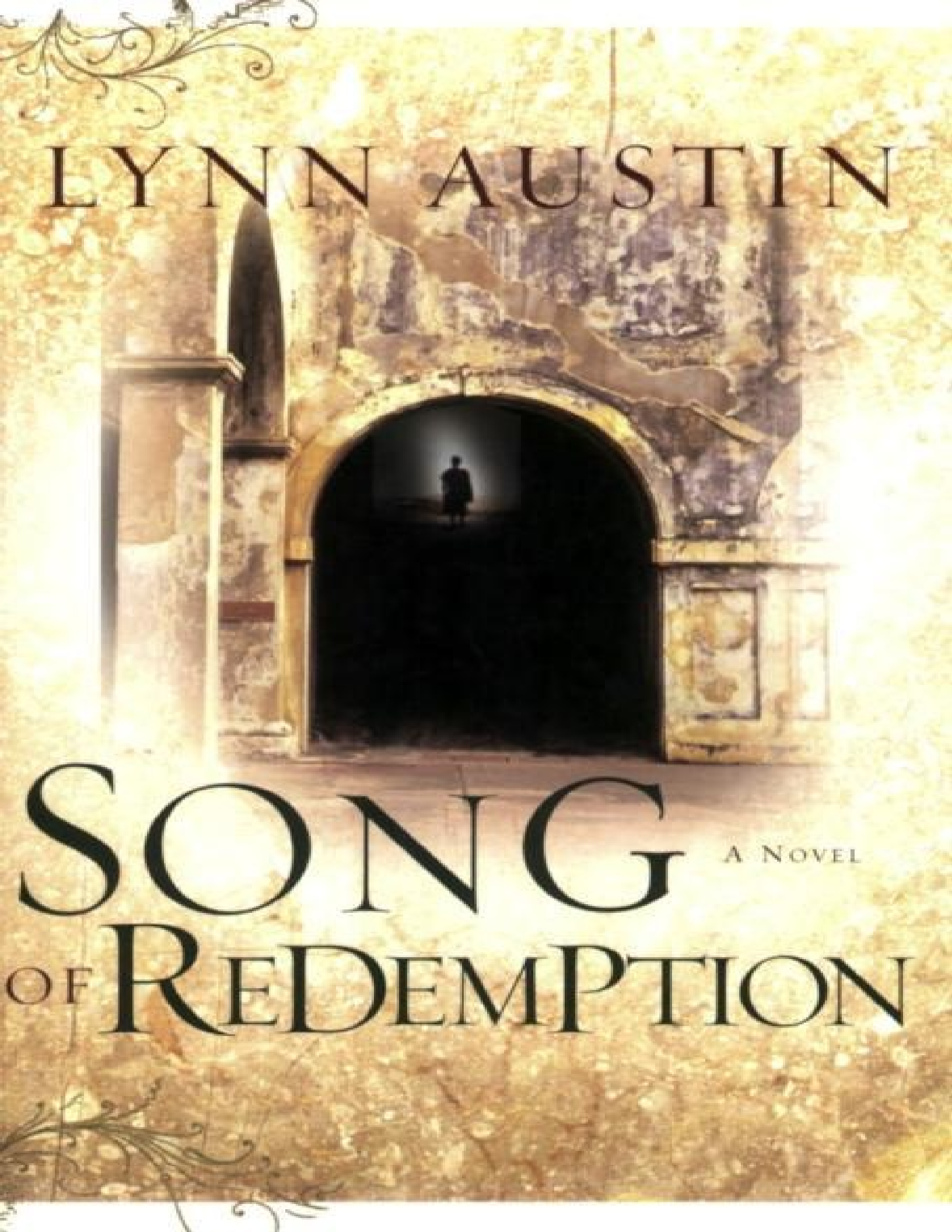
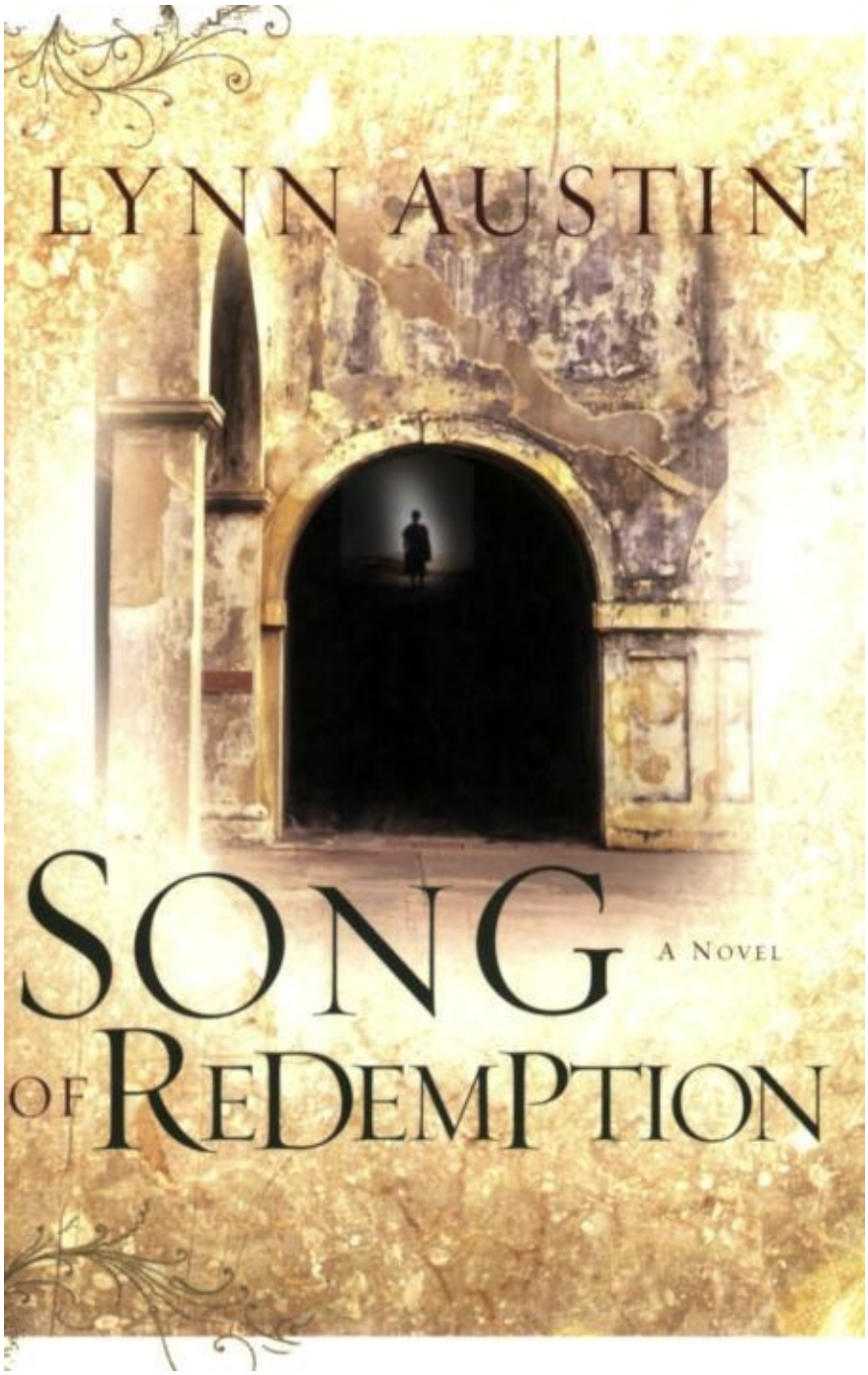
LYNN AUSTIN



SONG OF REDEMPTION

A NOVEL


LYNN AUSTIN
SONG
A NOVEL
OF REDEMPTION

SONG

OF

REDEMPTION

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Lynn Austin

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OF

REDEMPTION

LYNN AUSTIN



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Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Dedicated to my children, Joshua, Benjamin, and Mayamy favorite "trilogy"

The Lord is my strength
and my song;
He has become my salvation.

EXODUS 15:2



LYNN AUSTIN is a three-time Christy Award winner for her historical novels Hidden Places, Candle in the Darkness, and Fire by Night. In addition to writing, Lynn is a popular speaker at conferences, retreats, and various church and school events. She and her husband have three children and make their home in Illinois.

A Note to the Reader

Shortly after King Solomon's death in 931 BC, the Promised Land split into two separate kingdoms. Israel, the larger nation to the north, set up its capital in Samaria and was no longer governed by a descendant of King David. In the southern nation of Judah, David's royal line continued to rule from Jerusalem.

The narrative of this book centers on events in the life of Hezekiah, who ruled Judah from 716 to 687 BC.

Careful study of Scripture and commentaries support the fictionalization of this story. To create authentic speech, the author has paraphrased the words of these biblical figures. However, the New International Version has been directly quoted when characters are reading or reciting Scripture passages and when prophets are speaking the words of the Lord. The only allowance the author has made is to change the words "the Lord" to "Yahweh."

Interested readers are encouraged to research the full accounts of these events in the Bible as they enjoy this second book in the CHRONICLES OF THE KINGS series.

Scripture references for Song of Redemption:

2 Kings 17:1-23

2 Kings 18:1-12

2 Chronicles 29-31

2 Chronicles 32:27-30

See also:

Deuteronomy 17:14-20

2 Samuel 5:6-8

The prophecies of Isaiah and of Micah



Prologue

THE RAIN FINALLY ENDED, but puddles dotted the streets of Jerusalem as King Hezekiah walked down the hill from his palace to the Valley of Hinnom. He followed the route that the procession had taken when he'd been a child, ripped from his bed at dawn to witness the sacrifices to Molech. But this time there was no procession, no entourage of priests and soldiers forcing him to march against his will; only his friend Jonadab, captain of the palace guards, at his side. Fog blanketed the view ahead of him, and Hezekiah could barely see the jagged cliffs through the mist. It seemed appropriate that a shroud would cover this valley of death. He strode through the city gate and turned down the narrow divide, remembering the pounding drums, the column of smoke, his helpless terror. Once again Hezekiah stood face-to-face with his enemy Molech.

The monster seemed smaller than Hezekiah remembered, the brass idol dull and cold now that the flames had been quenched. Raindrops dripped from Molech's face as he gazed down from his throne. His soot-smudged belly stood empty, his gaping mouth mute. Heavy ropes shackled him, circling his neck, his chest, his arms and feet.

"It seems unbelievable that anyone would worship this thing," Hezekiah said, "much less sacrifice their children to it."

"Our nation will be a much better place without it," Jonadab agreed. "And it's fitting that you're the one to destroy it, Your Majesty."

Hezekiah nodded, remembering how close he'd come to being destroyed by Molech. He watched as the workers harnessed two teams of oxen to the statue. Then, on Hezekiah's signal, the foreman's whip cracked and the animals strained forward. The ropes stretched taut. Molech teetered on his throne for a moment, then lost his balance and crashed to the ground. The oxen dragged the idol a few more feet before halting. Molech's arms reached toward Hezekiah as if pleading for help.

"Well, that's the end of him, Your Majesty," Jonadab said.

"If only it were that simple." Hezekiah remembered his brothers Eliab and Amariah, who had been burned alive, and he felt no victory over his fallen enemy. "I'm afraid there are still plenty of people who'd rather cling to ignorance and superstition than seek the truth. And they're the ones who'll keep Molech alive."

"You think people will still sacrifice their children now that the statue's gone?"

Hezekiah nodded. "I'm certain they will-only now they'll do it in secret. You'll need to warn the guards at the Valley Gate to watch this place after dark, Jonadab. It's been used for child sacrifice for centuries, even before they made this cursed thing."

"And if we catch someone sacrificing here?" Jonadab asked quietly.

"Bring them to me at once."

Hezekiah watched in silence as the workers untied the ropes. Jonadab gestured to the fallen idol. "What do you want us to do with it, Your Majesty?" he asked.

"Smash it into pieces. Melt it down and forge weapons from it. Swords, spears, arrowheads, shields. Fill the armory with them. Someday I'll have an army again-and you'll lead them, General Jonadab."

The captain looked up at him in surprise. "Your Majesty?"

"I'm promoting you to general."

It took Jonadab a moment to recover his composure, then he bowed. "Thank you. I'm honored, Your Majesty."

The wind lifted a funnel of soot and ash into the air as Hezekiah walked closer to the empty fire pit. "Our nation's guilt is very great," he said softly. "I don't know how God can ever forgive us for all the innocent blood we've shed in this place." For a moment no one spoke. The workmen waited in reverent silence.

"Seems like we should say a prayer or something, doesn't it?" Jonadab said.

The men looked to Hezekiah expectantly. He drew a breath and recited one of the few verses of the Torah that he knew by heart: "'Hear, 0 Israel. Yahweh is our God-Yahweh alone. Love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.'"

Then he turned and began the long climb back up the hill to the palace.



Part One

Hezekiah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done. In the first month of the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the temple of the Lord and repaired them.

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2 CHRONICLES 29:1--3 NIV



I

In the northern kingdom of Israel

JERUSHA LAY AWAKE IN the sleeping loft above her house, listening to the sounds of a new morning. She was much too excited to sleep. Light from the dawning sun filtered through the cracks of the shutters, along with the melody of songbirds in the olive trees outside. She heard the heavy tread of the oxen on the stone floor in the stall below her room and her father, Jerimoth, speaking softly to them as he led them outside. He would feed and water the animals, then hitch them to the cart for the three-mile trip to Dabbasheth- and cousin Serah's wedding.

Jerusha stood up and folded her blanket, eager to begin this special day. She set the tiny square of bronze that she used for a mirror on the window ledge and studied her murky reflection as she combed her thick brown hair. Her straight nose and oval-shaped face were deeply tanned from working beside her mother in the barley fields, and she had her father's almond-shaped eyes, as green as the rolling hills. Abba said she was pretty; she wondered if it was true. Jerusha sighed and returned the metal scrap to its place on the shelf, wishing for a proper mirror.

This morning, instead of her usual work clothes, Jerusha put on the only good dress she owned, reserved for special occasions like this. The wedding festivities would last for days; she would feast and dance and visit with all her relatives. But best of all, maybe Abram would be there.

Jerusha had known Abram for years-had grown up with him, seeing him at weddings and festivals and village gatherings. He had always been a quiet boy, the opposite of her own carefree nature, and she had hardly noticed him when they were children. But now that Abram was a man-now that she saw him looking at her the way a man looks at a woman-Jerusha found herself dreaming of becoming his wife, bearing his children, and making a home with him on his father's land.

As Jerusha bustled around the tiny loft, humming a wedding tune, her younger sister, Maacah, stirred from her sleep. "Why are you getting up so early?" Maacah grumbled. "It's barely morning." She was small for an eleven-year-old and thin as a reed, with thick dark braids and a round freckled face. She followed Jerusha everywhere but was much too young to share her dreams of a husband and babies.

"Did you forget? We're going to Dabbasheth for Serah's wedding today." Jerusha unlatched the shutters and opened them.

Maacah turned toward the wall, pulling the covers over her head. "I didn't forget, but we don't have to leave this early."

"Abba says we can't leave until we finish all our chores, so the sooner we start, the sooner we'll get there. Come on, sleepyhead." Jerusha pulled the covers all the way off her protesting sister and stuffed them into the wall niche beside her own. Maacah was still groaning as Jerusha climbed down the ladder from the loft to the large main room of their house.

Their mother, Hodesh, knelt in the center of the room by the hearth, grinding wheat with a hand mill for their breakfast. "Oh, good-you're up," she said. "Go get me some water." She handed Jerusha the empty jug, then returned to her work, pouring a mound of the finished flour into the kneading trough.

Jerusha lifted the jar to her shoulder and opened the door, singing another chorus of the wedding song as she walked down the hill to the well. "'I am my beloved's and he is mine....'" The new day was fresh and clear, the sun warm but not yet high enough in the sky to be hot. It would be a beautiful day for a wedding.

By the time Jerusha returned with the water, balancing the pot daringly on her head, Maacah was out of bed and dressed, helping their mother rekindle the fire. Jerusha sang as she worked, her chores a familiar daily routine-but with a special reward at the end of them today. When Abba came in from outside, he bent to kiss her cheek.

"What makes my little bird sing so sweetly this morning?" he asked.

She smiled as she cut the goat cheese into thick slices for their trip. "You know why, Abba-we're going to the wedding today. I'll get to see Serah and Tirza and-"

"And maybe Abram, that handsome son of Eli?"

"I wasn't thinking of him at all," Jerusha replied too quickly. Her face felt warm as she handed her father a lump of cheese that had crumbled off. "But ... but he'll be there, won't he?"

Jerimoth laughed as he popped the cheese into his mouth.

"What's so funny, Abba?" Maacah asked.

"Nothing, my little one." He gave Maacah's braid an affectionate tug. "It's just that your sister has grown into a woman already. Look at her-as slender and graceful as a young willow tree. She'll soon make a lovely bride"

"But she's not getting married today," Maacah said with a frown. "Serah is."

"I know, I know." Jerimoth circled an arm around each of them and pulled them close. "How I wish I could keep my daughters here with me forever. How lonely we'll be without our Jerusha-bird to sing for us! But Abram's land isn't so very far. Maybe she'll fly back to visit us once in a while, eh?"

Jerusha looked up into her father's face, loving every line and wrinkle in his weathered skin. "Abba, you talk as if I'm already married and gone. How do you know that Abram even wants to marry me?"

"How do I know? Ha! If he had his way, you two would be getting married today instead of Serah and her groom. I'm the one who's making him wait. I'm the one who doesn't want my little bird to leave the nest"

Jerusha stared in surprise. "Did he really say he wanted to marry me?" She couldn't hide her excitement and hoped her father wouldn't laugh at her again.

"Yes, of course he did," Jerimoth said with a sigh. "And I can see that it's time I listened to him. After the wedding I'll talk to Abram's father. We shall see about a betrothal."

Jerusha threw her arms around her father and hugged him tightly. "I love you, Abba! Thank you! Thank you!" Jerimoth returned her hug in tender silence.

It seemed to take forever for Jerusha's family to finish their chores and load the oxcart with wine from Jerimoth's vineyard and the food that they had prepared for the wedding feast. Jerusha could hardly contain her excitement as they journeyed over the terraced green hills to Dabbasheth, and she longed to run down the road to the unwalled village ahead of the plodding oxen. But at last they arrived at Uncle Saul's house, tucked behind the shop where he fashioned and sold his pottery. Jerusha let the married women unload the cart and arrange all the food for the banquet-she had been asked to serve as one of the bride's attendants.

The girls talked in excited whispers as they helped Serah get ready, listening all the while for the sound of the groom's procession. When the bride was finally dressed in her brightly embroidered wedding gown with garlands of flowers in her hair and scattered around her chair, Jerusha gazed at her cousin with envy. "Maybe the next wedding will be mine," she sighed. "Mine and Abram's."

Then they heard the music of flutes and cymbals and tambourines. The groom was coming to claim his bride, leading his procession through the streets of Dabbasheth. Villagers streamed from their homes to celebrate with the happy couple and to watch the wedding ceremony in the courtyard behind Uncle Saul's house. Afterward, as Jerusha followed the bride and groom to the wedding banquet in the village square, she eagerly scanned all the faces in the crowd, hoping for a glimpse of Abram.

But above the music and gaiety of the procession, Jerusha thought she heard a rumble of distant thunder. She glanced up, hoping a storm wouldn't spoil the day, but the sun blazed in a cloudless sky. The rumbling grew louder, closer. Gradually the merriment died away as others paused to listen.

Suddenly it seemed as if a dam had burst as hundreds of Assyrian warriors on horseback poured into the village square. Screams of terror replaced the sound of singing and laughter as the villagers tried to flee, running in every direction. The Assyrians' swords flashed in the sunlight as they cut down everyone in their path, their horses' hooves trampling anyone who stumbled and fell beneath them. Within minutes the cobbled streets ran with blood and dozens of bodies lay

sprawled in the streets.

"Run, girls! Run!" Uncle Saul cried above the din. Jerusha heard his warning but she stood rooted in place, too stunned to move, f ozen in shock by the horror and bloodshed all around her.

"Run, Jerusha!" he begged. "Run! Now!" She watched in a daze as her uncle shoved his daughters down an alleyway toward their house. Jerusha looked around for Serah's new husband and saw him lying motionless on the ground in a spreading pool of blood. The grisly sight finally broke through her shock. She turned away to stumble down the alley behind her uncle, her legs moving beneath her as if weighted with heavy stones.

But just as Jerusha willed her lumbering feet to move, two Assyrian horsemen suddenly appeared at the far end of the alley, blocking their escape. The girls tried to turn back, but the soldiers thundered toward them, leaning over in their saddles to swoop Jerusha's cousins off their feet. The girls screamed in terror as the soldiers pushed them facedown in front of them across their horses' saddles.

Uncle Saul tried to grab one of the horses' bridles to stop them, pleading with the men. "Don't take my girls! Please, I'll pay any price-any ransom you name, if only you'll let them go! Please, I beg you!"

The Assyrian drew his sword and in one powerful slash chopped off Uncle Saul's hand. Jerusha nearly fainted at the sight, but Abba suddenly grabbed her from behind. "This way, Jerusha! Hide under the cart! Hurry!" He swung her around and urged her back toward the square, pointing to an oxcart parked several yards away. She saw her mother and sister cowering beneath it. A few yards away, an Assyrian soldier snatched a baby from a woman's grasp and hurled it beneath his horse's hooves to be trampled.

Screams and shouts and thundering hooves roared in Jerusha's ears as Abba pushed her toward the cart. It seemed a hundred miles away. She moved as if walking under water, her body refusing to obey her commands. Tears blinded her vision as she staggered the last few yards toward the safety of the cart. She was almost there. Her mother reached for her hand, then suddenly shouted, "Jerimoth, look out! Behind you!"

Jerusha glanced over her shoulder and saw her father facing yet another Assyrian soldier. "No! Get away from her!" Abba cried. He gripped the horse's bridle with both hands to try to turn the animal aside, ducking to avoid the man's slashing sword. "Run, Jerusha, run!" he yelled.

She made a final, desperate scramble for the safety of the cart and heard her mother scream again, "Jerusha, watch out! Behind you!" Out of nowhere, another mounted solider appeared alongside her. She tried to fight him off, flailing her fists and clawing his arms as he reached for her, but he scooped her up effortlessly and threw her facedown across the front of his saddle.

