his daughter as well as for his tribe in many ways. But somehow, knowing she now looked to him for the same settled a stronger burden on him than before. This was a woman who had been hurt in the past and who, if he chose, could be hurt even now.

And Yahweh help him, he was afraid that he would fail her.

There had been a week of rest after the battle of Ai. A week to distribute goods and then a day to pack their homes once more. To move out, this time not at the command of a cloud they could see in the sky but on the word of a man whom they all prayed could see Yahweh’s will better than they could.

As ever, Judah led the way, their wagons at the head of the tribes while Salmon and his family came at the front of those. This time with the women and children of Jericho as well.

“Where are we going?” Gavriila sat on the back of their family cart, wedged between tent poles and rolled up rugs. Her feet swung in rhythm to the vehicle’s jerking movements over the packed and rocky ground.

Salmon followed some paces behind, holding the tether for Rahab’s donkey. The animal bayed, answering the persistent call of their neighbors’ beasts keeping pace on every side. “Shechem, Gavriila, Moses told us Yahweh commanded we go there.”

Her face scrunched. “I don’t remember Moses, Abba.”

His pace slowed. His daughter had been no more than a year old when the man who led Israel from Egypt perished. And though she would have heard the commands given, she had no way to remember them.

Sensing eyes on him from behind, where Rahab and the other woman strode, he struggled himself to remember what it was Moses had said all those years before. “We go there, to the two mountains, Ebal and Gerizim, so that we can offer sacrifices to the I Am.”

“We give sacrifices at the tabernacle.”

“Yes...” Why had he allowed his pride to keep him from paying better attention the first time this was explained to him? He’d had the voice of Moses to tell him those years ago, but he’d let anger fester in his heart so that the words never sank in.

“This is one of Yahweh’s commands.” Jael ducked from beyond the cart, falling back from where she and Einan had been leading the way. She glared at him a moment before twisting her attention to Gavriila. “You may not have been old enough to remember Moses, but you were old enough to remember what happened to Achan when he disobeyed.”

Would their memory never be free of that man’s name! “My daughter is not asking why she should obey, only what it is we are obeying.”

“She will know soon enough when we arrive there and she lives it.”

“There is more to obeying Yahweh than simply completing a series of tasks.”

“Is there?” There was challenge in the raise of her brow. “You’ve done an astounding job of demonstrating that.”

What was with the women in his camp? First Tanyth and now Jael. Should he expect all the others to attack him in his sleep soon? “I may not have always lived as though that were true, but I’m trying now.”

“Are you?” This time, Jael’s challenge was directed over his shoulder. When he looked, he saw Rahab watching their exchange.

His nostrils flared. This was a matter which he was done discussing. Reaching his hand back, he dropped the tether into Rahab’s startled grasp and then marched forward, overtaking Jael and the cart moving ahead. When he came within a handbreadth of his brother’s wife, they both held in their tracks. “Rahab is here with Yahweh’s blessing. He proved that to us—”

“Not to me.”

“He proved it to all of Israel!” Behind him, he noticed that the creaking of Rahab’s cart had ceased. But he was not finished. “The lots were cast at the *command* of Yahweh, and it was the clan of Zerah that was drawn, not Perez.”

“Maybe there is another who the lots would accuse if we drew again.”

“We defeated—” No. He was not going to argue with a blind woman. He looked up, searching for his brother. “Einan!”

At first, neither his nor Einan’s carts slowed. Salmon yelled his name again and watched as Gavriila hopped from her perch to run around the front. Then the carts stopped and Einan appeared between. Even from that distance, Salmon could see him shaking his head in confusion. “Come speak some sense into your wife. Remind her that Yahweh’s word is final.”

Jael winced.

A moment’s worth of satisfaction flared before quickly dying out. What was he doing? Telling on his sister-in-law because he couldn’t bear her tongue himself.

Einan called to his wife, and with one last dagged glare at Salmon, she turned to go to him.

That glare cut more than the words she’d already leveled against him. A groan climbed his throat.

Turning, he came face to face with Rahab. Their eyes met, her expression inscrutable, telling him neither whether she appreciated his defense or thought him a tyrant. When he slowly drew near, she passed the donkey's tether and then stepped aside, waiting for him to lead.

For a moment, he held there. The rope lay limp in his palm until he flexed his fingers over it. The rough fibers scraped the flesh of his hand, reminding him of when he and Einan had climbed from Rahab's window.

He'd never, not once, regretted offering her his help, though he had worried that it would be his downfall and that of his family. So why should he judge Jael when she still worried the same?