"No! Oh, God, no!" she screamed. "Abba, help me! Save me!"

Jerusha struggled to free herself, but the soldier held her down, pressing his hand against her back. She managed to lift her head as the horse wheeled around and saw her father running toward them. Then she heard the soft swish of metal as her captor unsheathed his sword. She remembered the blood and horror of Uncle Saul's severed hand and shouted, "Abba, no! Stay back!"

The Assyrian leaned sideways in his saddle and slashed out toward Abba with his sword. Jerusha saw a crimson gash appear across her father's forehead, and he sank to his knees, his face covered with blood. Then he disappeared from her sight as the horse pounded up the road, away from the village.

Jerusha screamed as the horse sped faster and faster, away from the village of Dabbasheth, away from her family and safety. They galloped for several minutes, then the horse slowed and the soldier slapped Jerusha, shouting angrily at her in his strange language. When she didn't stop screaming, he struck her again and again until she finally stifled her cries. She felt numb with pain and fear.

"I don't want to die-please, I don't want to die," she whimpered. A few minutes later they stopped near a grove of sycamore trees beside a farmer's field. Several other horses were already tethered there, and Jerusha heard muffled screams and coarse laughter coming from among the bushes. Her heart pounded with a new terror as she realized what was about to happen.

"No ... no ... please don't," she sobbed. The soldier dismounted and pulled

Jerusha off the horse, throwing her over his shoulder like a sack of grain. As he carried her into the woods, she saw her cousin Serah fighting with all her strength against the soldier who was trying to pin her to the ground. When Serah wouldn't stop struggling, the soldier beat her with his fists until she no longer moved.

Jerusha knew it would be useless to fight. The blows her captor had already given her throbbed painfully. She wanted to live through this nightmare and find her way home, so she decided not to struggle. Jerusha knew it was the right decision, but she couldn't make herself stop crying. Her terrified screams blended with all the others until the woods echoed with the sound. Even the wind seemed to shriek with fear.

Finally Jerusha's captor halted and threw her to the ground. The smell of his unwashed body made her gag. She turned her face in revulsion, and he slapped her again, yelling at her angrily.

"Oh, God ... I don't want to die," she sobbed. "Not now, not like this. Please, God, please-I don't want to die!"



2

In the southern kingdom ofJudah

KING HEZEKIAH LET HIS GRANDFATHER lean on his arm for support as they slowly walked down the hill from the palace. The sound of grinding hand mills and the smoke of earlymorning fires filled the air around them, stirring memories for Hezekiah of another morning walk with his grandfather years earlier. It seemed a lifetime ago. Yet in the short time since he had been reunited with Zechariah, the bonds of love between them had been rewoven as if no time had passed at all.

Hezekiah's robes billowed in the brisk spring wind, and the gray sky threatened rain as they neared the Water Gate. "Are you sure you don't want to turn around and go back inside?" he asked Zechariah. "Maybe it isn't such a good idea to recite our prayers out here."

"Yes, I'm sure. Don't forget-once the Temple is purified, we'll be praying outside every morning in all sorts of weather. Even the rare snowstorm"

"I guess that's true dedication," Hezekiah said, laughing. He acknowledged the guards who bowed to him as he passed through the gate, then he and his grandfather started down the steep ramp that led out of the city.

Zechariah seemed unchanged to Hezekiah. Of course he had aged, his movements slowing, his hair and beard changing from gray to white. And now Hezekiah stood almost a head taller than his grandfather. But Zechariah had the same noble, dignified features Hezekiah had loved so much, the same gentle green eyes full of wisdom and humor. He smiled to himself, remembering how he had once thought that Yahweh must look like Zechariah.

"How's this?" Hezekiah asked when they reached a terraced olive grove near the Gihon Spring. The trees offered welcome shelter from the cold gusts of wind.

"It's perfect." Zechariah sighed with contentment as he sat down to rest on the

low wall surrounding the garden. He gazed all around, as if seeing trees for the first time in his life, and Hezekiah winced at this reminder of Zechariah's long imprisonment. He was glad they had come, in spite of the damp air.

"You know, son, there's a reason I wanted to come outside to pray," Zechariah said. "It's too easy to believe in our own importance when we're surrounded by our own creations all day." He reached to pluck a silvery green leaf from an olive tree and twirled it between his fingers. "But look at this. Can we fashion anything as fragile and perfect as this leaf-or as solid and enduring as those mountains?"

"'As the mountains surround Jerusalem,'" Hezekiah recited, "'so Yahweh surrounds his people, both now and forevermore.'"

"Ah ... you still remember."

"How could I forget? You recited that verse to me every morning when you first opened the shutters. And I was thinking about it just this morning when I saw how foggy it was. The mountains were nowhere in sight."

"Yet you know they're still there, just as Yahweh is still faithfully surrounding our nation, even though our sin and idolatry have hidden Him from sight."

Hezekiah bent to pick up one of the dozens of stones that lay scattered on the ground and absently tossed it from one hand to the other. "I love this sad little nation, rocks and all. I wish it still resembled the land of milk and honey our ancestors knew"

"God will answer your prayers, in time, if you're faithful to Him"

"Your trust in God seems so ... so limitless compared to my own tiny seed of faith. I'm afraid that it'll be insufficient, especially for the overwhelming task I'm facing. Besides getting rid of the idolatry, I want to win back all the land that's rightfully mine, the land my father lost to the Philistines and Ammonites. We need the farmland of the Shephelah and cities like Beth Shemesh to guard the mountain passes into Jerusalem and give access to the coastal trade route. We need the fortified cities in the Negev and Arabah. And Elath, our seaport on the Red Sea. These territories once belonged to my ancestors," he finished, tossing

the stone he was holding toward the Gihon Spring. "And they're rightfully mine."

"You remind me of King Uzziah, son. His reign prospered, not only because he dreamed big dreams, like you-but because he loved God. With God you can do anything-anything at all."

"Then why did King Uzziah's reign end so badly? What happened?"

"Uzziah's success resulted in pride, instead of gratitude. Foreign kings honored him for his accomplishments, and Uzziah took the credit for himself instead of giving the glory to God." Zechariah was silent for a moment before continuing. "I've watched all three kings before you as they were tested by God-and failed. I pray that you'll remain strong when you're tested. Pride destroyed Uzziah. His son Jotham was destroyed by bitterness and your own father by fear. If they had placed their trust in Yahweh, how different things might have been for you"

Hezekiah felt a restless urgency to begin, to make the changes his country needed as quickly as possible. "I need your wisdom and experience," he told Zechariah. "I'd like you to fill Uriah's position as-

"No. I won't serve as palace administrator."

His abrupt refusal disappointed Hezekiah-and confused him. He had assumed that Zechariah would be willing to help in any way that he could. "But ... but why not? I need you. You've served as palace administrator before, and you're experienced-"

"I'm a Levite and a teacher of the Torah. I'll help you with your religious reforms, but I won't serve in your government."

"But I need you. How can I convince you to change your mind?"

"You can't. I'll never hold a government position again."

Hezekiah exhaled in frustration. "I don't know anyone who's as qualified as you are. You know more about running the kingdom than all the members of my court added together."

"That's flattering, but an exaggeration, I'm sure."

"But you're still going to serve in the Temple, aren't you?"

"I'm much too old for that. Levites retire at age fifty. I'm close to seventy."

"Grandpa, please-there aren't enough Levites to do all the work, and there are even fewer priests. I'm hoping that some of the younger ones will return to service once all the reforms are complete, but the men will need to be trained and-"

"And so you want to call a wrinkled old Levite like me back into service for a while?"

"Yes. Would you? At least do that much to help me ... please."

Zechariah sighed and gazed up at the Temple walls, high above them. "The last time I wore my Levitical robes was the day I stopped your father from offering his sacrifice on the Assyrian altar, the day I became a prisoner. Do you remember what I told you when you saw me dressed in my robes that day?"

"No ... I'm sorry."

"You begged me to come back as soon as I was finished at the Temple so I could teach you more about Yahweh. I told you that I might be a little late, but I would be back. Well, I'm much later than I ever dreamed I'd be," he said, resting his hand on Hezekiah's shoulder, "but IT keep my promise and teach you Yahweh's laws. And I'll assist in the Temple until some younger men can be trained to replace me.

"Where should we start? The Temple looked to me like it was in pretty bad condition."

"It is, and we've already begun cleansing it as you asked us to. The next step is to assign the priests and Levites to their divisions the way King David established them, then anoint a new high priest. Of course the people will have to tithe the required Temple portion in order to support us."

"I'll issue the orders. And I'll contribute whatever I can from the royal

treasuries, too. But what about the Temple structures? Won't they require restoration?"

"Yes, and I think I know the man to help us. My friend Hilkiah has a son who's been trained as an engineer. Hilkiah is one of the few righteous men I know, and I'm certain that he has taught his son, Eliakim, to follow God's laws, too"

"Good. I'll send for him to oversee the reconstruction. But that raises another point," Hezekiah said, stroking his beard. "Right now the hardest part of my job is figuring out who I can trust. Uriah probably wasn't the only one who would like to take control of my kingdom."

"That's true. It's always a very dangerous time when power suddenly changes hands. You'll need to take a strong stand until your sovereignty is firmly established."

"My father's government was very corrupt-from the highest official to the lowest clerk. It's little wonder that the prophet Micah condemned the leaders of Judah so strongly. In any event, I've called for a meeting later today with all of my father's former advisors. I'm going to announce my decision to reorganize the kingdom according to the Law of Moses."

Zechariah's eyes narrowed. "In that case, you'd better prepare yourself for a bitter power struggle, son. Some people will be eager to return to the laws of God, but most of the men who've been in control under Ahaz will surely oppose you-behind your back, if not openly."

"I understand. But how do I prepare for something like that?"

Zechariah lifted his prayer shawl from around his shoulders and covered his head with it. "You pray. And you allow the Lord to be your strength. Remember-the Lord doesn't give you strength, Hezekiah. He is your strength." He gestured to the city walls on the cliffs above them and said, "When you're surrounded by enemies, don't rely on man-made fortifications or military power. Trust God."

Hezekiah nodded, but he knew he was a long way from understanding and having such strong faith.

"Perhaps we should recite one of King David's prayers this morning," Zechariah said as he rose to his feet. "David wrote it when he was hounded by enemies who wanted to destroy him."

Hezekiah stood as well, lifting his own prayer shawl into place. He closed his eyes as he listened to his grandfather recite the unfamiliar words, vowing that they would one day be familiar to him, vowing that he would learn them by memory and believe what they promised.

"'Deliver me from my enemies, 0 God; protect me from those who rise up against me. Deliver me from evildoers and save me from bloodthirsty men.... But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble.'"

Hephzibah closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep when her handmaiden, Merab, entered her bedroom. "You're not up yet?" Merab asked as she parted the filmy curtains that surrounded her bed. "Come, your breakfast is ready."

Hephzibah didn't move from where she lay against the pillows. "Bring it to me, Merab. I want to eat it here in my room, alone."

"No, my lady. You can't hide in here forever. You're the king's wife; the others are only his concubines."

"But I don't want to eat with them. And they certainly don't want to eat with me."

"It doesn't matter what they want. Your position is superior to theirs, and they must do whatever you say."

"They don't even respect me, Merab. They know Hezekiah hasn't sent for me since my wedding week. They mock me."

"Don't make excuses, my lady. Come" She nudged Hephzibah out of bed and to her feet. "Face them. Claim your rights. And don't allow them to make you a captive in your own palace."

Hephzibah felt sick with dread as Merab helped her get dressed and guided her down the passageway to the dining room. Hezekiah's concubines were already seated around the low table and had begun to eat without her. She steeled herself for their usual taunts, lifting her chin and pretending to be indifferent as she joined them. When they ignored her completely, she wondered if they had grown tired of their game-or if this was their newest one.

Hephzibah ate quickly, anxious to return to her room. She had nearly finished when the chamberlain of the harem hurried in. He stood with his hands on his hips, appraising the women as if trying to select one. The eunuch was a round, fleshy man whose pale body reminded Hephzibah of bread dough rising in a kneading trough. When the concubines noticed him, their chattering stopped.

"I need one of you to come with me," he said. "King Ahaz always wanted a concubine to warm up his chambers on a cold, damp day like today, and I'm sure the new king will, too, now that his time of mourning is

One of the concubines waved her hand at him. "Take me I'll gladly go."

Merab nudged Hephzibah. "My lady, you're his wife," she whispered. "Tell the eunuch you'll do it."

Hephzibah hesitated, reluctant to risk rejection-even though she longed to be with her husband. When she didn't react, Merab quickly spoke up. "King Hezekiah's wife will come with you, Lord Chamberlain."

The eunuch stared at Hephzibah with mocking eyes. "Her? She's the last woman the king would choose."

"How dare you!" Merab cried. She struggled to her feet, looking angry enough to strike him. The eunuch ignored her as he turned to appraise the others, deliberating for a moment before pointing to the girl who had already offered to go.

"All right-you. But hurry up. The king could return to the palace any time now"

Merab's face was red with fury. "How dare you insult my lady?" she cried. She followed the eunuch as he hustled the concubine from the room, and

Hephzibah heard her scolding him loudly, all the way down the hall.

"Oh dear, poor little Hephzibah," one of the concubines said.

"Now, why do you suppose she wasn't picked?" another one asked, and they all laughed.

Hephzibah stood and hurried from the room, unwilling to let her enemies witness her grief. But more painful than their jeers, more painful than the knowledge that she was unloved, was the thought that her husband would soon hold the concubine in his arms instead of her. She might never be held or loved again. She ran down the hallway where the others wouldn't hear, then leaned her forehead against the cold stone wall and sobbed.

"Is something wrong?"

Hephzibah whirled around, shocked at the sound of a man's voice. Prince Gedaliah stood a few feet away from her. He wasn't supposed to be here. Men were forbidden to enter the king's harem. But he leaned casually against the wall beside her as if he were a regular visitor.

"You're my brother Hezekiah's wife, aren't you?" he asked.

Hephzibah could barely answer. "Yes, my lord. I ... I'm his wife."

She saw only a slight resemblance between Hezekiah and his younger brother. The prince was much shorter and had King Ahaz's stocky build. She had watched him at the coronation banquet and he'd seemed spoiled and arrogant. The only similarities she saw were the brothers' curly dark hair and wide brown eyes.

"Well, you don't seem very happy, my little sister. Don't you like being married to the new king of Judah?" He moved closer to Hephzibah and his boldness unnerved her. She backed away.

"I ... I have to go."

"Wait-" Gedaliah grabbed her wrist, and the warmth of his hand seemed to burn her flesh. He wasn't holding her tightly, but she felt powerless to move. He

smiled, reminding her vaguely of Hezekiah. "Please don't go, Hephzibah. I just want to talk."

"We can't talk. You're not even supposed to be here."

Gedaliah shrugged indifferently and rested his other hand against the wall beside her. She couldn't escape. "You can't leave until you tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing ... I..."

"Then why were you crying? Did my brother do something to hurt you?"

"No. It was the others."

"Tell me." Gedaliah brushed the tears from her cheeks, and his tender gesture magnified her loneliness.

"The other women ... they mock me because the king always chooses them ... instead-"

"What? Instead of you?" Gedaliah tightened his grip on her wrist. "But why? That makes no sense."

"I don't know why. If only he would tell me how I've displeased him, I could try to change or-"

"Don't even talk like that. You can't possibly be to blame. Listen, my brother has been making a lot of stupid decisions lately-believe me. But please don't think it's your fault, Hephzibah. I'm sure it isn't."

He brushed away her fresh tears, but more fell in their place. "I think I know how you feel," he said gently. For a moment Gedaliah's arrogance vanished and Hephzibah glimpsed his uncertainty. Then his eyes narrowed with resentment. "When my father became king he appointed his younger brother as second-in-command. He made him an army general, too. By rights, I should take Uriah's place as palace administrator-or at least be the army commander instead ofJonadab. But Hezekiah is ignoring me just like he's ignoring you, and he's choosing others instead. So you see? I do understand how you feel, Hephzibah."

Gedaliah stood just inches from her. Hephzibah imagined her husband holding the concubine in his arms and another tear rolled down her cheek.

"We're both just sitting around all day," Gedaliah continued, "waiting ... hoping. Maybe he'll summon me today. Maybe tomorrow. But he never does"

Hephzibah nodded. The prince truly did understand how she felt, and she was moved with pity for his plight. As she looked into his eyes he loosened his grip on her wrist and gently twined his fingers in hers.

"You're so beautiful, Hephzibah," he murmured. "So incredibly beautiful. My brother must be blind. I would never treat you this way. Never."

Hephzibah's loneliness, her longing to be held and loved, seemed unbearable. Gedaliah opened his arms to her, offering comfort and solace, and before she realized what was happening, he had enfolded her in his embrace. His hands felt warm against her back. "It's all right," he murmured as she sobbed against his shoulder. "I understand. I understand." She was only dimly aware that it wasn't Hezekiah holding her, but his brother.

"What's going on? What are you doing in here?"

The eunuch's angry voice startled Hephzibah, and she quickly freed herself from Gedaliah's arms. When she realized that she had allowed another man to hold her, she nearly collapsed in fear. She and the prince would both be stoned to death.

But Gedaliah's arrogance quickly returned, and he spun around to challenge the eunuch. "I demand to know who's in charge of the king's harem!"

The eunuch seemed momentarily shaken by Gedaliah's anger. "I ... I am."

"Then I demand to know what you've done to make my brother's wife so upset. I found her here, sobbing her heart out-and I want to know why!"

The eunuch seemed unsure whether he should challenge Gedaliah or answer to him. "I don't know why she's upset," he finally replied. "You'll have to ask her"

The two men looked at Hephzibah. She was so frightened she could barely speak. "I ... I'm all right now... Really, I . . ." And not knowing what else to do, she turned and fled to her room. Even with her door closed she could hear the eunuch shouting and Gedaliah boldly defending her. She was horrified by what she had done.

At last the shouting stopped. Hephzibah waited, terrified, wondering what would happen to her. Why had she done such a foolish thing? How had Gedaliah managed to entice her into his arms? She wanted to crawl away and hide.

Suddenly the eunuch burst into her room. His round face was flushed with rage. "Do you have any idea what you've just done? I won't have you making a fool of the king!"

Hephzibah cringed, certain he would beat her. "We were only talking.. .

"The devil you were!"

"The prince is my brother-in-law and-"

"Now you listen to me, and listen well!" The eunuch grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her. "You belong to the king of Judah. No other man is allowed to touch you, ever! Anyone who does is committing an act of treason, a direct challenge to the king's sovereignty. Prince Gedaliah would like nothing better than to seize his brother's throne, and he would use you to do it, too!" Hephzibah knew that what he said was true. She felt faint.

"If you ever do anything that stupid again, I'll have you executed!" He gave her another rough shake, then stormed from the room.

Hephzibah stood rooted in place for a long time, her shoulders aching from the eunuch's grip. At last she stumbled over to the tall windows that looked down on the palace courtyard and opened the wooden shutters. Cold, damp air streamed inside, and she hugged herself, rubbing her bruised arms. She remembered the feeling of Gedaliah's strong arms around her, the comfort of his broad chest and masculine scent, the brush of his beard against her hair. Despair welled up inside her when she realized she might never be held in a man's arms again. She sank down on the window seat and surrendered to her grief.

After a while she became aware of voices and movement outside in the courtyard. She looked down and saw Hezekiah standing below her window, talking to an older man with a white beard. Their voices were too soft for her to hear their words, but she watched her husband as he talked, gesturing with his large, strong hands. She longed to call out to him, but her throat was choked with tears. Finally Hezekiah embraced the older man and disappeared alone into his chambers. He would find his concubine waiting.

Hephzibah was barely twenty years old, and she knew she would be Hezekiah's prisoner for the rest of her life. He didn't want her, but no one else could have her, either. She would have to live here alone until the day she died, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Outside Hephzibah's window, King Ahaz's clock tower loomed in the courtyard. Most of her days would be spent watching the sun's shadow inch slowly up the smooth stone stairs, then back down again. But today the skies were overcast. There would be no shadow. And Hephzibah would remain frozen in time like this-forever.

Hezekiah returned from his morning prayers with Zechariah feeling more troubled than comforted. Thoughts of political intrigue and conspiracy filled his mind, and his mood matched the gray, dreary day outside. When he entered his chambers he was surprised to find a concubine waiting for him.

"You look so cold, my lord," she murmured as she hurried into his arms. "Why don't you sit over here by the fire and let me warm you.

Hezekiah was still unaccustomed to such lavish attention, but he rather liked it. The concubine was one of his favorites-a lively, attractive girl-and she offered him a welcome diversion from his troubling thoughts. He allowed her to lead him closer to the hearth, enjoying the sweet fragrance of her perfume. "This is a nice surprise," he said. "I don't remember sending for you"

She cupped her hands around one of his, rubbing it gently to take off the chill. "The chamberlain thought you might like someone to help warm up your chambers."

"Did he, now?"

"Yes ... King Ahaz always did."

At the mention of Ahaz, any stirring of desire Hezekiah may have felt suddenly vanished. He clearly recalled the many concubines who had hovered around his father, and the memory disgusted him. The pursuit of pleasure had occupied most of Ahaz's time while his nation had nearly collapsed in poverty and disarray. Hezekiah pulled away from her.

"Did I say something wrong?" she asked in alarm.

"Tell the chamberlain that I'm not like King Ahaz. You're dismissed until I send for you." He knew from her expression that he had hurt her feelings, but she bowed low and left his chambers without a word.

As the door closed behind her, Hezekiah's worries suddenly returned, and for a moment he regretted his hasty decision. But he had work to do, a conference with his advisors to prepare for. He rang for his servants.



3

KING HEZEKIAH WAS SEATED alone in his throne room when the chamberlain ushered Isaiah inside. "I am honored to meet you, Your Majesty," the prophet said as he walked forward and bowed to him.

"We've met before, Rabbi-a long time ago, in the Valley of Hinnom.

"Yes, of course. I remember."