Clicking his tongue, he jerked on the tether, urging the animal forward. It bellowed, berating his ears, before leaning into its harness to pull the creaking cart behind it. Looking up and behind it, Salmon caught the quickly shifting glances of Shiba and Zibqet, who rode in the back along with the children. Tanyth strode behind, her penetrating gaze unyielding.

Yet he couldn't tell what she thought of his actions either.

A sigh rumbled from deep in his chest. He turned, directing the cart into the ruts left by Einan's.

All around him, he sensed and heard the mass movement of people, traveling the length of the desert until the mounts of Ebal and Gerizim should stop them. It was a way of life he had always known. One of traveling from place to place, never settling but always together. Now the rescue of a handful of women and children had driven a wedge between him and many of his people.

There were those who he had always known to travel close, who now fell behind. And even in his own family, tensions could not seem to die.

Lost in his own dark thoughts, Salmon hardly noticed when Rahab came alongside. Until she spoke his name. "Salmon." He glanced up, at first confused by the intrusion,

and then relieved. Studying her, he felt the heaviness of his guilt lift.

How could he not have offered her the mercy he'd so long wished to see?

Her face was tipped to look at his, the tight skin of her faded scars highlighted by the sun.

Beautiful.

Then her lips moved, forming a question he had not expected. "Would you be willing to tell me more about the sacrifices you offer to Yahweh?"

His mind emptied for a moment and he glanced around. As though the landscape could offer answers. "You mean... the ones we will be offering at the mounts or those we always make?"

"Both." She offered him a tentative smile. "I think I should probably know more about the worship of the God I am to follow."

A thickness gathered in his throat. She was more amazing than he could have imagined. More faithful, more trusting, and more believing that he had ever been. If he spent more time around her, married her like Einan suggested, would he be able to live up to the example she set? Could he follow her lead while leading her?

Chapter 39

The mounts of Ebal and Gerizim rose large across the horizon before Rahab noticed them. She'd been lost at Salmon's side, watching his expression as he described to her the sacrifices offered to Yahweh. Then, in turn, he had answered her questions regarding laws which she had already learned but didn't understand.

Though he hesitated from time to time, inhaling through his nose as though it would help him gather his thoughts, he never shrank from her questions or expressed irritation with her.

Eventually, Rahab noticed that Shiba had left their cart and come to walk with them as well. Even Gavriila had returned to her perch on her dohd's cart, feet swaying while her eyes showed she listened intently to her abba's every word.

Salmon had noticed Gavriila's attention, and his gaze shifted every few minutes to study her, his features softening. How long had it been since he and his little girl had a moment like this? One where they were both present and engaged.

Rahab's heart ached knowing Salmon was an abba who wanted to right his wrongs. And she believed he would be able to. Gavriila was young, her heart still willing to love despite its breaking.

He'd realized his mistakes in time. Now, he only had to remember what he'd learned from them.

Distracted, it took a second for Rahab to register that Salmon had ceased speaking. When she glanced at him, she found his attention had shifted up and into the distance. She followed his line of sight and stumbled when she saw how close they had already come to the twin peaks she'd only ever heard of until then.

They rose like rounded hills, towering over the rest, rising to the heavens, covered in brown grasses that would form pasture for the herds of Israel.

“Salmon!” Einan turned around and raised an arm over his head to grasp his brother’s attention. “Where should we camp?”

“Move into the valley,” Salmon answered. “We will pitch our tents on the slope of Mount Gerizim with the rest of our tribe.”

The rest of their tribe. Rahab glanced behind her, past her cart to the trudging masses of Israel. Family after family led wagons, carts, and herds until they all blended together in a mass of muted colors. But the sounds were anything but. Loud and filled with laughter and life despite the unknown.

Only the inhabitants of her own cart, little Duni as well as Tanyth’s children, remained quiet. Their eyes were wide, taking in a life they could scarcely grasp. One that was ever moving and wholly unfamiliar.

How long before they felt as though they belonged? How long before she did?

There were still Jael’s occasional caustic words and the stares of the curious and condemning who moved around them every day. And though she and the rest of her brood had the protection of two of Israel’s most important men, they were still outsiders claiming a space many believed they didn’t deserve.

Yahweh may have saved them, but did that mean he wanted them to continue to dwell among his people?

She wanted to. Wanted it with everything in her. Though Israel may not have fully embraced them, their God had. And Salmon...