The throne room was gloomy with the windows shuttered against the rain, but even in the pale light of the lampstands Hezekiah could see that the prophet had aged in the years since he had last seen him. His light brown hair had turned gray at the temples, and flecks of silver sparkled in his reddish beard. Fine wrinkles creased the corners of his blue eyes, but they were still clear and penetrating. Isaiah wasn't very tall and had only a slim build, but his presence seemed to fill the room.

"Your Majesty, Micah has told me how you've decided to embrace God's laws and renew our nation's covenant with Yahweh," he said. "For that, you've earned my deepest respect. But you've also made many enemies, and you'll need to be a man of conviction and courage in the days ahead. I want you to know that my prayers are with you."

"Thank you, Rabbi. I'm very grateful for your prayers-but I'd like to ask something more of you. I'd like you to return to your rightful place among the nobility and help me govern our nation. You're one of the few men I can trust, and I need your wisdom and advice."

Hezekiah didn't get the immediate response he had expected. Instead, Isaiah stared thoughtfully at him for what seemed like several minutes. The prophet's long silence puzzled Hezekiah. Any ordinary man would have leaped at the opportunity for power and position. But he was beginning to see that Isaiah was no ordinary man.

"I need to appoint someone to replace Uriah as palace administrator,"

Hezekiah said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "My grandfather suggested that I ask you."

Again the prophet seemed lost in thought. But finally Isaiah shook his head, giving Hezekiah his answer before he spoke. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I can't accept your offer. I'm honored-more than I deserve to be-but I can't accept it."

The refusal frustrated Hezekiah. For the second time today, one of the most qualified and trustworthy men in the nation had refused a position of power that was second only to his own. He couldn't understand it.

"May I ask why not, Rabbi?"

Isaiah exhaled. "My reasons are rather difficult to explain. Earlier in my life I worked very hard to earn a position like the one you've just offered me. You might say it was my life's ambition. Even now I have to admit that I'm tempted...."

"Then why not take it?"

"Because I've accepted another commission, Your Majesty, and I'm not free to accept yours."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. There is no other job in the nation that's more important than palace administrator-except

Isaiah smiled a brief, warm smile that faded in a flash. "It's a long story...."

"I'd like to hear it. I'm curious to know what could tempt a man of your obvious intelligence to refuse the power I'm offering you." Hezekiah settled back on his throne, waiting.

Once again, Isaiah smiled briefly. "My story begins when I was a young man, a grandson of King Joash, rapidly rising in the court of my cousin King Uzziah. He was one of the greatest kings this nation had seen in years. I idolized Uzziah, and I worked hard to please him and to gain a position of power in his government. Then everything suddenly fell apart"

Isaiah paused, slowly shaking his head as he stared into space. "When God's

judgment fell on Uzziah, I was stunned. It was so unfair. I considered the punishment much too harsh for a man of his greatness and accomplishments, and I was angry with God for cursing him, for making him an outcast, a leper. God refused to show mercy, and when the king finally died, he left a void in my life that his son Jotham could never fill. Uzziah was a great man, an outstanding king, and his shameful death shook my life to its foundations.

"Then, the same year that he died, I experienced an even greater shaking. I was worshiping at the Temple when the mountain of God suddenly began to quake beneath me. The earthquake was so violent that I was hurled to the ground."

Isaiah closed his eyes for a long moment. When he spoke again his voice was reverent, as if he was reciting words that were very sacred to him. "I saw the Lord-the Holy One of Israel. And in God's presence, all the earthly power and glory of King Uzziah blew away like ... like dust and ashes. All my life I'd worshiped a mortal king. Now I saw the Eternal One, the King of Kings.

"He was seated on a lofty throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the entire Temple. Hovering about Him were mighty seraphim, each with six wings. With two of their wings they covered their faces, with two others they covered their feet, and with two they flew. In a mighty, echoing chorus they sang, `Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty! The whole earth is filled with His glory!'"

Isaiah pronounced each word with such reverence and wonder that the room seemed to resonate with the majesty of Yahweh's holiness. Hezekiah held his breath, waiting for Isaiah to continue.

"At the sound of the seraphim's voices, the doorposts and the thresholds of the Temple shook to their foundations, and the entire sanctuary filled with smoke. I saw the Lord," Isaiah repeated in awe, "and in the light of His presence I saw myself for the first time. I saw my sin and my unrighteousness, and I cried out, `Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!'"

Isaiah lowered his head in shame as if seeing himself once again in the light of God's holiness. Hezekiah waited, transfixed, until the prophet finally looked

up at him.

"God's judgment on King Uzziah wasn't harsh," Isaiah said. "If anything, it was merciful. Uzziah had dared to approach the holy God in His dwelling place, even though no mortal man, not even a king, is worthy to stand before the Lord Almighty. And now that I stood before God, I knew that I was condemned to die, too. But then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with the coal, saying, `See-this coal has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sins are all forgiven.'"

Isaiah paused again, as if overwhelmed by the memory. "I certainly didn't deserve such forgiveness. I deserved God's judgment just like Uzziah-not mercy and pardon for my sins. Above all else, God is holy and just. But I saw that for those who repent, He bestows grace and mercy beyond measure. Then I heard the Lord say, `Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, `Here am I. Send me!'

"At that moment, God gave me back my life, King Hezekiahjust as He gave back yours in the Valley of Hinnom. And so I said, `Send me' Then Yahweh said, `Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving." Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.'"

Hezekiah already knew some of the abuse Isaiah had suffered in his work for God, including physical threats and exile by King Ahaz. Yet Isaiah was willing to continue his thankless job, even if it meant turning down political power. Hezekiah knew that men like Isaiah were exceedingly rare.

"When will your work for Yahweh be finished?" he asked.

Isaiah gave another fleeting smile and shook his head. "I asked, `For how long, 0 Lord?' and He answered, `Until the cities he ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.'"

The prophet's words alarmed Hezekiah. He wanted to know if this part of the

vision would be fulfilled within his lifetime, during his reign, but he was afraid to ask. Perhaps it was better not to know.

"Yet a remnant will survive," Isaiah added, as if reading his thoughts. "And though the nation will be invaded again and again, it will be like a tree cut down. Israel will be like a stump that still lives to grow again"

The promise of a surviving remnant should have comforted Hezekiah, but it didn't. "Rabbi, I think I understand why you can't serve in an official capacity," he finally said, "but may I still come to you for advice?"

Isaiah spread his hands. "My own advice will be of little use to you, I'm afraid. But I promise to reveal the Word of the Lord to you, just as I spoke it to the kings who ruled before you. Whether or not you heed that Word will be your decision, as it was theirs"

Hezekiah sat alone for a long time after Isaiah left, trying to decide who to appoint as palace administrator. Isaiah's refusal had disappointed him nearly as much as Zechariah's had. Both men possessed a deep relationship with God, and Hezekiah found it curious that neither of them wanted any part in his government.

The job of palace administrator was an important one. Hezekiah knew that he needed someone intelligent and uncorrupted, someone who would support his reforms, someone he could trust as a friend, and, most importantly, someone who was faithful to Yahweh. He knew a man who fit every requirement but the last one: Shebna, his tutor. Shebna would make an excellent choice except for the fact that he refused to believe in the existence of God.

Hezekiah continued to ponder a mental list of all the officials and nobles in his court, weighing each of their qualifications carefully. But he always returned to the same frustrating conclusion-none of them was as intelligent or trustworthy as Shebna. Unable to make a choice, Hezekiah finally decided to send for Shebna and seek his advice in making this difficult decision. All his life Hezekiah had relied on Shebna to help him examine all aspects of a problem and make a choice. The lanky Egyptian had been Hezekiah's closest friend for as long as he could remember, and he felt a sense of relief as soon as Shebna strode into the throne room. He knew he could come straight to the point.

"Shebna, I've asked the two most qualified men I know-Zechariah and Isaiah-to serve as palace administrator. They've both refused."

"Both of them? That is astounding!"

"Yes, and their reasons were even more astounding." He considered sharing Isaiah's vision with Shebna, then rejected the idea, knowing that he would never understand it. "So where do I go from here? Who's left? My brother Gedaliah?"

"I do not think that would be wise"

"What about the precedent my father set?"

"Gedaliah lacks the experience for such an important job."

Hezekiah sighed in frustration. He was tired of sitting, and he rose from his throne to pace the room, his hands clasped behind his back. "Let's be honest, Shebna. I'm inexperienced, too, thanks to my father"

"But you have always worked diligently, my lord. And hard work will quickly compensate for inexperience. On the other hand, Prince Gedaliah ... May I be frank, Your Majesty?"

"Of course. That's why I asked you to come."

"Prince Gedaliah seldom works hard unless it involves personal gain. I doubt that he cares about the good of the nation."

"I know. That's what bothers me the most about my brother. He seems to have inherited our father's love of pleasure."

Shebna said nothing, but his grim expression confirmed his agreement. Hezekiah continued to pace for a moment, then stopped near the shuttered window. He could hear the slashing rain beating against the wood.

"So, who's left?" he finally asked. "The truth is, I want to appoint you as my palace administrator, but .. " He sighed again.

"I understand, Your Majesty."

"Shebna, I need someone who's not connected to Ahaz's administration, someone who can't be bribed. I don't know much about my other advisors, but I know I can trust you. The others might tell me one thing and believe another, but I know exactly what you believe-"

"And what I do not believe," Shebna finished for him.

"I'll admit your lack of faith is a big problem for me. I need your sharp mind, your reasoning skills, your loyalty. You're not an idol worshiper, but .. " Hezekiah felt as though he'd run into a wall and couldn't find the doorway. He turned to his friend. Shebna nodded in understanding.

"Your Majesty, more than anything else I want to continue to serve with you in your new government. But I can never say that I believe in Yahweh. I would be lying if I did."

"And I'm determined to build my kingdom on Yahweh's laws. I don't know how we can reconcile that."

Both men were silent for a moment as thunder rumbled in the distance. Finally Shebna said, "Your Majesty, consider this: I have read your code of laws, your Torah, and found them to be good laws. I would have no problem conforming to them, and I would even submit to your rite of circumcision. But you must understand that my religion is only external. I have no faith in any god"

"I'm sure there are men in my court who will look me in the eye and tell me they're believers when, in reality, they have no more faith than you do. You could have done the same thing just to obtain power. At least you're honest." Hezekiah thought for a moment about what Shebna had suggested. "You would really agree to follow all the laws, Shebna-including circumcision?"

"Yes. But you had better think it through carefully, Your Majesty. You are certain to meet with opposition to my appointment. My religious views are not a secret, nor would I he about them if anyone asked. I would not wish to cause a controversy for you so early in your

Hezekiah knew that he needed Shebna. There was no one else he could trust.

The thought that Shebna's appointment would spark a controversy didn't deter him. He made up his mind. "I'm the King of Judah, Shebna. I don't need to justify my decisions to anyone. I want you to serve as my palace administrator."



4

THE EERIE SILENCE THAT suddenly filled the grove of trees terrified Jerusha more than the sound of screaming had. She lay on the ground, numb with shock and pain, listening. The agonized cries had all stopped. The other girls were dead. And now Jerusha's captor would kill her, too. He rolled off of her and stood. She watched in horror as he removed a short dagger from his belt.

"No-please! Please don't kill me." Her voice was barely audible.

She stared up at his dark face and saw him clearly for the first time. He was lean and muscular with wavy black hair and a short, squared-off beard. His deep-set eyes looked cold and cruel. She held up her hands as if to fend off his knife thrust.

"Please don't!" she begged.

His eyes narrowed as if considering her plea. Jerusha braced herself for the first painful stab of his knife, but he reached down and grabbed her hand instead, jerking her to her feet. Jerusha could barely stand, much less walk, but he shoved her down the path ahead of him, pressing the point of his knife to the base of her spine to keep her moving.

As she stumbled through the trees, Jerusha discovered the fate of the other captives. Their bodies lay scattered all over the grove. When she saw her cousin Serah, recognizable only by the embroidered wedding dress, Jerusha fell to her knees and vomited. Her Assyrian captor laughed. It sounded out of place amid the horror all around her. Then he suddenly grabbed Jerusha's hair and thrust her head back, pressing the blade of his knife to her throat. Fear pulsed through her. She was going to die.

But a moment later he released her. He said something in his language, and his thick brows arched as if asking her a question. Jerusha understood. He was offering her a choice: submit to him or die. She had only a moment to decide. She bowed before him, clinging to his feet.

"Please, I'll do anything.... I don't want to die." He laughed and pulled her upright by her hair, then shoved her down the path again.

They found the other soldiers waiting for them beside the horses. Jerusha's captor began barking orders, and she noticed that the men moved quickly to obey him. He was older than the others-probably in his mid-thirties-and clearly in charge of the group. One of the men tied Jerusha's hands and tossed her like baggage across the back of a horse. Then they all mounted and rode off with her.

For almost a week the soldiers made their way northeast at an exhausting pace, stopping occasionally to raid an unsuspecting town as they had raided Dabbasheth, burning and killing and destroying. There was no reason for it that Jerusha could see except to instill terror throughout the countryside. Between the villages, they left a trail of blackened fields, slaughtered livestock, and devastated vineyards and olive groves. Jerusha wondered if the Assyrians had destroyed her father's little farm before attacking Dabbasheth. She prayed that they hadn't, knowing how very much Abba loved his land. Beloved Abba. Jerusha wept when she thought of him and his desperate efforts to save her. She tried to remember his smile, his voice, but every time she pictured him she saw the Assyrian's sword slashing toward him and Abba's face, covered with blood.

Please, God, she prayed. Please let him be all right.

She remembered Mama and her sister, Maacah, cowering beneath the cart, and she wondered if the soldiers discovered them. Had they taken Maacah captive, too?

Please, God ...

Jerusha thought about her family constantly in the days that followed and vowed that somehow, someday, she would find a way to escape and return home. She would live through this somehow and one day be reunited with her family. Her love for them gave her the will to survive the seemingly endless days of terror and cruelty. But the farther away from home they traveled and the more unfamiliar the terrain became, the more she felt her hope trickling away like water from a cracked jar.

Jerusha had learned that her captor's name was Iddina. He had shouted it at

her, pointing to himself and making her repeat it. Iddina terrified her. There was no mistaking the cruelty in his dark eyes or his hunger for violence, his thirst for bloodshed. The sight of him, the smell of him gagged her as he forced her into his tent, night after night. But she remembered the mutilated bodies left behind in the little grove of trees and knew that her only hope of survival was unquestioning submission.

Six days after the raid in Dabbasheth, the Assyrian raiders finally reached their destination many miles to the north. Jerusha smelled the Assyrian camp before she saw it, sprawled like a vast black wasteland around a besieged city. Thick smoke and the scent of death hovered everywhere; the air carried the scent of blood and decay. All the trees-which Jerusha imagined had been centuries-old olive groves, vineyards, and fruit trees-had been cut down, and the farmland had been trampled beneath a blanket of black tents. The entire world of the Assyrians seemed dark and oppressive to Jerusha, and she saw more soldiers and chariots and horses than she imagined existed. Her chances of escaping from such a dreadful place seemed hopeless.

It was early evening when they arrived in the camp, and Iddina led her to the officers' section, where the larger, three-roomed tents offered more luxuries than the enlisted men's quarters. Iddina stopped beneath one of the few remaining trees where three more Assyrians, dressed in officers' tunics like his, sat on mats beneath the tree, eating their evening meal. The other officers seemed pleased to see Iddina and greeted him with hearty shouts. He pushed Jerusha in front of them, a hunter proudly displaying his trophy, and the men quickly lost interest in their food as they gaped at her in undisguised lust.

"No ... oh no, please ..." Jerusha whimpered as she edged away from them.

Without warning, Iddina slapped her across the face and shoved her toward the other men. Then he shouted something, and a woman who had been kneeling by the hearth jumped up and hurried over to them. She was the first woman Jerusha had seen in days, but she seemed more animal than human, with the cowering, skittish movements of a beaten dog. Her every gesture reeked of fear.

"I am Marah," she said in a toneless voice. "They want me to translate for you."

Jerusha was amazed to hear her speaking perfect Hebrew "Yyou're from Israel?" she stammered. Marah nodded. In spite of the deadness in Marah's eyes and the lifeless pallor of her skin, Jerusha could see that she had once been a beautiful woman. She seemed to be gazing straight through Jerusha as she translated Iddina's angry tirade.

"Iddina says that the Assyrians always share their spoils of war. He says he will not be selfish and keep you for himself. You belong to all of them now"

Jerusha instinctively drew back. "No ... no!"

As swiftly as a pouncing cat, Iddina grabbed her from behind and held his dagger to her throat. Jerusha knew what he was saying even before Marah translated it. "Iddina says you must choose. Do you still wish to live?"

Fear paralyzed Jerusha.

"Choose," Marah repeated.

Jerusha began to sob. There was no choice. Both alternatives horrified her; either choice would destroy her. Her tears produced laughter, not pity, among the men. They seemed more like animals than human beings.

"Die, you little fool!" Marah whispered harshly. "Die while you still have the chance to die quickly!"

Jerusha could no longer see the waiting men through her tears, but she felt the tension and strength in Iddina's arms as he gripped her, the blade of his knife pressed against her throat.

"0 God, please help me," Jerusha sobbed. "I don't want to die."

Marah mumbled something and Jerusha felt Iddina's arms relax. He seemed pleased with her decision. He laughed as he sheathed his knife and shoved her toward the waiting men.



5

KING HEZEKIAH STUDIED THE faces of the men bowing before him, pledging their support, and wondered how he could tell the honest ones from the impostors. They assembled in an audience before his throne, waiting for him to begin.

Outside the palace windows, cold, slashing rain continued to pelt the city, turning Jerusalem's creamy beige stones a deep golden color. The spring rains were as precious to his nation's economy as gold, and they had been plentiful this year. Hezekiah hoped they marked the beginning of God's blessings.

The windows of the throne room had been shuttered tightly against the rain and wind, and they admitted little light. Hezekiah had ordered all the torches and bronze lampstands to be lit, but the throne room remained gloomy, the atmosphere tense as the assembled men waited for him to speak.

"Our nation has stumbled around in darkness, without God's light to lead us, for much too long," he began. "But this is about to change. I'm going to rebuild this government from the ground up, and I intend to rule this nation according to the laws of Moses. That means changing the way things were done in the past. From now on you will consult the Levites and the teachers of the Law in every judgment and decision you make and in every action you take. We must remain faithful to the laws of the Torah. Positions of authority in my govern ment will be reserved for men who live by those laws and who haven't compromised with idolatry."

A gust of wind whistled outside, and the driving rain beat against the wooden shutters as Hezekiah paused. When no one questioned the fact that Shebna-an unbeliever-sat at his right-hand side, Hezekiah knew that he faced an audience of seasoned politicians skilled at hiding their thoughts and emotions. The throne room was cold, but a trickle of sweat ran down Hezekiah's neck.

"I'm going to oversee the administration of all levels of government at first, in order to eliminate the bribery and corruption of my father's reign. I'll also hold open court to hear all petitions, so that the injustice toward the poor that's

currently taking place at the lower court levels will come to an end. Micah of Moresheth has recently made me aware of how angry God is with such injustices," he said, gesturing to the prophet, "and I trust that he'll continue to hold us all accountable."

"Yes, of course, Your Majesty," Micah replied. He wore his left arm in a sling, and his many bruises had discolored to a deep, purplish black. With his tanned face and simple clothing, he looked out of place among the wealthy nobles.

"I have ordered the priests and Levites to reconsecrate the Temple," Hezekiah said, "so that the regular daily sacrifices can be offered once again. But first the Temple will need repairs as well as cleansing from everything that wasn't commanded by Yahweh. I've asked Eliakim, son of Hilkiah, to join our council." He motioned for him to come forward, then paused for a moment while he bowed low. "Eliakim, you've been recommended to me as a capable engineer as well as a faithful follower of Yahweh. I'm putting you in charge of the structural repairs to the Temple. You'll also serve as a member of my advisory council from now on"

Hezekiah detected a murmur of surprise, or perhaps discontent, as a newcomer lacking royal credentials was given such an important commission. Eliakim's speechless expression covered a wide range of emotions including astonishment and awe, but he quickly recovered and bowed again.

"I ... I am honored, Your Majesty. It will be a great privilege."

"As for the repairs," Hezekiah continued, "I've recovered a small sum of gold that Uriah stole from the tribute to Assyria. Since this treasure originally came from the Temple, I'm using it to finance the repairs. When the Temple is ready, I plan to offer a sacrifice for the sin of our nation and to renew our covenant with God. I'll be contributing animals from the royal flocks, but members of my court and city officials are welcome to participate, as well as everyone in Judah who wants to ask forgiveness for his sins."

He gazed at the faces assembled before him, trying to discern their thoughts. He believed there was discontent, mistrust, perhaps even conspiracy among them, but he saw no outward signs of it. He wanted to shock them into speaking

their minds, coax them out of hiding and see where the battle lines were drawn. Zechariah had helped him choose an explosive topic beforehand, and he decided to raise it now, hoping to elicit a response and discover where the divisions lay.

"I have one final question that we need to discuss. The Law of Moses requires the people to give a tenth portion to the priests and Levites so they can devote themselves to the Temple and its sacrifices. But the people are already heavily taxed to pay the Assyrian tribute demands. It seems that the Law of God and the demands of Assyria are in direct conflict. If our nation is to have any future, we need to consider what to do about that. I'd like to be free from Assyria's control and put our trust in God, but first I must consider what would happen if we stopped sending the tribute payments."

"You would be committing suicide!" one of Ahaz's former advisors shouted. He was an experienced statesman who had served under King Jotham as well as Ahaz. "The Assyrians would begin marching their massive army toward Jerusalem as soon as they heard of our rebellion."

"That's right," another advisor added. "You would be needlessly endangering the entire nation."

"But our nation is called to be a servant of Yahweh, not a servant of Assyria," Azariah said. Hezekiah had asked the new High Priest to deliberately draw out the opposition, but a third advisor turned on him sharply.

"Listen-all the nations around us pay tribute, as well. Do you think they're all fools? There's a very good reason why our taxes go to Assyria and not the Temple."

"He's right, Your Majesty," General Jonadab added. "I can prepare a detailed report on the Assyrians if you'd like me to. I think you will find it horrifying to read. They are a brutal, merciless, bloodthirsty people."

"And we can't afford to pay more taxes to the Temple," Ahaz's former treasurer added. "The Assyrian demands alone are staggering."

"But it was our nation's sin that caused our bondage to Assyria in the first place," the prophet Micah said. He had risen to his feet, his passion for his

subject unmistakable. "Once we make Yahweh the head of our nation again, we can throw off the Assyrian yoke."

"Now, wait just a minute!" Shebna said. He perched on the edge of his seat as he confronted Micah. "If you want to launch a religious revival and make everyone throw away their idols to worship Yahweh, that is immaterial to me. But it would be disastrous to allow your religious zeal to spill over into your political decisions."

Micah didn't back down. "Once we renew our covenant with God and purify the land of idolatry, we can't serve any other master but Yahweh. To give Yahweh's portion to Assyria would be a grave sin.

"You know nothing of world politics," Shebna said. "If we stop sending the tribute to Assyria, we will be destroyed. We cannot confuse religious idealism with political reality."

"You're wrong." Micah's voice was quiet but firm. "There's no difference between the two. King Hezekiah isn't the true ruler of Judah-Yahweh is. Our forefathers demanded a king like the other nations, but God is our true king. Therefore, there's no difference between our religion and our politics. They're one and the same."

Hezekiah was alarmed to see that Shebna disagreed so sharply with Yahweh's prophet. He wondered if his appointment had been a serious mistake. He watched the assembled men carefully as more and more of them joined the debate and noted that most of them sided with Shebna. The rift between the religious and secular factions was obviously very deep. But as Hezekiah listened to both sides of the argument, he wasn't sure which side he agreed with. Shebna had taught him to make practical, informed decisions based on reason; Zechariah urged him to trust in God's power alone. These two sides of Hezekiah seemed as irreconcilable as the two fighting parties.

A flash of lightning suddenly flickered outside the shuttered window, and Hezekiah heard the answering grumble of thunder a moment later. For his nation's sake, he would try to appease both political factions-and both sides of himself-for as long as he possibly could. With his economy in chaos, his nobility sharply divided, and his nation in a state of turmoil, the next few months of his

reign would be challenging enough.

Prince Gedaliah seethed with rage as he sat through the king's council meeting. Hezekiah had finally appointed a palace administrator-and it wasn't him. In fact, Hezekiah hadn't appointed Gedaliah to any position, not even the job of overseeing the repairs at the Temple. Some commoner named Eliakim had been given that job, and Gedaliah was furious about it. He longed to get even with Hezekiah for not granting him any political favors, and as he listened to the bitter opposition between his father's advisors and the new religious faction, he began to see how he might get revenge-and more. Why settle for Shebna's position as second-in-command if he could be king instead?

Hezekiah's new policies had angered many powerful, important men among the nobility. Gedaliah would be their obvious choice once they decided they'd had enough of Hezekiah's religion. But first he needed to let them know that he agreed with them. He had noted all of the advisors who spoke against canceling the Assyrian tribute, and when he saw that Shebna was among them, he knew exactly how he could win the Egyptian's support. Gedaliah waited for him outside the throne room, then fell into step beside him as he strode through the palace courtyard.

"I want you to know that I was on your side in there, Shebna."

"I do not know what `side' you are referring to," he said coldly. He walked on, but Gedaliah kept up with him.

"Come on-we've known each other a long time, Shebna"

"Yes, since you were a child."

"And ever since Hezekiah and I were children, you've made it plain that you don't go along with all this religious stuff."

"King Hezekiah is well aware of what I believe. What is your point?"

"Well, our king just announced in the meeting that all the key government positions will go to men who follow God's laws. Doesn't it strike you as strange

that the very top position went to you-an unbeliever?"

"Not at all. I have assured the king of my willingness to live by the laws of the Torah even though I do not profess belief in Yahweh or any god." Shebna was definitely on his guard. Gedaliah decided to take a friendlier approach.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. I'm on your side. So are a lot of others I can name. I don't know what my brother is trying to prove with these religious reforms, but frankly, I think he's becoming a fanatic. Now, if I were the king I wouldn't do things his way. I'd let the priests handle the religious matters, and you and I would handle the government. In other words, Shebna, your thinking is more in line with mine than my brother's. You know what I'm saying?" He had dropped the bait. He waited to see the response. Shebna stopped walking.

"Yes, I know exactly what you are saying. And I think you have greatly underestimated my loyalty to your brother. Good day." He turned to leave.

"I'm not finished, Shebna."

"I am. I have nothing more to say to you."

"Well, I have something to say to you, and I think you'd better listen. I'm quite sure that Hezekiah doesn't know everything there is to know about you."

Shebna faced him again, and his dark eyes bored into Gedaliah's. "I have nothing to hide."

"Well, I wonder if Hezekiah ever heard the true story of how our mother died-or why."

Shebna turned his back so suddenly that Gedaliah didn't have a chance to see if his expression betrayed guilt or fear. "We cannot discuss this out here," Shebna said as he strode toward his room. Gedaliah hurried to catch up with him, then waited while Shebna dismissed all his servants.

"Now, what do you really want?" Shebna said after he had closed the door. Gedaliah looked around at the rooms that had belonged to Uriah and felt his anger returning. This suite should be his.

"What do I want?" Gedaliah repeated. "Let's talk about my mother first. I was only a baby when she died, so I don't remember her at A. But I'm sure that Hezekiah remembers her quite well. And I think you do, too, Shebna. Am I right?" Shebna didn't reply, but he looked uneasy. "In fact, if Hezekiah were to learn the true story of her death and your involvement in it-not to mention the part you played in our grandfather's long imprisonment-I think he might have good cause to hold you responsible. What do you think?"

"All I did was tell King Ahaz that your grandfather was teaching Hezekiah. I was new to the palace; I had no way of knowing that the king would react the way he did."

Gedaliah saw Shebna's fear and savored the power he held over him. "Oh, I believe you, Shebna. But the question is-will Hezekiah?"

"I did nothing wrong."

"No ... more precisely, you did nothing at all-not even when my father gave the order for my mother to be executed, right in front of you. It was all your fault and you did absolutely nothing."

"Ahaz was the king! How could I stop him?"

"It was your fault that he found out what my mother and grandfather were doing in the first place, wasn't it?"

"Yes. But how could I have possibly known what Ahaz would do?"

"Kings are mysterious creatures, Shebna. They have a way of doing whatever they please with people who double-cross them. So I guess it's hard to know how Hezekiah will react, too-if he were to find out, that is."

Shebna looked pale. "What exactly do you want from me? A job in the government?"

"Yes, for starters. I need your help, Shebna, and you're going to need mine. You can't fight these religious fanatics all by yourself. They jumped all over you in the meeting today. And my grandfather and Isaiah both have a lot more influence over Hezekiah than you do"

"No. They have both refused a government position."

"Don't kid yourself. Maybe they don't hold an official title, but their influence over Hezekiah is enormous-especially my grandfather's. I don't know why my brother has allied himself with a bunch of religious zealots, but it's going to lead to disaster unless we work together to counterbalance them. You heard all their crazy talk about rebelling against Assyria. They're dangerous."

Shebna folded his arms. "What do you suggest?" he said irritably.

"If like-minded men such as ourselves band together to oppose these fanatics, my brother would be forced to listen to reason. We have to work together. You need me in your government, Shebna. And in return, I'll make sure Hezekiah never learns about your past sins-how you betrayed our mother, then stood by and watched our father order her execution!" Gedaliah's voice grew steadily louder until he was shouting.

"You have made your point, and I will see that you get your government position. But understand two things," Shebna said, thrusting his fingers in Gedaliah's face. "First, you will discharge all your duties with integrity. I will not tolerate any corruption. And second, although you and I may challenge some of the advice King Hezekiah receives from the religious extremists, we will never challenge his sovereignty. Understand?"

"I understand. And I guess I'll have to live with your ultimatums-for now But if these radicals gain any more power, you can bet they'll demand your removal from office because of your unbelief."

"We shall see"

"Yes. We shall see."

Eliakim hurried down the hill to his house after the meeting, his robes flapping in the wind. He was so eager to share the news with his father that he didn't care if sprinting through the streets in the rain was an undignified thing for a king's counselor to do. As he passed through the outer gate of his home, he barely had time to kiss his fingers and touch the mezuzah that hung on the

doorpost before his father threw open the door.

"Well? What happened, son? Why did the king send for you?"

"Abba, you'll never believe it! I can hardly believe it myself!" Eliakim leaned against the doorframe, puffing to catch his breath. Hilkiah gripped his arm.

"So tell me, already! What did the king want with my son?"

"He wants me to work for him!"

"Work for him?"

"Yes!"

Hilkiah clutched his heart with both hands. "Excuse me. I must sit down" He stumbled into the house and sank.down on the bench near the door. Eliakim followed, grinning broadly.

"Now, please," Hilkiah said. "Start at the beginning, Eliakim."

"Remember the night we helped Micah-the night he prophesied to the king? Well, King Hezekiah listened to him, Abba. Really listened and-"

"Yes, yes, I know this part. I took them to see Zechariah at the Temple, remember?"

"No ... all I remember was sitting in prison with my throat slit open" Eliakim frowned as he fingered the bandage on his neck. Hilkiah waved in annoyance.

"I know, I know. Forget your throat, already."

"It's pretty hard to forget an experience like that, Abba!"

"So the king invited you to his palace today to discuss your throat, Eliakim? Talk sense to me!"

"Abba, King Hezekiah is completely different from his father. He's going to purge all the idolatry from the land and govern the nation according to God's Law"

"Praise God!"

"I know I could hardly believe it myself. Your friend Zechariah and all the other Levites will be advising him. He's going to start by purifying the Temple and reopening it for the daily sacrifices. Then, when it's ready, the whole nation will hold a sacrifice and reaffirm our covenant with God."

Hilkiah cried out for joy and leaped up to embrace Ehakim. "Praise God! What a glorious day! It's too much. It's too much to even believe."

"You'd better sit down, Abba. I'm just coming to the best part"

"What could be better than reopening Yahweh's Temple? And the sacrifices? After all these years, all our prayers? What could be better than that?"

"The king hired me to oversee the structural repairs at the Temple"

Hilkiah stood blinking, his eyes wide. "Oh, Eliakim. God's holy Temple? You?"

"Yes, Abba, me. I'm in charge of the reconstruction. Not only that, King Hezekiah asked me to serve as a member of his advisory council-among the nobility. He said he's appointing only those men who've remained true to Yahweh and who never took part in idolatry. Apparently your old friend Zechariah recommended me, and of course Micah endorsed me, too."

"And you didn't want to help Micah. You told me to mind my own business the day of the riot"

Eliakim rolled his eyes. "Let's not go into that again. I've already admitted that I was wrong and you were right."

"'Kings take pleasure in honest lips,' Eliakim. `They value a man who speaks the truth.'"

"I know, I know .. "

"Oh, son, I'm so proud of you" He grabbed Eliakim again and kissed both his

cheeks.

"Abba, you'd better sit down. I want to tell you something else."

"There's more?"

"When the king asked me to serve on his council, I recalled an incident that happened a long time ago. Remember when I was a boy and you sent me to Isaiah's house late at night with a message from Zechariah?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, something happened that night. I think you would say Isaiah prophesied over me."

Hilkiah stared in stunned silence, waiting.

"I don't recall the exact words, Abba, but he said that one day I would be God's servant-that God would summon me to be `a father' to the house of David. He said I'd have absolute authority, second only to the king's-like the palace administrator, I guess."

"And you never told me all this?"

"Well, it seemed pretty farfetched at the time, Abba. I was only a boy. In fact, it still seems highly unlikely. King Hezekiah appointed his former tutor, Shebna, to the position of palace administrator."

"Who is this Shebna? That's a foreign name?"

"Yes, he's Egyptian. That was the only appointment the king made today that didn't make any sense to me. Shebna isn't a Jew, and from what I've heard, he doesn't believe in any gods at all. Personally, I don't trust the man. There's something about him-"

"If King Hezekiah follows the Torah, and if you're right about Isaiah's prophecy, then maybe you'll replace Shebna someday. Remember, 'Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails'"

Eliakim grinned. "Well, I'm content just to work on Solomon's Temple. It's amazing!"

Hilkiah gave another cry of joy and clapped his hands. "Call all the servants. We're going to have a feast. We'll sacrifice a thank offering and praise God for the great honor that He's given this household. We'll invite Uncle Moshe and-"

"Oh no, please, not Uncle Moshe."

Hilkiah stopped midsentence, frowning. "Why not Uncle Moshe?"

"Because he'll bring Aunt Hannah, and she'll have a long list of all the lovely brides she's picked out for me"

"So? Is that so terrible? Aren't you ever going to get married and give me some grandchildren?"

"Not to one of Aunt Hannah's brides, I'm not. Every one she chooses is as fat as she is."

"So maybe some of them are a little chubby. So what? What's wrong with chubby?"

"What's wrong with beautiful, Abba? Beautiful would be much nicer."

"Listen. You wait and see. The matchmakers will be beating our door down now that you're on the king's advisory council. Every rich papa in Jerusalem will want you to marry his daughter"

"You really think so?"

"I know so. You're not such a bad catch, you know. Good looking ... intelligent ..." He tousled Eliakim's damp hair. "Maybe a bit too skinny, though, and too pale. Yes, you could use a good wife, eh?"

"Just let me choose her, Abba, not Aunt Hannah."

"But we have to invite her to our feast. It wouldn't be right to leave her out"

"All right, you can invite her," Eliakim said, laughing. He opened the door. "I'll see you later. I just came home to tell you the good news.

"Where are you running off to now?"

"I have work to do-repairing the Temple. Remember?"

"Now? You're starting now, in the rain?"

"Why not?" He grinned. "That way I can see if the roof leaks."

"Oh, praise God, Eliakim! That I should live to see this day! Your dear mother, may she rest in peace, would be dancing for joy."



6

"I DON'T WANT TO ARGUE with you, Hezekiah, but I think you're making a serious mistake." Zechariah's face displayed his concern-and disappointment. "Why would you appoint Shebna to such an important position?"

think I can make it work." "Because there's no one else I trust as much as him. I honestly

I don't see how"

Hezekiah rose from his seat at the table beside his grandfather, searching for the right words. The room that had been his former study felt hot and stuffy, and he crossed to the windows and unlatched the shutters, flooding the room with damp, icy air. The rain had finally stopped, and the setting sun edged the remaining clouds with gold. But Hezekiah was too upset to gaze at the sunset.

"Shebna's duties will be mostly administrative," he told his grandfather. "I'm relying on you and the other Levites to make sure that every decision is in accordance with the Law"

"Will you be going to Shebna for advice?"

"Well, yes. Sometimes."

"How can Shebna make wise decisions without the Lord's guidance?"

"Because he's a brilliant man"

"They're the most dangerous kind. Man's wisdom is foolishness in God's eyes"

Hezekiah sighed in frustration and rubbed his eyes. "Well, I had no choice. If there had been anyone else who was qualified, I never would have chosen Shebna. I didn't want to appoint someone who was connected with Ahaz because-"

"But Shebna is connected with Ahaz. Your father hired him."

"As a tutor, yes. But Shebna wasn't part of my father's government. I wanted to completely separate my reign from my father's."

"You're wise to make that distinction."

"But that doesn't leave very many men to choose from, don't you see? And the truth is, a lot of my advisors are no more religious or godly than Shebna is. They're just better liars. At least I know where Shebna stands. He won't pretend that his advice is godly wisdom."

Zechariah stared at him gravely for a moment. His face looked drawn and tired. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then sighed and shook his head. "Let's not argue about it anymore. We have work to do." He began to unroll the scroll he had brought with him, scanning the tiny letters as if searching for something. Hezekiah closed the shutters again and sat down beside him, very aware that he hadn't convinced Zechariah or won his approval of Shebna's appointment.

"Ah, here it is," Zechariah said. "This portion of the Torah was written for you. It contains Yahweh's instructions to the kings of Israel. Of course, the king must follow all the laws of the Torah, but these words apply specifically to you, not the people."

"I had no idea any rules or guidelines existed," Hezekiah said.

"Read it aloud." Zechariah pointed to the starting place.

"'When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses-'"

"God chose the house of David," Zechariah interrupted. "He promised that David's throne would endure forever. And God chose you. That's why He saved you from Molech. Never forget that." He gestured for Hezekiah to continue.

"'He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite.'" Hezekiah looked up from the text. "Or

worse still, an Egyptian?" he asked his grandfather. Zechariah didn't reply. "Look-Shebna is the least of my problems," Hezekiah said. "The emperor of Assyria is the real king of Judah. The wealth of our land is going straight into his own treasuries"

"Yes, I agree. The Torah clearly says, `Do not place a foreigner over you,' yet that is exactly what Ahaz did when he first sent the tribute to Assyria. But then, Ahaz made no pretense of following the Torah"

Hezekiah stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I purposely raised this question of serving Assyria in the council meeting today because I wanted to see where everyone stood. But I'm beginning to see that it's only a matter of time before it really will become a major issue. I don't want to remain a vassal nation, but I don't see how we can free ourselves from Assyria."

"If you renew Judah's covenant with God," Zechariah said, "then God's part of that covenant requires Him to deliver us from all our enemies"

"Then you favor rebellion?" Hezekiah asked.

"I favor obedience to the Word of God, which says, `Do not place a foreigner over you.'"

Hezekiah exhaled. "I think I'm a long way from your level of faith. Assyria is the most powerful empire on earth. Maybe if we joined a military alliance with some of our neighboring nations we could rebel, but-"

"No:' Zechariah said firmly. "There are no alliances in God's plan, especially not with Egypt. Read the next part."

"'The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." " ' "

"Alliances with other nations lead to bondage," Zechariah explained. "Joseph started out as Pharaoh's trusted advisor in Egypt, but later generations ended up as slaves. And wasn't it Ahaz's so-called alliance with Assyria that led to our present slavery?"

"Yes, but aren't alliances with other nations necessary? Times have changed since this law was written"

"No. Yahweh's Word will still be valid one thousand years from now You don't need to trust in the fickleness of other nations. Put your trust in God"

Hezekiah knew that his faith wasn't very strong. Yahweh had saved him from Molech, but would that knowledge be enough if the powerful Assyrian armies marched against his tiny nation? "I'll be honest," he said. "This is too new for me. I've been taught to rely on the facts and on my own judgment and-"

"Then rely on your judgment and forget all this." Zechariah scooped up the scroll with a sweep of his hand. "But don't try to do both. It won't work. Either your faith in God is absolute, or it's worthless. There's no way to compromise."

Their eyes met and held. Then a slight smile flickered across Hezekiah's face. "I have a lot to learn, don't I? Come on-teach me" He unrolled the scroll again and found his place. "'He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray.'" Hezekiah looked up in surprise. "But kings always have harems full of wives."

"That's because kings don't always follow the laws of the Torah."

"What do wives have to do with anything?"

"King Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, and they led him to compromise his faith in God."

"Wait a minute," Hezekiah said. "I thought kings were supposed to have large harems to make sure they produce an heir to the throne."

"God promised that there would always be an heir of David reigning on his throne. Does God need the help of a hundred women to fulfill that promise?"

Hezekiah smiled. "No, I guess He needs only one."

"Marriage is a sacred covenant, much like Israel's covenant with God. Our affections must stay pure toward one wife, just as Israel's affections toward God must remain pure, not lusting after other gods. Do you have many concubines?"

"A few, and I'm not sure I want to get rid of-"

"How many wives?"

"Only one-her name is Hephzibah."

"Good. Do you love her?"

Hezekiah leaned back in his seat. "No. I hardly know her. My father arranged the marriage as a political payback. I've always thought of her as a present from Ahaz, so I guess I never showed much interest in her. I want to choose my own wife now that I'm king."

"Does Hephzibah love Yahweh, or does she practice idolatry?"

Hezekiah frowned. "I don't know what she believes. Why?"

"If you decide to be faithful to one wife, as the Torah commands, then Hephzibah would be the mother of your heir."

"I really don't know anything about her," he admitted. But the thought that he might be stuck with the wife that Ahaz chose for him made him uneasy.

Hezekiah thought back to the day he married Hephzibah, and how young she had seemed. He remembered how she had trembled when he held her in his arms. He smiled to himself when he remembered her daring scheme to get a glimpse of him, fearing that he might resemble his father. Maybe he should give her another chance.

"I guess it isn't her fault that she was a gift from Ahaz," he murmured.

"It wasn't until after my beloved wife died that I realized she was my most cherished treasure. Hold your wife close to you, son. Confide in her. Listen to her. Sometimes women see things more clearly than we do. If you win her loyalty and her love, you'll be the happiest man alive. God gives us wives for more than offspring and physical pleasure. Ancient tradition says that Yahweh dwells amid married couples."

Zechariah picked up a clay tablet and a writing tool. "You see, here's the word

for man-and the word for woman. All the letters are the same except for these two. And if you put those two letters together, they form the name of God. If you share a love for each other and for God, His presence will dwell in your midst."

Hezekiah still wasn't sure he wanted to dismiss all of his concubines, even if what Zechariah said was true. He turned back to Zechariah's scroll and continued to read. "'He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.' Well, this won't be hard to obey," he said. "The royal treasuries are empty. I can only hope that this nation will prosper again someday."

"It will, son, if you obey God. I promise you."

"'When he takes the throne of his kingdom,'" Hezekiah read, "'he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law ... it is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God.... Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in

Zechariah stopped him again. "Yahweh knows that a king's three biggest temptations are power, pride, and pleasure," he said. "When we begin reading the history of your forefathers, you'll see how often one of these three contributed to their downfall. Yahweh requires you to write the words of His Law yourself so that you can study them. The king must have no doubt about what God demands of him."

"Will you come every day and teach it to me as I copy it?"

"Yes, I'll get you started. And there is a promise in this passage of Scripture- 'Then he and his descendants will reign a long time'"

"My father and his father both died relatively young."

"That's no coincidence, son. It was Yahweh's blessing that Ahaz died before he completely destroyed this country"

"Sometimes I wonder if it isn't too late already," Hezekiah said. "Rabbi Isaiah doesn't seem to think that the men of Judah will repent and turn back to God. And it all depends on the people, doesn't it? I mean, I can do only so much as king, and if the people don't respond, if they continue in their idolatry-" He stopped, remembering Isaiah's vision of ruined cities and a desolate land.