Rahab dared a glance at his upturned face. As though sensing her gaze, he dipped his chin to look at her. A blush heated through her cheeks and spread across her collarbone. She couldn’t turn her head away fast enough.

Blessedly, he didn’t comment. Instead, he addressed Gavriila, asking what she thought about their discussion. The question made Rahab’s heart ache.

If the God of Israel could find her in Jericho, then he could find her anywhere. But leaving these people would mean leaving Salmon, and the more time passed, the less she wanted to.

On Ebal, the mount of curses, Joshua built an altar to Yahweh. Following the instructions given through Moses, it was constructed of uncut stones with the sharp angles and jagged edges left in place.

Where the altar in the tabernacle was of precious wood, protected by a covering of bronze, this was stone exposed to the elements. It would be years before the winds and sandstorms wore down its edges. Before use chipped away at the fragile shelves of stone, creating an ever more weathered image.

It would become more beautiful with time, the layers of ash and blackened rock bearing a history of faithfulness.

Already, the altar dripped with melting fat that caught in flames. Salmon watched from afar as priests stood around, sweat beading on their brows and soaking the linen of their garments from the heat. He didn't envy their positions, though sometimes he wondered if their duties might be less taxing than the confusing task of leading a people who were prideful by nature.

Perhaps Yahweh felt the same.

Salmon waited his turn in line, two unblemished lambs bleating at his feet and struggling against their tethers. The noise and commotion only stoked their fears.

“Shh.” He reached down and rubbed first one behind the ears and then the other.

Over the din of the crowd, the sharp ping of metal on stone pulled his focus to where Joshua sat away from the crowd. The commander of Israel’s army was cross-legged on the ground, two pieces of stone before him. They were flat, broken into large sheets which Joshua leaned over with chisel in hand. Every strike of the hammer on chisel was another line, another

reminder of the laws of Moses which Joshua inscribed into the stones' surfaces.

The recording would take all day. Plenty of time for Israel to offer their sacrifices and then gather in place the next morning for what Moses had commanded them to do.

And for that night and day, the fire on the altar would burn. Consuming the burnt and fellowship offerings of a people standing atop a mount of curses, waiting for the moment when Yahweh's word, both of blessing and of punishment, would be read to them.

“If you are faithful...” Salmon murmured under his breath. He struggled to remember the words that he would be required to recite. The blessings Yahweh promised to them.

Did those blessings say anything about living without nightmares that haunted your waking hours?

Slowly, the line of worshipers moved, shortening the distance between Salmon and the altar. He continued to recite the blessings under his breath, until the words were right. Until they felt like a promise he could speak without doubt.

Why would Yahweh bless him? Bless any of them? Yet every male head of each family stood in the same line, offering on the same altar, praying for the same blessings and forgiveness.

For their sins to be borne by another, their punishment taken in their stead by the lambs at their feet.

When it was his turn, Salmon lifted each lamb in turn into the arms of a waiting priest. And as their throats were slit, he held his hand over their heads in prayer to the I Am.

As the second was slaughtered, he flinched.

Red swelled and the edges of his vision blurred, his world swirling in on itself. The creep of his weakness bleeding in.

Blessed shall you be. It was a whisper in his ear, a flitter of thought in his head. The words he'd repeated for the last hour now an unconscious recitation. He grabbed hold of the phrase,

affixing it in place of the memories that haunted him, until the edges of his sight cleared and his breathing evened.

Oblivious, the priest waved him on.

He shuffled out of the way. With the blessing on repeat, he was able to observe, as though from somewhere outside himself, as his sacrifice was transferred from the foot of the priest and onto the altar. As the flames caught wool and flared, the scent was lost amongst that of everything else that burned.

Blazing and snapping, the smoke billowing with thick flames. With each sacrifice added, the smoke continued to rise as a column visible across the camp of Israel.

It was a pillar, like the one that had watched over them each night for forty years. But this one was a signal that their sins had been removed, taken into the flames while they remained unscathed.

“And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to keep all his commandments that I command you today—” The people of Israel stood on either side of the ark of the covenant, which had been carried into the center of the valley between Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. The peoples’ voices rose, first those who stood before Mount Gerizim, repeating the blessings Yahweh had promised to them. “All these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God.”

Salmon allowed his baritone to blend with the rest as he stood among his people atop Mount Gerizim. The words struck him, hitting places in his heart which had been left untouched all those years ago when he first heard them. “Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.”

Was he blessed? His brother now stood alongside him; their differences forgotten in the light of Yahweh’s mercies. Among those was Rahab, a woman whose equal Salmon could never hope to meet again.

Was there still pain? Jael might never forgive him for his actions in Jericho, and his daughter still feared that he would leave. His nightmares and moments of weakness had yet to cease.

He was not sure that they ever would.

“The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. They shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways.” That had already happened in Ai and would continue to happen in every city they came across throughout Canaan.

The drone of voices continued, listing the ways Yahweh would protect them and set them apart from the other nations of the world. A second behind every word Salmon uttered, Rahab followed it, her voice sure though she had never heard the promises before.

A tightness gripped Salmon’s chest, but rather than being like one of those moments when his vision blurred and his senses were lost to him, he instead felt a flood of emotions too pure to be denied.

It was happiness. For the first time in years, he felt as though everything fit into place. As though Yahweh’s plan had done something good in his life.

“But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to keep all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.” The echo of curses reached from the other side of the valley, were the other half of the tribes of Israel stood before Mount Ebal. But unlike with years past, the reminder of Yahweh’s wrath was not as fearsome as it had once been.

In the silence after the curses were completed, Salmon allowed his gaze to drift in Rahab’s direction. There was an expression of contentment on her face, though her eyes were closed.

If Yahweh’s plan was to bless him, to burn away his sin with the sacrifices they offered, then the second chance Einan

spoke of was sure to follow.

When Rahab's eyes opened again, she turned, as though seeking direction on what to do next. And honestly, he didn't know. Moses' instructions had ended at this, not just for the day, but for good. From here on out, Israel would follow the word of the I Am and the direction of Joshua.

"Well," Jael spoke up, reminding him there were others present. "No use standing here." She reached down, taking Gavriila's hand. "I think it's best we return."

For once, Gavriila didn't argue with her. She let herself be tugged away into the crowd, her chin lowered in exhaustion.

Einan looked at Salmon and shook his head. "I guess I'll follow." He shifted his gaze between the women in their care and the children huddled around their skirts. "Would any of you like to come with me?"

Tanyth huffed. "I certainly don't want to keep standing here."

"Then keep close and follow me."

Already, most of Judah had turned to leave. There were stragglers, like Salmon, who lingered, waiting for the rest to clear out. It filled him with anxiety just to look at everyone, a milling herd of bodies as far as he could see.

When Rahab made as though to follow, he snagged the edge of her sleeve. "Could I speak with you first?"

She stopped, allowing the crush of bodies to flow around them for a few moments before looking up at him. He released her sleeve as she did, his thoughts diving into his feet instead of his head where they should have stayed.

Her head tipped to the side, a hesitant smile lifting the corners of her mouth. "Did you need to ask me something?" The light in her eyes seemed to tell him that she knew what he wanted to say, though for the life of him, he couldn't remember.

After another moment of silence, her brows raised.

Even with skin tightening around her eyes, pulling at the scars on her cheek, she was beautiful. Better than he deserved.

Which reminded him what he had been going to ask.

“First, I want you to know I don’t expect anything from you. If you don’t want to, I’ll still protect you.” It would just be harder. At least for him.

Her brows scrunched and he realized his rambling didn’t yet make sense.

“I would like to marry you, Rahab.” It was harder to say this time. When he had asked Gavriila’s mother, he had been surrounded by both his family and hers. And her abba had already said yes. Asking her had merely been a formality.

But Rahab didn’t have an abba or brother to accept his bride price. There was no one to argue on her behalf and he would have to hear her acceptance or denial straight from her lips.

For a moment, he thought it would be the latter.

At his pronouncement, she had stiffened and her eyes had taken on a hollow cast. But then her gaze had shifted behind him. When he turned to look, he saw the pillar of smoke that still drifted from Mount Ebal in a lazy curl. Before night fell, it would be gone, the last of the offerings no longer enough to sustain it.

Did she see the same thing in the smoke that he had?

“The first man who asked me to marry him, stole my innocence before abandoning me.”

The admission was like an arrow whistling past his ear. Though there was no pain to himself, he still felt it. And this time, he was the one frozen in place.

“After, my family told me I was worth more as a prostitute than as a bride.” The crack in her words drew his gaze and he watched a tear slip through the channels of her scars.

Salmon wanted to comfort her, to wrap his arms around her like he would have for Gavriila. But unless she accepted him, he had no right to touch her.

She finally met his gaze again. Hers was still hazy with tears and she made no attempt to wipe them away. “But you and your God have always treated me as more.”

He swallowed, feeling a catch of emotion in his throat. “I’m sorry no one showed you before.” He couldn’t imagine going through life the way she described. Without the love of his family, he wouldn’t have survived this long.