"God has set before them life and death," Zechariah said. "We can only pray that they choose life."

Hezekiah noticed that the room had gradually grown darker in the last few minutes as the sun dropped below the western ridge of mountains. He could barely see to read the scroll. "Shall I call a servant to light the lamps?" he asked.

"No, it's time for prayers." Zechariah rolled up the scroll, then stood and covered his head with his prayer shawl. Hezekiah did the same. But before Zechariah closed his eyes to recite, he gave Hezekiah a somber, penetrating look. "When it comes to obeying the Law, you can't pick and choose. If you decide to obey His Word, you must obey all of it."

Hezekiah nodded and closed his eyes. But as soon as Zechariah began to recite, Hezekiah knew by the psalm that his grandfather had chosen that they were back where they had started: Zechariah still disagreed with the decision to appoint Shebna.

"'Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.'"

That evening, drawn by curiosity, Hezekiah decided to visit Hephzibah. The realization that he knew nothing about her-and that he had ignored her since the week of their wedding-disconcerted him. He wondered how she would react to his sudden appearance after so much time. But when he saw Hephzibah again, he was the one who was astounded. She was a strikingly beautiful woman.

Hephzibah was dressed in white linen and adorned like a queen with golden earrings and bracelets. The fragrance of fine perfume and bath oil filled the room. Hephzibah's long dark hair hung loose down her back in thick curls, and it looked so luxurious that he had an overwhelming urge to bury his hands in its softness.

Hephzibah gazed at him in astonishment when she first saw him standing in her doorway. He saw surprise in her eyes and many unspoken questions, but she

quickly recovered and bowed low.

"Welcome, Your Majesty. Come in. Shall my servants bring you some refreshments?" Her voice shook, and she kept her head lowered as if awed by his presence.

"No, that's not necessary. You may dismiss them." Before Hephzibah could say a word, the servants all disappeared. "You look lovely," he told her. "Your dress ... your perfume ..." He couldn't take his eyes off her. Was this incredible stranger really his wife?

"Thank you," she murmured. "Everything is for you."

"But ... but how did you know that I was coming tonight?"

"I didn't."

"You mean you go through this every night? Just in case?"

"Yes, my lord."

For a moment Hezekiah glimpsed the absurdity of her situation, the hours of preparation and waiting just to cater to his whims. He suddenly felt awkward with her, as if it was their first time together. The discovery that such a beautiful woman had been waiting in vain for him every night stunned him.

She was small and delicate, the top of her head barely reaching his chin, and her skin was a golden, tawny color that matched the high lights in her hair. Her deep brown eyes were flecked with gold and fringed with thick dark lashes that brushed against her cheeks as she stood before him. She seemed so young to him, with a vulnerability that made him want to shelter and protect her. She was his wife, yet the only thing he knew about her was her name. He took her hand and led her to a cushioned couch, then sat facing her. Her hand felt icy, and he cupped it between his own.

"How old are you, Hephzibah?" he asked, trying to shake the disturbing awkwardness he felt.

"Nearly twenty, Your Majesty."

He reached out to hold her other hand. It was icy, as well. "Is it too cold in here? You're shaking. Shall I have the servants light a fire?"

"No, Your Majesty. Thank you ... I'm fine."

He should have warned her that he was coming. She seemed nervous, and he wondered if that was what made it so difficult for him to relax with her. He raised her chin to make her look at him, and when their eyes met he was startled to read in them the depth of her love, a love he knew he didn't return. And he also realized that she wasn't shaking from cold, but from fear.

"Hephzibah, why are you afraid? Is it because I'm the king now?"

"Yes ... a little." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"And why else? You can tell me."

Her eyes filled with tears.

Hezekiah guessed that he was probably to blame but he couldn't imagine what he had done to make her cry. Nor did he know how to make her stop. "Have I made you unhappy somehow?"

"No, my lord! I'm the one who hasn't pleased you!"

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you never come to see me like all the others."

"Is that what you think?" Hezekiah was horrified to learn that she had interpreted his lack of interest as her own fault. "It's not that way at all, Hephzibah."

She looked down at her hands, still in his, and her tears continued to fall. "And I've failed to give you an heir."

Hezekiah sighed in frustration and let her hands drop. He felt angry with himself and guilty for allowing his hatred for Ahaz to hurt this beautiful woman. He wanted to make things right with her, but he didn't know where to begin. He

stroked his beard, trying to think, and remembered Zechariah's words: "Yahweh dwells amid married couples."

He placed his hands on Hephzibah's shoulders. "Listen-I know we haven't gotten our marriage off to a very good start, but it hasn't been your fault. You've never done anything to displease me. Maybe we should start over again. Do you think we could give each other another chance?"

"Oh yes! I want that with all my heart!" She gazed up at him with a mixture of hope and joy, and once again her deep love for him shone clearly in her eyes. He pulled her into his arms and felt her tears, warm and wet on his chest, as she clung to him with surprising strength.

"I want our marriage to be happy," he said. "I want to know all about you. After all, you'll be the mother of my heir."

She lifted her head and stared up at him. "But suppose one of your concubines has a son first?"

Again, he thought of Zechariah's words: "When it comes to obeying the Law, you can't pick and choose." The Torah instructed him to be faithful to one wife, and if he had to decide between Hephzibah and one of his concubines, there was no contest. None of the others could match her elegance and grace-or her astonishing beauty.

He took a deep breath. "It won't happen. From now on I'll have only one wife, as the Torah commands."

She stared at him in disbelief. "What?"

"It's true. You'll be my only wife."

Hephzibah gave a cry of joy and threw herself into his arms, clinging to him as if she would never let go. He had surprised himself, as well. He certainly hadn't made this decision ahead of time. And as he held Hephzibah close and stroked her soft, fragrant hair, he was equally surprised to discover that he no longer cared about the rest of his harem. How could he have forgotten how beautiful Hephzibah was?

"I know that in time we'll have a son," he said, "maybe by this time next year. But there's really no hurry. I plan to live a long time, so I won't be needing an heir right away."

She looked up at him, smiling through her tears, and Hezekiah was overcome again by her loveliness. "I will give you an heir-I promise! If I bring regular offerings to Asherah, she-"

"Oh no:' Hezekiah groaned. Hephzibah worshiped idols. He released her from his arms.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Hezekiah saw the look of horror on her face as she realized she had lost him again, and in spite of the revulsion he felt toward her idolatry, Hezekiah couldn't bear to hurt her. He studied her delicate face for a moment, the perfect slope of her nose, the slant of her eyes, the flush of her smooth, tawny skin.

"Do you believe in Yahweh, Hephzibah?" he asked.

"Yes; my family taught me to offer sacrifices to him."

"Other gods, too?"

"Which ones?"

"The lord Baal ... the goddess Asherah ..."

"And Molech?" He felt his stomach turn.

"No, my lord. Not Molech."

Hezekiah sighed. Once again he remembered that Hephzibah had been a gift from Ahaz, and her idolatry didn't surprise him. He knew he was free to divorce a wife who worshiped idols and to choose his own wife, but he was amazed to realize that he didn't want to. Maybe it was because he recognized her deep love for him. Or maybe because she was so very beautiful. Hezekiah didn't fully understand why, but he knew he wanted to give Hephzibah another chance. He felt irresistibly drawn to her, like the proverbial moth to the flame.

"There is only one God," he said gently. "Yahweh. He is the only God we will ever worship in this nation and in this household as long as I am king. The others are only wood and stone. If you want to remain married to me, you must give up Baal and Asherah and worship only Him." He wondered if he was asking for too much too soon.

"I will do anything for you," she said, and again he saw the love in her eyes. He believed her.

Hezekiah wondered what would happen if he opened his heart to her in love. He hadn't really loved any of his concubines. "Confide in her. Listen to her. Win her loyalty and her love, and you'll be the happiest man alive," Zechariah had assured him. But how would he begin to build a life with her? Hezekiah didn't even know her. He gazed around the room, searching for a place to start, and spotted a small lyre.

"Is that little harp yours, Hephzibah? Can you play it?"

"Yes" Her smile was both shy and radiant.

"Would you play a song for me? I love music, but I don't play an instrument myself. My grandfather is a Levite singer, and of course my ancestor David was a musician, but I didn't inherit any of their talent."

"Shall I sing for you, too?"

"Yes, I'd like that." He watched as she picked up the lyre and began strumming it softly. He could tell by the way her delicate fingers caressed the strings that she was an accomplished player. But when she began to sing, her voice was the most beautiful sound Hezekiah had ever heard. It flowed so sweetly and effortlessly that she made singing seem easy. He sat entranced, feeling the tension and strain of his day melt away. He was sorry when the song ended.

He sat in silence for several moments, enjoying her beauty, basking in it. Then he said, "Please ... sing another one."

She smiled. "All right. I'll play one that was written by another ancestor of yours." She strummed a few bars of a haunting melody, then began to sing.

"'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth-for your love is more delightful than wine.... Take me away with you-let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers.... Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me.'"

When she finished, Hezekiah gently took the lyre from her hands and gathered her into his arms.



7

KING HEZEKIAH LEANED BACK on his throne as another long day of listening to petitions drew to a close. "Are we finished for today, Joah?" he asked the court scribe.

"Almost, Your Majesty. A delegation of priests and Levites from the Temple requests an audience with you."

"Good. Send them in." He turned to Shebna, seated by his right hand. "I've asked them to report their progress in purifying the Temple. Let's hope it's good news for a change."

Shebna made a face. "More likely it is another internal power struggle for us to solve. We seem to have plenty of those"

"Yes, well, now we know why King Solomon prayed for wisdom"

The delegation consisted of Hezekiah's grandfather, the new high priest, Azariah, and Shimei, the chief Levite. As soon as they entered the throne room, Hezekiah knew by the expressions on their faces that they brought good news. Azariah, who had served as high priest before Uriah, seemed alarmingly old and frail, and he had difficulty rising to his feet after bowing low before the king. But when he spoke it was with the vigor and enthusiasm of a much younger man, willing to tackle an overwhelming job.

"Your Majesty, we've finished cleansing the Temple," he said simply.

It took Hezekiah a moment to realize the importance of his words. "You mean everything is finished?" he asked in astonishment.

"Yes, everything. We've restored and sanctified the altar of burnt offerings and all its equipment, and set up the Table of Shewbread. What's more, we've recovered all the utensils discarded by King Ahaz when he closed the Temple, and they're beside the altar of the Lord, ready to be used again."

Hezekiah couldn't hide his surprise. "You mean everything's finished already? The Temple is purified?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I can't believe it. I thought it would take months to restore. How did you accomplish everything so quickly? It's only been-how long? A little more than two weeks?"

"Sixteen days, Your Majesty," Shimei said. "But some of us have waited a lifetime for this opportunity."

"It's not fancy," Zechariah added, "and there's still a lot of repair work to be done, but it's purified according to the Law. Why don't you come with us and see for yourself?"

Hezekiah couldn't resist the invitation. He hadn't been to the Temple since the night Uriah died. "Lead the way," he said. Shebna remained behind as Hezekiah followed the three men.

The afternoon was dismal, and a light rain fell as Hezekiah climbed the steps

of the royal walkway to the Temple Mount. Rows of rolling gray clouds hung heavily over the valleys, and Jerusalem looked sodden and deserted.

"We're as surprised as you are it was finished so quickly," Azariah told him as they ascended, "but we all worked together as one man. The priests took everything that was unclean out of the Temple and carried it into the courtyard. Then the Levites took it down to the Kidron Valley and dumped it. We reached the outer court in about a week and finished everything else this afternoon."

When they arrived at the entrance to the Temple, Hezekiah stopped to admire the spacious open courtyard and the magnificent view from the highest point in the city. Then he followed the others through the court of women and into the inner courtyard, stopping just inside the gates. The Assyrian altar was gone. Yahweh's altar was back in its original place. It loomed above them, thirty feet square and fifteen feet high. Hezekiah watched as one of the priests ascended the ramp to fuel the fire, which hissed and steamed in the falling rain.

"How did you ever move this altar back?" he asked. "It's so huge I imagined it would require hundreds of workers"

"Your new engineer, Eliakim, figured out a way for a handful of men to move it as if it weighed nothing at all," Azariah said.

"Amazing." On Hezekiah's left, a team of craftsmen was working to construct a new base for the Bronze Sea to rest upon, modeled after the original base of twelve oxen from Solomon's time. The huge basin still rested crookedly on its old, improvised foundation, and raindrops made spreading circles on the glassy surface of the water. Hezekiah walked over for a closer look, running his fingers across one of the oxen's shining flanks.

"They're magnificent," he said. "I never saw this the way it's supposed to be. Didn't you tell me that the original oxen were sent to Assyria?" he asked his grandfather.

"Yes. Such treasures to give away to a heathen king."

"Not just our treasures-our wealth, our sovereignty...." Hezekiah felt a surge of anger, but for now he was powerless to change the situation his father had

created. Perhaps the rededication of the Temple would bring the return of Yahweh's blessings.

"Have all the priests and Levites consecrated themselves?" he asked the high priest.

"More Levites than priests have returned to serve with us, but we've all performed the ritual of consecration as Yahweh commanded. We're ready."

Hezekiah looked around again at everything they had accomplished and remembered his disappointment the first time Zechariah had brought him here. It had seemed like an empty ritual, with none of the splendor and majesty that God deserved.

"How long has it been since the daily sacrifices have been offered?" he asked.

"According to the Law of Moses? I don't know ... many years," Zechariah said. "Yet Yahweh commanded that a sacrifice be made morning and evening for the sins of the people."

"Then the account of our sin must be very great by now. When can we begin sacrificing again?"

"Tomorrow morning," Azariah said, smiling.

"Are the musicians ready, too?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Shimei said. "I've organized everything according to the pattern prescribed by King David, just as you commanded. All the Levites from the tribes of Asaph, Heman, and Jedu- thun are ready. We have singers, harps, lyres, and cymbals. And we've been rehearsing."

Hezekiah rested his hand on Azariah's shoulder. "I still can't believe everything is ready so soon. You've all worked hard. Thank you.

He was about to leave when he saw Eliakim hurrying across the courtyard to bow before him. His clothes were drenched, and rain plastered his hair to his head and dripped from his beard.

"Welcome, Your Majesty. I hope you're pleased with what we've done so far?"

"Yes. I'm amazed at how much has been accomplished, Eliakim. How are the structural repairs coming?"

"Excellent, Your Majesty. I have a very dedicated crew. There's still a lot of repair work to be done, but the foundations are solid. Solomon's original structures were well built, each stone chiseled so precisely that mortar wasn't even necessary, and-" Eliakim paused to sneeze. "Excuse me, Your Majesty."

"We've tried to get him to go indoors for a while, out of the rain," Shimei said, "but he won't listen."

Eliakim dismissed Shimei's concern with a wave of his hand. "Even the great earthquake from King Uzziah's time didn't seem to damage the main structure. Most of the work will involve repairing the crumbling plasterwork, replacing rotting beams, and restoring what was damaged when the gold was stripped off by King Ahaz. But the Temple is ready to be used for the sacrifices" He finished with another sneeze.

"That's very good news, Eliakim. I appreciate your dedication. And now I'm ordering you to go home and change into dry clothes."

Eliakim blushed and fought to suppress a grin. "Yes, Your Majesty."

As Hezekiah walked back through the courtyard toward the palace, a glint of metal caught his eye. He turned aside for a closer look and saw a statue of a snake draped around a brass pole. He called Shimei over. "What is this?"

"It's the bronze serpent that Moses raised up in the wilderness. According to the story, poisonous serpents attacked the Israelites because of their sin, but when they looked to this bronze serpent, God healed them"

"I noticed it the last time I was here, but I assumed it was more of my father's idolatry. Was this part of Solomon's original Temple?"

"Well, no. Not exactly."

"Get rid of it, then. It doesn't belong here."

Shimei stared at him in surprise. "But many people pray to it, and some even claim healing`-"

"Then the people are misusing it. They've made it into an idol. It's unclean, and I want it out of here. God is the One who heals, not this thing."

"But, Your Majesty, the people consider it sacred and-"

"I don't care. I'll smash it to pieces myself if you don't want to, but it doesn't belong in this Temple. It isn't sacred. It's a hunk of brass. Our worship must remain pure."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Tell the priests that I want the sin offering tomorrow to be seven times the usual sacrifice for sin. Offer it for the entire congregation, and for the sanctuary because it was so defiled. And for all of Judahno, make that for all of Israel and Judah. Even though we're two nations, we're still one people."

"Everything will be done just as you command, Your Majesty."

"Good. Until tomorrow, then."

The overcast sky was beginning to lighten in the east when King Hezekiah descended the broad palace steps to greet the nobles and city elders waiting for him in the courtyard. The crowd streaming up to the Temple seemed large-larger than he had dared hope, especially with wave after wave of gray storm clouds rolling down from the distant mountaintops into the valleys below. The spring rains had been plentiful this year, and Hezekiah wondered again if God had already begun to bless his nation.

From a distance he heard the bellowing of the sacrificial animals and smelled their scent. Blood had to be shed, atonement made, and suddenly Hezekiah felt very conscious of his sins, as if they were visibly "written on him for all to see. He knew his guilt was very great, and he wondered if he would feel any different

afterward.

Azariah stood beside the altar of burnt offering, dressed in the miter and ephod of the high priest. The air above the altar wavered from the heat, and Hezekiah could feel its warmth as he approached. One of the young bulls strained against the rope as it instinctively shied away from the fire; Hezekiah identified with the animal in its attempts to escape, remembering his own desperate struggle against the soldiers who had carried him to Molech. Hezekiah placed his hand on the bull's head, feeling the rough stubble of its fur, and he remembered Uriah's hand resting on his brother Amariah's head, marking him as the firstborn. The bull would take Hezekiah's place, would die for his sins. His brother had also died in his place.

The high priest did his job swiftly and skillfully; the bull went limp, its blood filling the ceremonial bowl. Then there was a flurry of activity around him as the priests slaughtered the animals that the chief elders had presented. Carcasses piled up around the altar as the priests poured out basin after basin of blood at its base. Knives glinted and flashed, the priests' arms turned bloody, their garments stained, but they worked tirelessly, slaughtering the seven rams, then the seven lambs. The Levites helped with the sacrifices, removing the fat for the priests, who carried it up the sloping ramp to the altar. When everything was ready, the high priest began to chant the liturgy, and the men who still remembered the words joined in. "'Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.'" Everyone fell prostrate in worship as the priests and Levites sang: "'I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.'"'

As the congregation rose to their feet, the high priest laid the offering on the altar and stepped back. Then the joyful cry rang out as a pillar of fire ascended into the air. "'You forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found ... you are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of

The words seemed like a promise to Hezekiah, and he wondered if he would ever have enough faith to trust God for deliverance from Assyria. He looked at his grandfather and knew that Zechariah had waited and prayed many years for this day.

With the sin offering completed, Hezekiah gave the command for the burnt offering to begin, and the Levite musicians assembled on the steps of the sanctuary with their instruments. The sound of voices and instruments in the echoing courtyard, along with the stirring melody, touched a chord in Hezekiah as ancient as his ancestry and brought back tender memories of Zechariah singing to him, comforting him when he was a child. As the music rose in the morning air, the sacrifices seemed transformed. The splattered blood and slaughtered animals faded into the background as the priests accomplished their tasks in rhythm to the music. It was no longer a scene of carnage, but an act of worship.

"'Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyfiil songs...." The aroma of roasting meat filled the air, and Hezekiah found it was a sweet smell, one he would smell every morning and evening from now on as the wind carried it down the hill to the palace.

When the music ended, Hezekiah faced the people. "Now that you have rededicated yourselves to Yahweh, you may bring your peace offerings and thank offerings." The overwhelming response amazed him as hundreds of men brought their offerings forward. Zechariah and the other Levites had to take over for the exhausted priests as the people brought animals to them in a steady stream. As the morning wore on, a misty rain began to fall, washing gently over the worshipers, and it seemed to Hezekiah that it cleansed the entire city. The Levites continued to praise and sing in spite of the rain until the last offering was finally placed on the fire.

Hezekiah bowed his head as the high priest delivered the benediction: "'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."'

"Amen," Hezekiah murmured. He felt a sense of relief knowing that peace had been restored between him and God. He had a new beginning after so many wasted years. Now he could begin to lead his nation on God's path.



8

JERUSHA LIFTED THE TENT FLAP and dragged the heavy water jug over to the hearth, lacking the strength to carry it. Her limbs ached, and she felt horribly ill as she battled waves of nausea. She knew that she would receive no compassion or relief even if she was sick, so she struggled with her work in silence, willing her seething stomach to be still.

Black flies swarmed around the food, and she swatted uselessly at them. They hovered everywhere, clinging to the dishes and cooking pots. Everything about Jerusha's new home seemed oppressive and evil, as if all the color had drained out of the world, leaving only darkness. Dull black tents stretched endlessly in every direction. The Assyrians' curly hair and pitiless eyes were black. The ever-circling vultures darkened the sky, blotting out the sun.

Birds no longer sang during the day-or else they were drowned out by the cries of human pain and torture and the distant sounds of battle. At night the hyenas and jackals boldly roamed about in the darkness, fighting and feasting on the bodies of the fallen. Jerusha couldn't escape the smell of rotting flesh, but to the Assyrians the scent was a sweet-smelling perfume. Death was their sport, their way of life, their god. Her life had become an unceasing grind of slavery, preparing meals during the day, being used and abused by Iddina and his fellow officers at night.

Jerusha had lost track of time as the days and weeks merged together endlessly. Had she been captured a month, six months? She no longer knew, nor could she recall joy or laughter or love. When she tried to remember her home and her family, she found that the memories had faded, merging with the suffering all around her. She could remember her family only as she had seen them last: Abba covered with blood, Mama and Maacah cowering in fear. She recalled how the grape arbors and olive groves of her homeland looked after they'd been looted and burned. Death and destruction were all she knew.

"You'd better hurry up!" Marah's angry voice brought Jerusha back to the present.

"I can't work any faster," she moaned. "I feel awful."