Her laugh caught him by surprise. “There’s no reason to be.” She swiped at her tears, as though just noticing they were there. Then she laughed again. “I wouldn’t be here if anything had been different.”

“But that doesn’t—”

“I’m alright.” She grabbed his hand and he nearly jerked, startled more than he was proud of. While his heart raced, her fingers tightened around his. “You— and Yahweh— rescued me. Everything from before is gone.” Her tone turned mischievous and she motioned with her free hand to the dwindling smoke on Mount Ebal. “A certain someone taught me that was what the sacrifices were for.”

He let his fingers tighten around hers and allowed the moment to settle over him. In the expression of her face and lightness of her voice, he sensed her answer to be a ‘yes’. But that was only part of what brought this moment of peace.

It was also the realization of what the I Am had been trying to tell them all along with the words that their tribes had just spoken.

That before Yahweh’s curses, were Yahweh’s blessings. Proof of what he had wanted to give them from the beginning.

Discussion Questions

1. In the beginning of the story, Rahab finds herself rejected by her family, including those members who were closest to her. She responds by withdrawing into herself and trying to not stand out. If you feel comfortable, share about a time you may have felt such rejection and how you addressed it.
2. Initially, Rahab believes that she has found acceptance in Jilsen. To retain this acceptance, she bends to his will and sacrifices her innocence. Has there ever been a time in your life where you felt you sacrificed something important about yourself to gain the approval of others? Looking back, what would you have done differently?
3. While in the temple, Rahab finds a sort of advocate in Mitunbaal. Have you ever found support in such unlikely places? Looking back, are you able to see God's hand in the encounter?
4. Upon returning to her home after leaving the temple, Rahab is once more reminded of her place in the world as a woman. Around the world, and even in many supposed Christian homes, there are women suffering in the same way as Rahab and the women of her family. Are there women in your life living this way? How might you be able to help the plight of women just like her?
5. In my story, while forced into prostitution, Rahab must do most of the work in finding her own clients. For many victims of sex trafficking, situations like this may lead them to believe they are active participants in their abuse. How can we show love and forgiveness to women, and men, who have come out of these situations?
6. As the people of Israel approach the Promised Land, Salmon is newly disgusted by the command of God to kill the people who oppose them. At this time, the narrative shows the first sign of Salmon's PTSD due to these killings. Do you sympathize with Salmon? How would you have felt were you in his shoes?
7. In numerous places throughout the story, Salmon's brother Einan expresses a disdain for the people currently

inhabiting the Promised Land. In each instance, Salmon disagrees with him, instead seeing little difference between the Canaanites and the people of Israel. The only thing that separates them in Salmon's mind is that Yahweh has chosen Israel, though they often fail as miserably at serving him as the people of Canaan. Have there been times in your life that you or someone you are close to has expressed similar thoughts to Einan's about the unsaved?

8. It is in Rahab's house where Salmon is confronted with the mercy of a God who has chosen to save him through a prostitute. It is a mercy that he knows he does not deserve, and one he immediately offers to Rahab in kind. Have there been moments in your life where you have been struck by the extent of God's mercy? How have you sought to share that with others?
9. Einan is quick to point out to Salmon, and to Joshua, that Salmon's vow to Rahab was given without Yahweh's permission. Has there ever been a time in your life that you have acted on faith that something was the right thing to do, only for someone close to you to make you doubt?
10. When the walls of Jericho fall, Rahab is left with the knowledge that before the day is through, her brother Idrikan will be dead. Though this is a time of relief for her own safety, it is also a time of grief. Can you relate to this situation? Have there been moments in your life that have been both a time to rejoice and a time to mourn?
11. Because of the defeat of Ai, as well as Yahweh's word to Joshua that there were consecrated things among them, many assume that the defeat is due to Salmon bringing Rahab and her family out of Jericho. A few men take it a step further and seek justice against Rahab on their own, before the lots are drawn. Have you ever found yourself reacting to sin in a similar way? Casting judgment before the full story has been made known?
12. At one point, Jael uses a lesson on Israel's laws to put down Rahab for her past. Rahab responds, "Maybe the people of Jericho were lesser, but if Yahweh saw me that way, why did he allow Salmon to rescue me?" Have there been times when you have witnessed others try to exclude

people from the body of Christ due to their pasts? What are ways we can let others know that all who come to the Father are sanctified, regardless of their past sins?