Marah continued to grind grain in silence, offering no sympathy. From the beginning, Jerusha had shared the three-room tent and all the cooking duties with Marah, but if Jerusha had hoped for any love or friendship, she was soon disappointed. Marah had retreated long ago to a secret world inside her own mind in order to escape from the Assyrians and her living death sentence. She had nothing to give Jerusha beyond the basic instructions of their daily work.

Jerusha had guessed Marah to be in her late thirties and was startled to learn that she was twenty. She seemed like an aging, bitter woman, her beauty used up, her youth and innocence long dead. Through the scattered, fragmented sentences Marah offered from time to time, Jerusha learned that she had been captured more than a year earlier during an Assyrian raid like the one on Dabbasheth. Her husband and tiny son had been brutally slaughtered in front of her. Now Marah often retreated to a world inside herself, sitting alone in her tent in a huddled ball, rocking endlessly, staring at nothing. Once withdrawn that way, she was deaf, blind, unreachable.

"What's wrong with you today?" Marah asked. "Why are you so slow?"

"It's my stomach. I feel like I'm going to be sick."

The smell of burning dung suddenly reached Jerusha's nostrils, and she could no longer control her nausea. She dropped the dough she was kneading and fled behind the tent to vomit.

When Jerusha stumbled back to her work again, Marah was star ing at her with her hands on her hips. "You're pregnant, aren't you." It wasn't a question, but an accusation.

"No .. I can't be...

"Why not?"

"Because-" Jerusha started to say that only women who were married and had homes and husbands got pregnant, but the words died on her lips. For a painfiil, bitter moment she thought of her promised betrothal to Abram and the rosy-cheeked babies she had imagined they would have together. It had been her

dream, all that she had asked for in life. Then the vision died with the realization of where she was and what she had become.

"You are pregnant," Marah said, and Jerusha knew it was true. She covered her face and wept. "I'll take care of it for you," Marah said after a moment.

"What do you mean?" Jerusha couldn't imagine why the cold, unfeeling Marah would offer to help care for her child.

"I know how to take care of it so it'll never be born."

Jerusha drew back. "No. . ."

"It's better to kill it now, before it grows too big."

"I could never do that!"

Marah gave her a disgusted look. "Suit yourself. But don't say I didn't warn you." She returned to her work.

Jerusha didn't think her life could become any more unbearable than it was. She was already living a nightmare that she could never awaken from, and now she had to face the fact that she was carrying a child. A baby conceived by rape was growing inside her, and she would have to give birth to it in this dark, evil place. She covered her face again and wept at the hopelessness of it all, her body shaking with her sobs. Why had God abandoned her to this living hell?

"You'd better stop that and get back to work," Marah warned. "If their breakfast is late, we'll both get a beating."

Jerusha finally dried her eyes and picked up the lump of dough to resume her work. She had no other choice.

"Oh, Miriam, it's so good to be home again!" Hephzibah threw her arms around her sister and hugged her warmly. "You're so grown up, Miriam. Turn around and let me look at you." Hephzibah's sister was now taller than she was, and nearly as beautiful with the same thick, curly hair and deep brown eyes.

"You've become a woman overnight," Hephzibah said.

"Well, I am sixteen now"

"Come on-let's go out in the courtyard and sit under the fig tree and talk like we used to do. Remember?"

"It seems like you've been gone for ages," Miriam said as they walked outside, arm in arm. "And now your husband is the king! I still can't believe it. My own sister is married to the King of Judah! What's it like?"

Hephzibah sighed contentedly as they sat on the bench beneath the tree. She loved this tiny, patch of trees and flowers that brought back so many warm childhood memories. She had said her wedding vows here. But her smile faded as she remembered the first months of her marriage.

"I'll tell you the truth, Miriam-at first it was very, very lonely being married. I had no friends in the harem except Merab, and I missed all of you so much."

"What about your husband? I thought being married would make up for leaving your family."

"Well, at first I never saw him. That was the worst part. He was more interested in the rest of his harem than in me, and I was very miserable. I didn't know what I'd done to displease him."

Miriam circled her arm around Hephzibah's shoulders. "Why didn't you tell us you were so urihappy? We had no idea you were lonely."

"I was too ashamed to come home," she said, closing her eyes. "I didn't want Abba to know that I had failed as a wife."

"And I've been envying you for marrying royalty."

"Well, there wasn't much to envy at first. But ever since my husband became king, everything has changed. Now we spend every evening together."

"So tell me your secret! How did you win him away from his concubines? I'll have a husband of my own someday."

"I'd like to think it was something I did, but the truth is-I didn't do anything. King Hezekiah says it's against Yahweh's Law for the king to have a lot of wives."

"What? Against the Law?"

"That's what he said," she shrugged. "From now on I'm his only wife. He sent all of his concubines away. And you know what else? He says our son will be the next king."

"But kings always have huge harems. What about David and Solomon? Their harems are legendary!"

"I know, I know I don't understand it. But it sure is wonderful to finally have my husband all to myself."

Miriam shook her head. "It doesn't make sense. I've never heard of that law before."

"That's not the only one. King Hezekiah wants me to learn all sorts of rules and rituals, like special baths and offerings and forbidden foods. He talks about Yahweh so much that sometimes I get a little jealous. But he says that if I obey all these laws, Yahweh will bless us with a son-many sons."

Miriam looked at her in disbelief. "That's really crazy. I've never heard of Yahweh granting sons. Everyone knows you pray to Asherah if you want children."

"Shh! Please, Miriam! I'm not allowed to even mention the name of another god. King Hezekiah doesn't believe in any god but Yahweh, and I have to do the same."

"He's taking a big chance, then, if he wants to have sons. You'll be barren if he offends the fertility goddess"

"Shh-I know, I know" Hephzibah found it easy to believe in one God when she was with Hezekiah at the palace, but now that she was home, reminded of the old ways, the old loyalties, she felt guilty for heartlessly abandoning Asherah.

"Is it true that the king tore down the big altar of Assur that used to be in the Temple?" Miriam asked. "And that he even destroyed the sacred serpent of Moses?"

"Yes, it's all true."

"Well, I know Abba has been very upset about all the changes your husband is making. Every time he comes home from the palace he shouts about the terrible things that are going to happen to our nation because the king has offended all the gods."

"I know-it scares me, too," Hephzibah admitted. "But my husband refuses to believe in any god but Yahweh"

"Do you still believe in them?"

Hephzibah had asked herself the same question many times. She had assured Hezekiah that she would abandon all her other gods, but sometimes she felt a lingering fear for deserting them. What if Yahweh really wasn't the only god?

"I've decided to believe what my husband believes," she finally said.

"But what about your vow, Hephzibah? You pledged a daughter to Asherah's service-remember?"

"That was before-I mean, how was I to know my husband would forbid me to worship Asherah?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, maybe once we have a son, King Hezekiah will be a little more open-minded about who I worship. But for now, I just want to please him, Miriam. I'll do anything he asks."

"You really love him, don't you?"

Hephzibah thought of the warmth of Hezekiah's arms, the passion of his kisses, and all her other concerns vanished. "Yes. More than anything else in the world."

Miriam sighed. "I hope I can learn to love whoever Papa chooses for me."

"You will. Just wait and see. Has Papa been making any inquiries for you yet?"

"I don't think so. He's waiting to see who'll be appointed to the important positions in the new court.... Do you know if there are any eligible men on the council?"

Hephzibah reached up to pluck a leaf off the fig tree. "Well, there's Shebna, the new palace administrator. He isn't married-but he's too old for you. There's a new chief engineer named Eliakim who's becoming pretty important. He isn't married, either."

"Is he handsome?"

"Yes, in a scholarly sort of way-high forehead, dark, rumpled hair and beard, slim build-"

"I want a husband as handsome as yours."

Hephzibah tossed the leaf at Miriam playfully. "That's impossible. There's no one in the whole kingdom who's that handsome."

"Do you remember when you made me sneak out to try to see what Prince Hezekiah looked like?" Miriam asked.

Hephzibah laughed. "How could I forget? If Abba had found out, he would have stoned both of us!"

"Tell the truth," Miriam said. "You were afraid the prince would be a fat, ugly toad like his father, weren't you?"

"Well, can you blame me? But when I saw him that day, he was so tall and handsome, with those dark eyes ... I wanted to be his wife more than anything in the world. I was so afraid that King Ahaz would change his mind and I'd never know what it felt like to be held in Hezekiah's arms."

"But now you do," Miriam sighed.

"Yes. The goddess has answered all of my prayers."

"And is being married to him as wonderful as you dreamed it would be?"

Hephzibah couldn't help smiling. "Even more wonderful. Someday you'll find out, little sister. I know that my husband doesn't love me yet-not as much as I love him. But IT make sure that he does someday ... no matter what it takes"

"Even if it means forsaking Asherah and following a bunch of crazy rules and rituals?"

"Yes, whatever it takes. And as soon as I give him an heir, I know he'll be truly mine-forever."



9

HEZEKIAH SLOWLY TRACED HIS index finger down the yellowed parchment, then paused. "Is this where we stopped yesterday?"

"Yes, that's the place," Zechariah said. "We were reading about Moses and the plagues of Egypt"

Hezekiah smiled at his grandfather. "I remember the first time you told me the Passover story, when I was a child."

"Yes, you especially liked the plague of frogs, remember?"

"That's because I could imagine the panic in the harem if the ladies woke up with frogs in their beds." They both laughed.

Hezekiah had chosen the classroom where he had spent so much time with Shebna to begin his study of the Torah with his grandfather. They worked together every day, with Zechariah explaining God's laws as Hezekiah copied the scroll in his own hand. The work bonded them even closer together than before.

"I also remember how you begged me to take you to the Passover feast," Zechariah said, "but of course there was no feast. In fact, there hasn't been one for a long, long time."

"Now that the Temple has been purified and the daily sacrifices are being offered again, couldn't we reinstate the feast days, too?" Hezekiah asked.

"We certainly could. In fact, the Torah says ... let's see ... where is it?" Zechariah unrolled the scroll and spent several minutes searching for something. "Here it is! This passage describes the first Passover feast, and it says, `This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to Yahweh.'"

Hezekiah stroked his beard. "Then Yahweh commands us to celebrate it?"

"Yes, and I think it would unify our people and strengthen their faith if we reminded them of this monumental landmark in our nation's history."

Hezekiah felt a growing excitement. "When is Passover traditionally celebrated?"

"It's too late. The time has just passed." Zechariah frowned. "It was supposed to be held on the fourteenth day of this month, but we were still purifying the Temple then"

"You mean, we'll have to wait an entire year to celebrate it?"

"I'm afraid so."

Hezekiah's disappointment felt close to anger. "Celebrating this feast could have accelerated all our reforms, even more than the covenant sacrifice."

"Yes, I think you're right. The people are ready for a fresh start. With Passover as a reminder of God's deliverance, maybe they would have abandoned their idolatry for good"

Hezekiah rose from his seat and stood in front of the window that looked down on Jerusalem. Sounds from the city drifted up to himchildren squealing in play, wagon wheels rumbling over the stone streets, shouted greetings and curses. He wished he could remind all these people what God had done for them in the past. "If only we didn't have to wait an entire year!"

"Wait a minute," Zechariah said. "It seems to me I recall . . ." He picked up the Torah scroll and began searching through it again. "Let me try to find it."

As Hezekiah watched his grandfather squint at the tiny, handprinted letters, he noticed how tired Zechariah looked. His face was pale with fatigue, and his movements seemed slow and painful. He had worked hard to purify the Temple, then had pitched in to help with the covenant sacrifice. The task of slaughtering more than three thousand animals had tired the younger men-and Zechariah was nearly seventy. But he had never complained, nor had his enthusiasm for Hezekiah's reforms waned.

"Here it is!" A smile of victory spread across Zechariah's face. "Here's the

answer! Some of the Israelites missed the first Passover feast because they were ceremonially unclean. They asked Moses what they should do and ... Well, here. You read it" He passed the scroll to Hezekiah, and Hezekiah sat down again to read aloud.

"'When any of you or your descendants are unclean because of a dead body or are away on a journey, they may still celebrate the Lord's Passover. They are to celebrate it on the fourteenth day of the second month at twilight.'" He looked up. "Do you think this applies to our situation?"

"Yes, I'm certain it does. Like us, these men weren't consecrated according to the Law at the time of the feast. But Yahweh gave them a second chance during the second month."

"Then let's do it! We'll proclaim the fourteenth day of the second month as the Lord's Passover this year. Do you think we can make all the necessary preparations by then?"

"With a little hard work, I think we could."

Hezekiah couldn't sit. "I'll send couriers to every town with the announcement. And I'll notify the northern tribes of Israel, too."

"Yes! The timing will be perfect! The religious calendar for the northern tribes is one month behind ours. If we celebrate a month later here, it will coincide exactly with Passover in Israel."

"Then it's settled." Hezekiah crossed to the open window again and looked down on the bustling city. "Jerusalem is the place God chose as the center of worship for all His people," he said. "The local shrines and high places must be abandoned for good. Passover will be the beginning. I'm going to reawaken in my people a knowledge of our history-and of our God."

King Hezekiah's courier rode steadily during the daylight hours, traveling out of the mountains into the rolling foothills of the Shephelah. So far he found that the response to the announcement that Passover would be celebrated had been mixed. In some towns the people greeted the news with joy; in others, with

indifference.

The day was just beginning to cool off as the courier reached Lachish, one of Judah's largest cities. He headed up the ramp to the main gate, knowing that he would find the new city governor, Prince Gedaliah, seated there with the elders of Lachish, judging regional disputes and local squabbles. He slowed his horse to a walk to avoid creating a dust cloud around them. The governor was arguing loudly with a dark-haired man in peasant clothing, and several moments passed before the men even noticed the courier. But when he finally dismounted and the emblem of David became clearly visible on his horse's banners, the discussion halted. The courier removed a document from the folds of his cloak and passed it to Gedaliah.

"This is for you, my lord, from King Hezekiah."

Gedaliah frowned. "Now what does he want?" He began reading the notice aloud in a voice that seemed to mock the king's words. "'From King Hezekiah to all the men of Judah. Return to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that He may return to you who are left. Do not be like your fathers and brothers, who were unfaithful to the Lord so that he made them an object of horror, as you see . . .' And so on. Let's get to the point.... Ah, here it is: `Come, let us celebrate the feast of Passover together on the fourteenth day of the second month in Jerusalem. For on this day Yahweh brought our people out of Egypt.... ' And so on. That's about it."

"The king is going to celebrate Passover? In Jerusalem?" the darkhaired peasant asked in astonishment.

"That's what it says" Gedaliah handed the parchment back to the courier, who rolled it up and tucked it inside his cloak. He was eager to move on to the next village. If he could reach Arad and Beersheba within the next few days, he could then head toward home once again. He walked to his horse and prepared to mount.

Suddenly the peasant raised his arms to heaven and shouted, "Yahweh be praised!" His left arm didn't go quite as high as his right, but twisted crookedly at an odd angle. "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains," he shouted. "It will be raised above

the hills, and all peoples will stream to it. Many nations will say, `Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God ofJacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. All the nations may walk in the name of their gods; we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever."

The courier stood spellbound as the man spoke. He'd heard rumors that the prophets of Yahweh were active in Judah once again, but this was the first time he'd heard one speak. He was sorry when the prophecy ended, but the elders of Lachish seemed unimpressed. Governor Gedaliah turned on the prophet angrily.

"Now, you listen to me, Micah. We have our own high places and priests here in Lachish, and there's no reason why we should have to travel all the way up to the Temple in Jerusalem."

"It's what Yahweh commanded," Micah said. "He chose Jerusalem as the place for the whole nation to celebrate the feasts."

"I don't believe that," Gedaliah said. "My brother is just using Passover as an excuse to take away our local power and autonomy. He wants to be in control."

"You're wrong! The king consults the word of God in everything he does-and so should you. Instead, you allow the people to worship at a temple to the sun god-right in the middle of your city!"

"The citizens of Lachish are free to worship whatever gods they choose," Gedaliah said. "They've made peace with the gods of the land. Why should we change our ways and trek up to Jerusalem just to celebrate some ancient ritual?"

The king's courier watched as the tension between Gedaliah and the prophet multiplied with every word they spoke. He mounted his horse.

"If you refuse to destroy your pagan temple and return to Yahweh, God's judgment will fall on this city," Micah warned. He spread his arms wide and began to prophesy again. "Quick! Use your swiftest chariots and flee, 0 people of Lachish, for you were the first of the cities of Judah to follow Israel in her sin

of idol worship. Then all the cities of the south began to follow your example. Weep, weep for your little ones for they are snatched away, and you will never see them again. They've gone as slaves to distant lands. Shave your heads in sorrow-"

Gedaliah gave the prophet a shove that stopped him mid-sentence. "Get out! Go back to your farm in Moresheth. Our city is at peace, and you're talking like a fool about exile. Go home! We don't want you in Lachish."

The courier turned his horse and rode off to the south, leaving the governor of Lachish to choke in the dust behind him.

Jerusha's father, Jerimoth, knelt in the rocky soil of his vineyard and gently wove the new green shoots through the framework of the trellis. A few months ago it had seemed to him that these damaged stumps could never live again, but the new green stems and leaves that sprang from the blackened trunks flourished in spite of their brush with death. And now the vines spoke silently to Jerimoth, telling him that he must also go on living, planting and harvesting again, in spite of the destruction around him. All his life he had witnessed spring's rebirth after the cold defeat of winter, and he clung to the hope of new life.

He slowly rose to his feet and looked at the row he had just tended, then groped over his shoulder for the flowing end of the keffiyeh he wore in a loose turban around his head, wiping the sweat from his face and neck. His tanned face was as deeply furrowed as his fields, scarred by years of plowing and planting, waiting and worrying.

Jerimoth looked up from his work, carefully studying the rutted road where it disappeared over the horizon, constantly alert for the ominous dust cloud, listening for the rumble of hooves that would signal the start of another Assyrian raid. But the road lay quiet and still, disturbed only by a gentle breeze that stirred up a funnel of dust and by the fluttering blackbirds as they scratched in the dirt for insects.

Jerimoth's square stone house stood on the highest rise of his land, shaded by two date palm trees that had been there for as long as he could remember. He

had been born in that house, beneath those trees, as his father had been before him. He watched his wife, Hodesh, descend the stairs from the flat rooftop, carrying a dried bundle of flax to the covered patio where she and their daughter worked. Little Maacah wrestled with the heavy loom, determined to master this new skill she had been forced to learn. Her arms and legs were as thin as the shuttle that she labored to pass back and forth between the threads of the loom. She should be playing with straw dolls, Jerimoth thought, combing the flax for their make-believe hair, yet now she'd been forced to grow up in order to take over Jerusha's chores.

The thought of Jerusha brought a stab of pain to Jerimoth's heart, reopening a wound that had never healed. He fingered the scar on his forehead and shuddered at the memory of her heart-rending screams. He would never be able to accept her loss or erase the agony from his heart. They had found the bodies of Saul's daughters, Serah and Tirza. Jerimoth had helped his brother dig their graves in the soft brown earth, and as painful as the task had been, it had helped Saul accept their deaths and finally understand that he would never see his girls again. But Jerusha? Not knowing her fate-and imagining the worst-tormented Jerimoth. He would never know if her life had ended violently or if she still lived somewhere, suffering unspeakable horrors. Jerimoth shuddered and wiped his face again with the end of his keffiyeh. Please don't make her suffer, he silently pleaded. Please don't hurt myjerusha-my happy little bird.

He was about to return to his labors when he spotted a small puff of dust on the southern horizon, moving up the road from the village of Dabbasheth. "Hodesh! Maacah!" he shouted. "Get into the house!"

Hodesh dropped her bundle of flax and grabbed Maacah by the hand, pulling the startled child behind her as she raced across the patio and into the house. Jerimoth had prepared an empty cistern beneath the floor, hewn from the bedrock. He would hide his wife and daughter there the next time there was another Assyrian raid. They were all he had left now, and he was determined to protect them from this enemy that was ruthlessly consuming everything he had ever loved.

He sprinted up to the house, lifted the heavy stone lid, and helped them climb in. Then he fitted the lid into place where it blended with the other flagstones on the floor of his house. Once the woven rug was laid over the hiding place,

Jerimoth went to the door and peered down the road again. He saw now that the dust cloud was too small to be a division of Assyrian soldiers, and he felt foolish when he realized that they would sweep down from the north when they came, not from the south. But he decided to keep his family hidden just the same. He busied himself in the sticky shade of his winepress as the dust cloud sped closer.

The horse's hooves pounded on the hard-packed dirt road in rhythm with Jerimoth's heart, and he shot a quick glance in that direction. The lone rider was a soldier but definitely not an Assyrian-and not from Jerimoth's nation of Israel, either. The rider slowed as he approached the row of cedars that guarded the borders of Jerimoth's land, then dismounted near his well. As Jerimoth walked cautiously toward him, the stranger greeted him in Hebrew.

"Shalom! May I refresh my horse at your well?" His face wore a mask of perspiration and dust, finely etched with lines of fatigue. His horse panted in the heat.

"You're from Judah?" Jerimoth asked when he recognized the emblem of the King of Judah emblazoned on the horse's banner.

"Yes, I've come from Jerusalem with a message from King Hezekiah. I just delivered it to the elders of Dabbasheth, and I'm on my way to the next town."

Jerimoth wondered if the armies of Judah were coming to help his nation fight the Assyrians. He decided to probe for more information. "You've come all the way to Israel? With a message?"

"Yes, and I'll be returning to Jerusalem through the tribal lands of Manasseh and Issachar. King Hezekiah's invitation will be spread from Beersheba to Dan."

Jerimoth lowered the rope into the well and hoisted a bucketful to the top. He emptied it into a stone watering trough, licked smooth by generations of animals, and allowed the lathered horse to quench its thirst before passing a drinking gourd to the stranger. The soldier drank his fill, then splashed water over his dusty face. When his thirst was relieved, the stranger looked around and gestured toward Jerimoth's charred land.

"Did the Assyrians do this?"

Jerimoth nodded.

"That's a shame. We've heard that they sometimes raid farms along the borders"

"We've suffered terribly at their hands these past months," Jerimoth said. "Sometimes I think Yahweh must have forgotten us to make us suffer so."

The soldier grew attentive. "You believe in Yahweh?"

Jerimoth hesitated. It wasn't wise to admit to a stranger which god you worshiped, but the words had already slipped out. "Yes, I believe in Him."

"Then you'll be interested in King Hezekiah's message." He pulled a scroll from the folds of his tunic and gave it to Jerimoth to read while his horse finished drinking.

People of Israel, return to the God of Abraham that he may return to you who have escaped from the Assyrians. Do not be like your fathers and brothers, who were unfaithful to the Lord, so that he made them an object of horror, as you see. Come to the sanctuary, which God has consecrated forever. Serve the Lord your God, so that his fierce anger will turn away from you. If you return to the Lord, then your children will be shown compassion by their captors and will come back to this land... .

There was more, but tears blurred Jerimoth's vision and he couldn't read it. The scroll trembled in his hand. During all the years that he had farmed his land, raising his crops and his children, he had never gone to Jerusalem to acknowledge Yahweh with offerings of thanksgiving. Jerimoth had forgotten God until his life had begun to crumble. Now, in anger and despair, he cried out to the silent heavens, wondering why Yahweh had forsaken him. He held the answer in his hands-and also hope.

"Do you think you'll go, then?" the soldier asked.

Jerimoth looked up, lost in thought. "What did you say?"

"Will you be going to Jerusalem for Passover?"

Jerimoth wiped his eyes and finished reading the scroll.

For the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him. Come, let us celebrate the Feast of Passover together on the fourteenth day of the second month in Jerusalem.

"I've never celebrated the Feast of Passover," Jerimoth told the soldier.

"None of us have. It hasn't been celebrated in Judah since before King Ahaz's reign. But King Hezekiah has been making a lot of changes. Now he's going to celebrate the feast days, beginning with Passover. Not too many people in your country seem interested, though. The elders of Dabbasheth wouldn't even give my horse any water."

Jerimoth quickly reread the amazing words, memorizing them: If you return to the Lord, then your children will be shoum compassion by their captors and will come back to this land.

"Yes," Jerimoth said as he handed back the scroll. "Yes, I'm going to Jerusalem for Passover."

"Good. Thanks for the water." The courier mounted his horse and Jerimoth watched him ride up the dusty road to the north. When the rider finally disappeared over the horizon, Jerimoth hurried up to the house and kicked the rug aside to open the cistern. Hodesh heaved a sigh of relief as she climbed out. She fussed over Maacah, brushing bits of plaster from her clothes and hair, and several minutes passed before she noticed the tears streaming down Jerimoth's face.

"What's wrong?" She scanned the vineyard and olive grove, then turned back to Jerimoth. "What happened? Who was it?"

"We're going to Jerusalem for Passover," he said.

Hodesh put her hand to his cheek, tenderly brushing the tears from his beard. "What are you talking about, Jerimoth?"

"If we return to Yahweh, He will bring our Jerusha home to us again.



I0'

VISITING HEPHZIBAH EVERY EVENING was becoming a habit that King Hezekiah thoroughly enjoyed. She lavished him with attention as he shared the events of his day with her, and she helped him unwind from the pressures of his reign. She seemed to know exactly what to say to cheer him, to encourage him, to comfort him. Hephzibah's beauty and quick wit far surpassed any of his concubines' charms, and Hezekiah shared a companionship and an intimacy with her that he had never experienced before. He was beginning to understand what Zechariah meant when he said that God gave a wife for more than physical pleasure. And Hephzibah was beautiful. Just watching her or listening to her sing was a pleasure Hezekiah looked forward to more each day. No matter how busy his day, Hephzibah had become his addiction. And so, only a few days before the first Passover celebration, he made his way to her chambers with anticipation and the now-familiar longing to hold her in his arms.

"You look so tired, my lord," she said as she led him to the couch.

"I am tired. But there's so much to do-so many preparations to make." He sank down among the pillows, but his overworked mind couldn't stop planning and calculating.

"You need to relax. You look much too serious tonight."

He was struck once again by how tiny and delicate she was, like a beautiful, fragile dish. He wished he could forget everything else and stay here with Hephzibah, but there was too much to do before the feast.

"I can't relax yet," he told her. "Not until everything is ready. In a few days this city will be bursting with pilgrims-at least I hope it will "

He wondered how far his reforms would spread, how responsive the people would be to all his changes. He rose from the couch again, unable to relax, talking as he walked restlessly around the room.

"One minute I'm wondering where we'll put everyone, and the next minute

I'm doubting if anyone will bother to show up. If their idolatry is too deeply rooted ..."

"They'll come," she soothed as she followed him around the room. "Why wouldn't they come?"

"Well, it's been so long since Passover was celebrated. Do you have any idea what it means to the people?"

Hephzibah stood on tiptoe and planted her hands on his shoulders, then gently pushed him down onto the couch again. "No. What does it mean? Will you explain it to me, my lord?" Her hands remained on his shoulders, gently kneading his tense muscles, and he could feel the strain start to ease.

"Umm. That feels good. Don't stop" She seemed to know what he needed even before he asked. He smiled in spite of himself. "Where was l?"

"You were going to tell me what Passover means."

"Unun. Passover ... It's a celebration of freedom, Hephzibahthe anniversary of our nation's deliverance from slavery. God heard our cries of suffering and freed us from serving the Egyptians so we could serve Him. The men of Judah work hard all year in order to make a living, but when Passover comes, they can lay aside their work for eight days and rest and feast and thank God"

"And how will they feast for eight days if our nation is so poor?" The charming way she cocked her head to one side when she asked a question amused him.

"Good question, my dear lady," he said, smiling. "That's why I've been so busy. I'm opening the royal storehouses and donating animals from my own flocks and herds. I want to make sure that everyone who comes, rich or poor, will have eight days to relax and feast and celebrate Yahweh's goodness."

"Since you're providing the food, it seems to me they should celebrate their king's goodness instead."

"No, I'm not the Messiah:' he said with a sigh. "I may be able to feed the people for a week, but the rest of the year we're still slaves to the Assyrians.

They demand more and more tribute every year and-"

"Shh . . ." Hephzibah stopped massaging and put her fingers over his lips. "You have all day to worry about such things. Now it's time to forget about them."

He pulled her onto the couch beside him. "You're right. Help me forget." Her warm skin was soft and fragrant as he kissed her neck. She laughed softly.

"What's so funny?" Hezekiah asked.

"Your beard is tickling me" She tugged on it playfully, and Hezekiah laughed, too.

"Ah, Hephzibah-you're so good for me. Your laughter, your love ... they're just what I need." He held her close and realized for the first time how very precious she had become to him in the past months.

"This is the best part of my day," Hephzibah murmured, "being with you. But our time together is always too short."

"And I'm afraid it will be even shorter tonight. I can only stay a few minutes."

"Oh no."

"I'm sorry. But there's too much work to do."

"Can't your servants and officials do some of it? Do you have to do everything yourself?"

"I'm still not sure who I can trust and who's waiting for a chance to stab me in the back. Remember Uriah?" he asked, poking her back gently with his forefinger. "I'm making a lot of changes in a very short time and probably a lot of enemies, too. People resist change. Besides, my father's government was so corrupt that the only way I can be sure things are done right is to do them myself."

"You're scowling again, my lord." She gently smoothed his fore head with her fingers. "You're not supposed to talk about all your problems-remember?"

"And you're supposed to help me forget my problems-remember?"

"Then I guess I'd better do my job." She took his face in her hands and kissed him--driving Passover far from Hezekiah's mind.

Jerimoth sighed and tugged on his beard as he surveyed his vineyard one last time. "I guess everything will be all right until we get back."

"It'll be fine," Hodesh said. "Come on" She looked impatient as she stood waiting beside the cart with Maacah. Jerimoth walked around the loaded wagon again, examining the wheels, the paired yoke of oxen, the harness fittings. He made certain that the new spring lamb he had chosen from his flock was tied securely to the load, then turned to the young man he had hired to watch over his land while he was away.

"You'll remember everything I told you?" he asked. "You'll remember to watch for my daughter Jerusha? She'll be coming home soon, you know"

"I'll watch for her, sir."

Jerimoth sighed again, and with a final, worried glance at his farm, he set off with his wife and daughter on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. A seed of hope had been planted in his heart, and Jerimoth had nurtured it, clinging to King Hezekiah's promise that the Assyrians would release Jerusha if he returned to Yahweh. Jerimoth and his family traveled south toward Dabbasheth, skirting the village and its painful memories, then passed through the towns of Cabul and Rimmon. Soon the road turned east, and they journeyed over the rolling hills to Migdal on the sparkling Sea of Galilee.

Jerimoth found a caravan of other pilgrims who were headed to Jerusalem, and he joined them for the remainder of the trip, following the lush plains along the banks of the Jordan River. They reached the oasis of Jericho on the fourth day, feeling tired and irritable, their throats parched from the choking dust. The swaying palms of Jericho offered welcome shade, and even the bitter blue waters of the nearby Dead Sea looked inviting. After a night's rest they began the final leg of their journey, following the rugged mountain road up to Jerusalem. They

climbed steadily upward, passing dry stream beds and deep mountain gorges, until their legs ached and it seemed as if they had climbed to the skies. Late in the afternoon, as the caravan paused to water the animals, Jerimoth scanned the horizon and caught his first glimpse of Jerusalem.

"Look, Hodesh!" he suddenly shouted. "There it is!" He could faintly discern the gold-colored walls of the Holy City as he squinted into the distance, nestled among the green-and-brown hills. He even caught the glint of the Temple's golden roof, perched on the highest hill. This glimpse of their destination seemed to give all the tired travelers the extra encouragement they needed to finish their climb, and they continued on, reaching the gates of Jerusalem an hour before sundown. As soon as the sun set, the eve of Passover would begin.

The caravan disbanded as soon as it entered the city, and each family went in search of friends or relatives to stay with. It was only after he reached Jerusalem that Jerimoth realized he had no place to stay during the festival. The crowded city seemed huge and strange to him, the walls confining, and he missed the open fields and broad skies of home. He wandered through the unfriendly streets, tired and disoriented, searching for a room in an inn until it was almost dark. But pilgrims crammed every available space, and all the rooms were taken. He felt desperate as he saw his daughter sitting on top of the cart looking pale and frightened. His wife was close to tears.

"What are we doing here, Jerimoth?" Hodesh asked. "We don't even know anyone."

"We'll be fine, Hodesh. One of the innkeepers said to try the caravansary in the market square. It means sleeping out in the open, but it's the best we can do"

Hodesh glanced anxiously at Maacah. "Is it safe? Won't there be foreign caravan drivers there?"

"We'll go and see," he said wearily. "I don't know what else to do. Besides, we need some things from the market, don't we? Come on."

When they reached the square, Jerimoth sent Hodesh to barter for food while he searched for an empty place to park his cart for the night. But as he listened to the caravan drivers settling into their places and heard their crude jokes and

vulgar language, he realized that the caravansary was no place for his wife and daughter to sleep. He didn't know what to do. He wandered farther down the street, where the shops were more elegant and well-kept, looking for an empty doorway to shelter them. When Jerimoth heard jovial laughter drifting from a nearby booth, he was drawn toward the sound.

A round, bald-headed man and his servant were laughing merrily as they closed up a shop of elegant, imported cloth. Jerimoth stopped a few feet from the shop and stared at them. The jovial merchant turned to Jerimoth.

"And what can I do for you, sir? I'm about to close my shop for the holidays, but if I can help you with anything ..."

Jerimoth wasn't interested in the imported cloth. He didn't know what to say. He stared at the merchant for a moment, wringing his callused hands. "I'm from Israel," he finally said. "I've come to celebrate Passover"

"That's wonderful, wonderful! My name is Hilkiah, and if you're a follower of the Eternal One, then you're already my friend. Did you have a pleasant journey?"

"I have no place to stay," Jerimoth blurted.

"Ah, I see. Are you traveling alone?"

"No, I came with my wife and daughter." He pointed to his cart standing on the corner by the square. Maacah sat on top of the load, looking tired and forlorn.

"Ali, yes," Hilkiah said gently. "What's your name, my friend?"

"Jerimoth."

"Well, then, Jerimoth, I'm celebrating Passover with my son, and we'd be honored to have you and your family as our guests" He grinned so warmly that Jerimoth managed a tired smile. "Then you accept?" Hilkiah asked.

"Yes, thank you. I've brought a lamb with me from my flock. I'd like to share it with you"

"Then it's settled. I don't live far from here. Give me a moment to finish closing my shop, and we'll be on our way."

Jerimoth hurried back to where Hodesh and Maacah waited with the cart. "I've found a place to stay," he told them. "Come on."

"Where? At an inn?"

"We'll be guests of Hilkiah the merchant and his son"

"Who?"

"He owns a shop. Over there. See?"

"A stranger?" Hodesh asked. "You accepted an invitation from a stranger?"

"Just come, Hodesh. You'll see."

"I don't like the idea...:'

Jerimoth gestured to the caravan drivers in the square around him. "It's better than this, isn't it? It's nearly sunset. Where else can we go?"

Hodesh followed nervously as Jerimoth led the way to Hilkiah's lavish shop. They both bowed low in respect. "My wife, Hodesh, and I are so very grateful, my lord."

"Now, now. None of that," Hilkiah interrupted. "I'm pleased to meet you, Hodesh, but you must call me Hilkiah. Shall we go? I hope dinner's ready, because I'm starved." He patted his round belly and led the way up the hill to his house.

King Hezekiah sat on the palace rooftop with his grandfather after the evening sacrifice, watching the steady stream of pilgrims flowing into the city for the feast. A pang of hunger rumbled through his stomach, and he thought of his older brother, Eliab. Hezekiah hadn't eaten anything since dawn, fulfilling the traditional Fast of the Firstborn in his brother's memory.

"I had hoped that this many people would come," he told Zechariah as another caravan passed through the gate below them. "But I still can't believe it's happening."

"Yes, it's a wonderful sight, isn't it?"

Hezekiah thought he detected a note of hesitancy in his grandfather's voice. "Is something wrong?"

"Well-it's just that the people are required to consecrate themselves before celebrating the feast."

"Meaning what?"

"Among other things, all the men must be circumcised."

"And you think some of them aren't?"

"I'm sure many of them aren't," Zechariah said, "especially the younger ones who were born during your father's reign, after the Temple was closed. And if any of them have come from Israel, they're probably ignorant of the Law. It's not their fault, of course. They were never taught, but ..."

"So which is the greater sin-coming to Passover unprepared or not coming at all?"

Zechariah shrugged. "If their hearts are longing to return to Yahweh, surely He is merciful even if the Law isn't fulfilled...."

Zechariah's answer sounded more like a question, and it disturbed Hezekiah. He wanted clear answers from God, precise rules that he could follow with confidence. If Zechariah didn't know the answers, how could Hezekiah know them?

The sun sank halfway below the horizon, and still the pilgrims streamed through the city gates. How many were there? How far had they come? Hezekiah thought of the long, arduous journey many of them had made, and it worried him that Yahweh might reject them because of their ignorance of the Law.

"Isn't there anything we can do for them?" he asked. Zechariah sat in silence for a moment, then stood and lifted his prayer shawl over his head.

"We can pray for them."

Hezekiah followed his grandfather's example, and they stood together on the palace roof. Prayer was still new to Hezekiah, so he was unsure how to begin. But he thought of all the people who had journeyed this far, and the problem he had created because of his ignorance, and the words came to him.

"Lord, I pray that you'll pardon everyone who determines to follow you, even if he isn't properly sanctified for the ceremony."

Hezekiah prayed until long after the sun had set and his time of fasting had ended. By the time he and Zechariah finished, the first stars shone brightly in the heavens.

Hezekiah looked at his grandfather hopefully. "Yahweh hears?"

"Yes, He hears. It says in His Word that when we return to the Lord and obey Him with all our heart and with all our soul, He'll have compassion on us."

Hezekiah looked out over the darkened hills that surrounded his city and murmured, "Please, Lord ... have compassion on us"

Eliakim frowned as he stood beside Hilkiah, performing the ritual hand-washing before the evening meal. He didn't share his father's enthusiasm for inviting strangers into their house, and he was annoyed with Hilkiah for not consulting him first.

"Where did you say these people are from, Abba?"

"They're from Israel, son-northern Israel." He tossed Eliakim the towel as if that ended the conversation.

Eliakim grabbed his father by the sleeve and drew him back. "You don't even know them, do you, Abba?"

"Certainly I do. They're followers of Yahweh, blessed be He."

"Abba, you know what I mean. You've invited strangers into our home again."

"They're followers of Yahweh. Why should you need more information than that?"

"Because Micah was a follower of Yahweh, and I remember all the trouble it caused when you invited him into our home."

"Hasn't God paid us back for all our trouble-a double portion?"

"Yes, and I grew to admire Micah, so I suppose it was good that we helped him, but-"

"And I'm sure you'll grow fond ofJerimoth and Hodesh and their little daughter, as well." "

"Listen, you have to admit that the soldiers made a terrible mess of our house that night, not to mention nearly slitting my throat" He rubbed the long scar on his throat protectively.

throat. Okay? Let's eat" 44 Eliakim, I give you my pledge. Our guests will not slit your

"Abba, will you listen to me?"

"The Torah says that it's a great blessing to extend hospitality to strangers at Passover. Amen."

Eliakim looked at his father skeptically. "The Torah says that?"

"You don't believe me? Didn't the Eternal One heap blessings on us for helping Micah? Aren't you working for the king himself?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"Amen. And you'll see how greatly Yahweh will bless us in return this time,

too. You can never out-give God. Don't ever forget that." Hilkiah punctuated each word by poking Eliakim's chest with his forefinger. He smiled, and Eliakim knew the discussion had ended. He followed his father into the house, wondering if the Torah really said it was a blessing to help strangers or if Hilkiah had conveniently made it up.

Their guests were already seated on cushions around the low dining table, and Eliakim struggled to conceal his shock when he saw how poor they looked, how exhausted and frightened. Where had his father found them?

Hilkiah gestured expansively as he made the introductions. "My friends, I'd like you to meet my son, Eliakim. And this is Jerimoth, his wife, Hodesh, and their daughter Maacah"

"I'm happy to meet you," Eliakim said. The strangers lowered their heads in his presence as if he were royalty. He felt uneasy.

Hilkiah recited the blessing and they began to eat. Eliakim didn't want to stare at the strangers, so he stole quick glances at them between bites of food. He noticed that they were ill at ease with the elegant table settings, silken floor cushions, and rich food. Jerimoth reminded him of Micah, tanned and muscular with work-callused hands. He had thick, bushy black hair, mottled with gray, and mournful green eyes. His short, squat wife seemed built for hard work-and she looked out of place in Hilkiah's elegant home attended by servants. Their daughter was little more than a shadow, so thin that only her thick braids seemed real to Eliakim, the rest of her a mere ghost. Wherever they had come from, Eliakim decided to make peace with them.

"My father tells me you're from Israel," he said as he passed Jerimoth the bread. "Are you close to the border of Aram?"

Jerimoth nodded. "It isn't too far."

"I hear that the Assyrians control all of that territory now. Have their armies ever come as far south as your village?"

Jerimoth flinched as if he'd been struck. The bread slipped from his fingers as his hand touched the jagged scar on his forehead. Eliakim saw the pain in his

guest's eyes and wished he had never asked the question.

"Yes, we've seen their armies," Jerimoth finally replied. His voice faltered as he struggled for composure. "A few months ago they raided our village. They destroyed most of my crops and ... and they carried our daughter Jerusha away."

"I'm so sorry, my friend," Hilkiah said. He rose to go tojerimoth's side, resting his hand on his shoulder "I'm so sorry...." But Jerimoth didn't seem to hear him. He gazed straight ahead as if looking into the past, at scenes only he could see.

"The Assyrians have no hearts as we do," he said in a hollow voice. "They can't be moved to pity or touched by pleas for mercy. They flowed over our borders like a flood, and the earth was red with blood when they left. They're deaf to pain and blind to human suffering. If you beg for mercy, they will cut out your tongue. If you lift your hands to plead with them, they will cut your hands off. I've seen them rip babies from their mother's arms and toss them beneath their horses' hooves to be trampled. They will torture your loved ones in front of you, then put out your eyes, leaving you to remember the sight forever.

"The more valiantly a village resists them, the greater the punishment that town receives. The more you plead for mercy, the heavier the torture they inflict. They know a hundred ways to prolong death-slowly, horribly-and there are more Assyrian soldiers than there are grains of sand in the desert. No city walls are strong enough to keep them out, no army is mighty enough to defeat them. They'll carry away entire villages full of people, and those who are carried away are never heard from again."

The room was still when Jerimoth finished. Eliakim was afraid to speak again. Even Hilkiah seemed at a loss for words to ease Jerimoth's pain.

But at last Jerimoth sighed, then looked at Hilkiah, who still knelt by his side. "King Hezekiah promised that if I celebrate Passover Yahweh will show compassion, and my daughter will return home to

Jerimoth's unrealistic hopes alarmed Eliakim. He didn't believe in such an oversimplified faith. God wouldn't make all your wishes come true if you prayed. His own father was a man of prayer and had enormous faith in God, yet Eliakim had watched as his mother and two younger brothers died of a fever, one

after the other, while his father's useless prayers ascended into the silent heavens. He remembered kneeling beside his father, praying with all his heart that his mother would live-yet she died. Eliakim knew God couldn't answer Jerimoth's prayer. He would never see his daughter again. It would be better if he faced the truth.

"Listen, I don't think it's realistic to expect-" Eliakim began, but Hilkiah cut him off.

"We will join with you in prayer, my friend. Yahweh is merciful and compassionate. And I know that He answers prayer."

"But, Abba-"

Hilkiah silenced Eliakim with a warning look, then turned to Jerimoth. "My dear friend, tomorrow we will take your Passover lamb to the Temple, and my son and I will pray with you. Yahweh will answer you. I know He will."

Eliakim was furious with his father for making such a rash promise-worse, for involving him. God couldn't answer a prayer as impossible as this one. The Assyrians never returned their slaves from captivity. The girl was probably dead already.

Eliakim stared down at his plate, picking silently at his food while everyone else ate everyone but little Maacah. While Jerimoth had been speaking she had sat as still as a stone, her eyes wide, as if she saw the same things her father did. Eliakim realized that she had probably witnessed everything Jerimoth had described, and he was moved with pity for this haunted child. Hilkiah had been right to invite them home even though he was wrong to encourage their false hopes.