13. On their way to Shechem, Salmon and Jael get into an argument over Gavriila's education in the law. Jael claims that Gavriila will understand the law by doing what it says, to which Salmon remarks, "There is more to obeying Yahweh than simply completing a series of tasks." Which of the two do you agree more with? Why?
14. The last lines of the novel read, "That before Yahweh's curses, were Yahweh's blessings. Proof of what he had wanted to give them from the beginning." Is this a statement you agree with? Have there been times in your life where you have seen this play out?

Author's Note

The first beginnings of an idea for this book started in my college years, when I attended classes in Early Judaism as part of my minor in Religious Studies. The professor who taught these classes was a self-proclaimed atheist/agnostic, who had a deep appreciation for Judaism and a relative disdain for modern, evangelical Christianity.

One of professor's reasons for finding fault in Christianity seemed to be the perceived disassociation between the God of the Old Testament (OT) and the God of the New. The professor saw the loving God of the New Testament (NT) as something entirely different from the wrathful God of the Old, and disliked the Christian portrayal of the God of the OT as one that was loving.

Cited in this professor's argument was the wrath which called for the Israelites to destroy Canaan. And having attended a college located within the Bible Belt, there were many students in the class who were quick to refute this argument... without being able to give a good theological basis for their reasoning.

I was struck by two things during the classes I had with this professor. The first was that it is useless to fall back on the argument, "Well, because [my pastor, my parents, my church doctrine, etc.] says so." We must look exclusively to the Bible and what it says when arguing Biblical truths with unbelievers. Though this professor was well informed, most unchurched (and even churched) people do not know church history and doctrine, nor do they care. The Bible is our one source of truth, and the only thing which we can rely on.

The second thing which struck me was the rapidness in which my classmates, and other Christians in my life, would often dismiss questions which were difficult to answer or else might force them to question their own perception of morality. This was never more apparent than the way they often waved

away the question, “How can a loving God command his people to slaughter an entire nation?”

“Because the Bible says that they had sinned. And they deserved it.”

But haven’t we all sinned, and don’t we all deserve it? That was the question I grappled with, the answer most apparent to me in the story of Rahab and her rescue from Jericho. In writing this story, however, I wanted my readers to grapple with that question as well. And I wanted them to come out the other side, both deeply empathetic to the deaths of real people who had truly lived, and deeply grateful to a God who deemed to save them through the redemptive work of another (Christ).

To drive this point home, I wrote Salmon as someone who struggles with accepting the commands of God. Someone who has yet to see the sacrifice of Christ, only the wrath of an all-powerful being. A God who has chosen to use people like Salmon to be the instruments of his punishment and who doesn’t offer mercy or second chances... unless Salmon has been misunderstanding the intentions of God all along.

Coming from the land of Canaan, Rahab is more readily able to accept this God as loving. She knows what being unloved looks like. She knows what it is to be used. And with that introduction, without foreknowledge or doubting, she is ready to accept the God who sees her. This easy acceptance is something often spoken of—the three thousand who accepted Christ when they heard the early Christians speaking in tongues for the first time, and all those people encountered on mission who have never heard the gospel but soak it up as parched souls.

In modern, industrialized societies of first world nations, we are far away from this reality. We need a while to deliberate and make absolutely certain that we are willing to throw our hats into the religious ring in the name of Christ. If we are wrong, we have a lot to lose. Maybe not physically, but deep within ourselves. But Rahab, who had never lived as one who belonged to herself, had nothing to lose.

May we all live with such abandon in the name of Christ.

Other fun things to note:

* The adult male population of Judah (20 and over) was 76,500 in Numbers 26:22, years before they even reached the Jordan River. Provided all those men were married with children, the population of the tribe of Judah was well over 190,000 (my guesstimated math).

* Joshua 7:4-5 says that Ai routed the soldiers of Israel, killing about 36 of them on the slopes... out of 3,000. This seems to imply that Israel had been so used to winning, and never losing a soldier, that they felt God's anger towards them after losing so few. But it also shows how Achan could have been unafraid to sin as he did. Having likely never seen a man of Israel die in battle, he might have taken Yahweh's command for granted, believing that nothing would actually come of his misdeed, which would also be why he confessed. And with the destruction of him, his family, and his possessions, those 36 deaths were atoned for.

* Body language in the Middle East may be different than what most readers of this novel are used to. There, tipping the chin up means "yes", while tipping it down means "No." And, most confusing to an American like myself, is that shaking the head side to side means "I don't understand" rather than "No." This is the interpretation of these signals which I used within this novel, though I did my best to ensure context clues made it clear what was meant.

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