When they finished the meal, Hilkiah turned to the little girl, speaking gently to her. "Maacah, I have a very important job to do right now. Do you think you could help me?" She didn't move or respond but stared silently at her hands, folded in her lap.

"It's the children of the household who are supposed to perform this job," Hilkiah said, "but as you can see, my child is all grown up" He gestured toward

Eliakim. "I could use your help, Maacah. This is the very first part of the Passover celebration and-"

At the mention of Passover, she looked up. "I'll help you," she said softly. "For Jerusha."

Eliakim started to his feet, angry with Hilkiah for dragging this wounded child into his fantasies. She had obviously suffered enough already. "Abba, wait a minute. May I have a word with you, please?"

"Not now, Eliakim. You see, Maacah, Yahweh commanded us to clean our houses very thoroughly before Passover. We're not supposed to leave even the smallest trace of leaven. That's because our forefathers couldn't even wait for the bread to rise when they made their escape from Egypt. My servants have been cleaning our house from top to bottom for the last few weeks, but what if they accidentally missed something with leaven in it?"

He tried to look horrified, but his sparkling eyes betrayed him. He nudged Maacah to her feet. "When Eliakim was a child he always helped me search for leaven on the eve of Passover, and you know what? I think a child's eyes must be sharper than a grown-up's, because he always found something we missed."

Eliakim had fallen for this ruse for years before realizing that the leaven he'd found had been carefully planted for his benefit. But Maacah seemed convinced and eager to help. Hilkiah gave her a wooden spoon and a feather to scoop up the forbidden leaven.

"But first we must recite the blessing," Hilkiah said. He closed his eyes and lifted his hands toward heaven. "Blessed art Thou, Yahweh our God, King of the Universe, who has commanded us concerning the destruction of the leaven. Amen." He and Maacah set off to search the house, leaving Eliakim behind with her parents.

"It seems like a long time since I searched for the leaven like she's doing," he said. "My father tried to keep some of the Passover traditions even though the Temple was closed, but we couldn't celebrate the right way. I guess he has always had a lot of faith in Yahweh." He smiled, but Jerimoth made no response. "You have a lovely little girl," Eliakim said, trying again.

Jerimoth finally looked up at him, his eyes mournful. "Yes. She's all I have left," he said softly. "All I have left."



II

KING HEZEKIAH STOOD ALONE on the palace roof, gazing at the Temple of Solomon on the hill. He had just returned from the evening sacrifice, where the music and worship had moved him deeply, "My soul finds rest in God alone," the Levites had sung. "He is my fortress, I will never be shaken."

Hezekiah found it easy to believe in a living God, to believe that he played a part in His eternal plan, when immersed in an atmosphere of praise and worship. On the Temple Mount, high above the city, God's presence seemed real, and Hezekiah could easily forget the existence of poverty and starvation in his nation. The music and rituals lifted him far above the awareness of those realities. But now the praises had ended, and the crowds had returned to their homes. The daily sacrifice was left to roast slowly on the altar. And as the problems of his nation confronted Hezekiah again, the presence of the Lord seemed to have faded and died with the music.

A week ago he had stood before the cheering crowd on the final day of Passover. He had held up his hand for silence, but a long time had passed before the cheering stopped and Hezekiah could speak. "I wish that the Feast of Passover could go on forever," he had told them, and they had cheered and shouted, "Yes! Another week! Another week of Passover!" Their willing response astonished him.

Zechariah had held a hurried discussion with the other Levites, then explained the precedent. The first celebration in Solomon's newly built Temple had been such a success that King Solomon had extended the feast for a second week.

"Then let's do it," Hezekiah had said. "I'll extend this Passover feast for another week, as well."

The rejoicing was so great it seemed as if the heavens had opened and hosts of angels had joined in the praises of the people. It had been easy to believe then. But now?

Alone on the rooftop, Hezekiah felt very far away from God. Why had he started this reform movement, this revival of faith in the God of Abraham? He thought back to his coronation and all the events of that night, and he knew that part of the reason was gratitude. He owed Yahweh a debt for saving him from Molech's fire.

But the primary reason was because he had wanted to restore his nation to prosperity and security. And if he served Yahweh, Hezekiah was promised God's blessings in return. His selfish motives shamed him.

In the streets below, Hezekiah heard singing and dancing as the second week of Passover drew to a close. What motivated all these people? Why had they traveled great distances to Jerusalem? And why did they dance and sing songs of praise in the streets? Because of the food he provided? Because they hoped Yahweh would bless them, too? He thought of Micah and the vicious beating he had suffered for proclaiming Yahweh's message. What motivated him to serve God? And what inspired Zechariah to endure many years of unjust imprisonment for God and then, at his age, to serve Him with the hard work of thousands of sacrifices?

If he asked his grandfather or Micah these questions, he thought he knew what they would say-they did it because they loved Yahweh. But in his heart Hezekiah knew that he didn't feel the depth of love for God that they felt. He felt gratitude for his salvation from Molech, and he felt obligated to serve Him in return. But he didn't really know God. How could he say that he loved Him?

The song in the street ended, and in the stillness Hezekiah heard footsteps ascending the stairs to the roof. He turned to see Zechariah coming up to join him. How Hezekiah loved this frail giant of a man! They stood side by side in silence for several moments before Zecha riah asked, "What's troubling you, son?"

"Am I that easy to read?" Hezekiah sighed and turned to gaze down at the view again. "I guess I've been thinking about the first law you ever taught me 'Love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' I've been trying so hard to keep all the laws of Yahweh, all the sacrifices, all the sacred observances-yet I can't honestly say that I'm even fulfilling the first law I ever memorized. How do I learn to love Yahweh?"

"You already do love Him."

Hezekiah shook his head. His hypocrisy had fooled even his grandfather. "You think because I've restored our nation's covenant that I love Yahweh?"

"Yes. A sign that we love Him is that we keep His commandments. That's the starting place for all of us. As the psalmist has written, the Lord's love is with those who keep His covenant."

Hezekiah still couldn't face Zechariah. "I've been studying His Law, and I'm trying to obey every letter of it as perfectly as I can. Why doesn't that seem like enough?"

"When you married your wife, you made a covenant with her, but you didn't love her yet. Love will require mutual trust, opening your hearts and lives to each other. It takes work to build a true relationship. The same is true of Yahweh. You've renewed your vows at this Passover feast; now the work begins as you learn to love your God. Love for God is never instant. It has to grow and mature just like any other kind of love. The struggle is always with our will."

"But why do I feel like such a hypocrite, serving a God I barely know?"

"God revealed himself to Israel in the Law at Mount Sinai. As you learn to keep that Law, you'll learn to know Him better."

"I don't understand."

"When you brought your sin offering to the Temple and placed your hand on the animal's head, how did you feel at that moment?"

Hezekiah relived the sacrifice, feeling the cold, misty rain on his face and the warm stubble of the animal's fur beneath his hand. "I felt ... unworthy."

"Then you do know Yahweh. When we feel unworthy in His presence it's because we glimpse His holiness. You obeyed the Law, and He revealed His holiness to you" Hezekiah nodded slightly, remembering Isaiah's vision of a holy God. "And now, at Passover," Zechariah continued, "when you ate the Passover lamb in obedience, how did you feel?"

Hezekiah thought for a moment, trying to put his feelings into words. "I felt like I was part of a much greater plan-a plan that began in the past and continues in the present and will go on into the future. I felt like part of a greater purpose than I can clearly see."

"Ah! When you obeyed the Law and celebrated Passover, Yahweh revealed himself to you as the Eternal One, whose plan reaches throughout all the ages. That's why the people wanted to celebrate; Yahweh revealed himself to them, and they hungered for more. As long as you continue to seek Him, son, your love will continue to grow. And as you express your love for Him through obedience, He'll reveal more of himself to you."

"Will I ever have faith like yours?"

"That's up to you. The only way to grow in faith is to put your faith to the test. You must place yourself in His hands and let Him prove himself faithful. Unless you make up your mind to trust Him, you'll never know that Yahweh is faithful."

"You're talking about trusting God to prevail against the Assyrians, aren't you?"

Zechariah didn't answer right away. "Hezekiah, do you remember what Yahweh promised you long ago, in the Valley of Hinnom? `When you go through deep water, Yahweh will go with you. And when you ford mighty rivers, they won't overwhelm you. When you pass through the fire, you won't be burned. The flames will not hurt you. For Yahweh is your God. The Holy One of Israel is your Savior.

Hezekiah stared at his grandfather as the truth struck him. "That prophecy wasn't just for me, was it?"

"No, son. That promise is for everyone who believes in Him and trusts Him in faith."

The merriment in the street died away as the revelers went home for their evening meals. Hezekiah gazed over the parapet, watching them go. When he turned back, Zechariah was gone. Hezekiah stood in the growing twilight,

pondering the decision he knew he had been avoiding. He couldn't avoid it much longer. The time was rapidly approaching when the tribute payments to Assyria would have to be made.

His people suffered under a heavy burden, even though God had delivered them from slavery once before, at the first Passover. Worse, the Assyrian king was receiving Yahweh's tithe. For both of these reasons, Hezekiah knew it was wrong to send the tribute. But now there was a third reason. If he truly believed that God heard Israel's cries of suffering, truly believed everything that the Torah said about Him and His covenant with the nation, then why didn't he trust Yahweh to deliver him from Assyria? Was the Assyrian emperor more powerful than Yahweh? Zechariah had told him to put his faith to the test, but did Hezekiah dare to test Yahweh with the future of his nation at stake? Was it fair to risk the lives of his people? Would God really intervene in the political struggles of his nation?

Hezekiah felt as if he were balancing on the parapet and one mistake-one misstep-would send him hurtling to disaster. No matter whether he decided to send the tribute or not, the effect on his nation was certain to be great. He needed only a push, a gentle shove to help him decide which way to fall-to allow his nation to plunge deeper into poverty and debt, or to let them fall into the hands of God. Again Hezekiah heard footsteps ascending the stairs, and this time he turned to see Shebna walking toward him.

"Your Majesty, the meal is ready, and I told the servants I would summon you. I ... I wanted to talk to you"

Hezekiah was surprised to see Shebna struggling for words. It hadn't happened before, in all their years together. "What is it, Shebna?"

"Your Majesty, I owe you an apology. You know that at first I did not agree with all the religious reforms you were making."

"Yes. I know"

"I am sorry. I was wrong. Now I can see the wisdom in what you have done."

"Does that mean you believe in God?"

"No, my lord. I still cannot say I believe. But in the short time that you have been king, I have seen this shattered nation pull itself together almost miraculously. It is wonderful! I have never seen such strong bonds of nationalism, such a sense of shared history. You used the same strategy that your ancestor King David used. He strengthened his power by returning the ark to Jerusalem. And now, by celebrating Passover, you have unified the nation in support of your reign. It was a brilliant strategy, Your Majesty. No king has been this popular since David. You could do anything now, ask anything of them, and they would follow you.,,

"Is that what you think?" Hezekiah asked in horror. "That I started these religious reforms as ... as some sort of political strategy? For my own personal gain?"

Shebna didn't need to answer. Hezekiah knew that his friend wasn't far from the truth. His original motives had been self-servingto save his reign from economic and political disaster. And Yahweh, who knew all men's hearts, knew the truth, as well.

"Please, don't let it be true," Hezekiah murmured.

"Pardon, Your Majesty?"

"You're wrong, Shebna" Hezekiah said quietly. "David brought the ark to Jerusalem because he wanted the reality of the presence of God"

"I do not understand."

"No, of course not," he said to himself. "You couldn't possibly understand unless you believed." Hezekiah felt the push he needed, the gentle shove that forced him off the wall of indecision. He made up his mind. "Shebna, I know you've argued against this in the past, and that's why I want you to be the first to know"

The Egyptian looked alarmed. "To know what, Your Majesty?"

"At harvesttime, when the tribute to Assyria is due, we won't be sending it. Our nation is in God's hands now"

"Your Majesty, no! Are you certain you want to do this? You cannot possibly believe that some invisible god will be able to protect you if you rebel against the Assyrians!"

Once again Hezekiah recalled the prophet's words: "When you pass through the fire, you won't be burned . . . for Yahweh is your God."

"Yes, Shebna," he answered quietly. "I do believe it."

Shebna looked up from his evening meal as Prince Gedaliah pushed past the servant and barged into his private chambers without waiting to be invited. Gedaliah's face was flushed, and his body bristled with anger. Shebna knew immediately why he had come.

"You can't let him do it!" Gedaliah shouted. "He's rebelling against Assyria? Are you both crazy?"

Shebna laid his bread down and pushed his plate aside. "I had no choice," he said, controlling his own anger. "The king never asked for my advice. He reached the decision on his own."

"Well, why didn't you send for me right away? We could have gathered a delegation to petition him. There are plenty of men who disagree with Hezekiah. We could persuade him to listen to us"

Shebna remembered the determined look on Hezekiah's face and shook his head. "I don't think-"

"Yes! There are plenty of influential people who believe we should stay under Assyria's protection. I know the taxes are high, but we've lived in peace since my father made his alliance with them. Why jeopardize that now?"

"Stop shouting at me and sit down. I am telling you the king would not have listened-not to me, not to you, not to a whole delegation."

"Who brainwashed him, then? My grandfather?"

Shebna recalled passing Zechariah on the stairs to the palace rooftop the night Hezekiah had made his decision. "Maybe so."

"I knew it!" Gedaliah shouted. "That old man and his prophets have more power in this government than you do!"

"You're wrong. They have no power at all."

"Oh really? Take a little tour of our nation, then, if you don't believe me. Those religious fanatics are causing trouble everywhere. I've got one named Micah who's been trying to stir things up in Lachish, telling me to tear down our temple to the sun god. My father had the right idea in dealing with these fanatics-he never tolerated any of their religious garbage."

Shebna allowed Gedaliah to ramble and shout until he finally ran out of venom. "Are you finished?" he asked.

Gedaliah cursed and slumped into a chair.

"Now listen to me, Gedaliah. I know your brother very well, and believe me, he is not going to listen to reason. This is some sort of a test he is putting himself through to prove that he has faith in his god."

Gedaliah bolted to his feet again. "What? He's trying to prove a point by putting our entire nation at risk?"

Shebna moved to within inches of Gedaliah, staring hard at his unreasonable guest. "Listen to what I am trying to tell you. It is impossible to talk him out of it. You had better consider some other options."

Gedaliah sat down again, his brow furrowed, his body tense. "I'm governor of one of Judah's largest cities. Maybe we could organize a coalition of other city-states, persuade them to rebel against the king and become independent. Then we could pay the tribute to Assyria ourselves-"

"It would never work."

"Why not?"

"King Hezekiah is much too popular with the people. You could never incite the masses to rebel against him. They would tear you to pieces if you tried. I am sure you heard what happened all over the country after the Passover feast-how the men of Judah destroyed all of Ahaz's shrines and high places on their way back to their homes? It happened in nearly every city, all the way down to Arad"

"I know," Gedaliah said. "They went after my temple in Lachish, but I wouldn't let them destroy it."

"And do you really think you can fight that kind of popularity, that spirit of nationalism, all across Judah?"

"What if we convinced the military to back us up?"

Shebna gave a short laugh. "What military? If you are talking about the palace guard, General Jonadab would lie down and die for his king. He trained you and Hezekiah since you were childrenremember?"

Gedaliah cursed in frustration. "Well, if the king is going to go ahead with this suicidal rebellion, then at least we can convince him to make some alliances with other nations. We can't possibly take on Assyria alone."

"That is exactly what I am trying to do," Shebna said.

"And is my brother listening to you?"

Shebna sat down at the table again and toyed with his bread. "It is not that easy. The timing is never right. Besides, I cannot freely offer my advice unless the king asks for it."

"You're stalling, Shebna. You don't want to lose your precious job, do you?"

"It has nothing to do with that."

"Are you going to stand up for what you believe, or are you going to sell out, just to keep your fancy lifestyle?"

Shebna leaped from his seat. "I do not know why I am even listening to you. I know what you are really after-you want to be the king. Well, I have no intention

of helping you. Your brother is doing an outstanding job, considering the mess he started with. And who knows? Maybe he will succeed in this, too. Maybe he will get away with rebelling against Assyria."

"And maybe he won't!"

"Assyria has other problems within her empire. She is too busy to be concerned about our puny country. And it will certainly be in our best economic interests if we do not send the tribute."

"So I see they've brainwashed you, haven't they?" Gedaliah said bitterly. "Next thing I know you'll be spouting faith in Yahweh."

"No-but I do have faith in King Hezekiah. And our nation is certain to benefit if he succeeds in this rebellion."

"Yes, and we're certain to be annihilated if he doesn't!"



12

JERUSHA AWOKE AS THE FIRST rays of dawn soaked through the seams of the heavy tent. The tense atmosphere that hung over the camp was unbearable, and she had slept poorly. The powerful Assyrian battering rams were poised to break through the walls of the besieged city at any time. Today might be the day, and the lust for battle, the scent of spoil, intoxicated the restless soldiers. Like wild animals that know their prey is cornered, the warriors prowled around the camp waiting for the signal to pounce and kill.

As Jerusha lay on her mat, her baby thrashed and kicked restlessly inside her. She gently stroked her abdomen, trying to soothe the child back to sleep, but the activity inside her increased. Was it part of the Assyrians' nature, even before birth, to fight and struggle? Would her baby, born into this atmosphere of death and destruction, be cursed into becoming like them? She shuddered at the thought of giving birth to a son in Iddina's image.

Iddina. The name alone had the power to terrify her. Everything about him seemed more animal than human: his powerful muscular stance, his stealthy catlike movements, his fierce brutality. He could torture and kill another human being as casually as a boy pulls the wings off a fly.

Jerusha no longer dreamed of escaping. Some of the male slaves had tried it, but the soldiers quickly recaptured them. The Assyrians loved the challenge of a hunt, and they tracked runaways as a gleeful sport, wagering among themselves on the success of their pursuit. The Assyrians always recaptured their slaves. No one ever escaped. And the brutal punishment that awaited runaways was horrifying as the Assyrians prolonged their victim's agony for days and weeks. Jerusha would never attempt to escape. There were much faster ways to die.

She finally rose from her mat and began preparing the morning meal, dragging the heavy clay pots from the tent, rekindling the fire, grinding grain between the stones to make flour. She looked around for Marah and found her huddled inside the tent, mute and staring, paralyzed with fear. Jerusha would have to do the work alone.

Iddina and the other officers had risen much earlier to meet with the priests and consult the gods for omens. Jerusha could hear the distant pounding of the barns' drums and the faint drone of their incantations as she worked. Before long the drumming stopped, and when Iddina returned for his breakfast a few minutes later, Jerusha knew that the omens had promised victory. The great walled city was doomed.

Iddina's dark eyes glittered with hatred and with lust for battle. His every muscle twitched with readiness to kill. Jerusha had seen him in this state before and had watched in horror as he'd killed a slave for committing a minor mistake, snapping the man's neck with his bare hands. The sight of him now sent a shiver down Jerusha's spine. Her hands trembled uncontrollably as she served his meal. When Iddina finally left, she wept with relief.

All that long day Jerusha listened to the distant sounds of battle. As she hauled fresh water from the spring, she heard a thundering rumble as a portion of the breached wall finally toppled. As she washed the dishes and serving platters, the Assyrians' piercing war cries drifted to her on the wind along with the first sounds of torture. She tried not to think about what it would be like to be one of the victims trapped inside the city with no hope of escape.

And all day Jerusha's baby thrashed inside her as if longing to join the battle. The stench of fire and death grew so overpowering it gagged her, and she wondered if the child could smell it, too-if it would poison his soul, even in the womb. The sky turned black with vultures, like dark-robed pilgrims flocking to a great feast. Jerusha watched and listened all day, then the next day, and the next. The soldiers didn't return from their sport, and she was alone. Marah hadn't moved from her place inside the tent.

The brutality and violence Jerusha witnessed reached nightmarish proportions, with every kind of inhumanity imaginable. She envied Marah's uncomprehending trance. The conquered inhabitants, already half-starved, were being tortured, dismembered, impaled, beheaded, flayed alive. Orphaned children, lost and terrified, cried pitifully for their parents. The moans and screams and cries of the condemned rang endlessly in Jerusha's ears, day and night, as she worked and as she lay in her tent, until she begged God to strike her deaf. Where was He? Didn't He hear her cries anymore? Didn't He care?

On the third night Iddina and the other officers finally staggered home to their tents, intoxicated by the thrill of their conquest, soaked in the blood of their enemies. Iddina carried two trophies of war, the severed heads of enemy noblemen, which he hung from the branches of the tree beside his tent. He believed they contained powerful magic.

Jerusha remembered how her father would return from his vineyards on a summer day beaming with pride as he carried the first ripe grapes from his vines as a gift to his family. Her life had become a mockery of real life, a twisted nightmare she couldn't awaken from. Jerusha was weary of death-the sight of it, the smell of it, the sound of it. She didn't know why she struggled to live anymore, except that the only way to conquer her Assyrian captors was to cheat them out of her death. Life became very precious to her, her own life and the life of the child that struggled inside her.

Somehow she would defeat her captors. She would go home again. She would find a way to rejoin the world of the living.



13

PERSPIRATION DRIPPED OFF KING HEZEKIAH'S brow and splashed on the scroll that was unrolled before him. He mopped his face and poured a drink of water from the pitcher. As soon as the rains had ended, a khamsin had blown into Jerusalem from the Arabian Desert, bringing oppressive heat and clouds of fine dust that seemed to penetrate every shuttered window and doorframe. Two days ago the land had been green, the wildflowers in full bloom, but then the khamsin had begun to blow, and suddenly the air was stifling and the earth was baked brown and coated with a layer of gray dust.

Hezekiah glanced up at his grandfather. He looked unwell. For weeks Hezekiah had begged him to slow down, without success. Hezekiah leaned back in his seat and stretched, trying to mask his concern.

"Why don't we quit for today?" he said. "It's too hot to work."

Zechariah didn't even look up. "If we keep going, we can finish the fifth Book of Moses."

"Wouldn't you rather rest?" Hezekiah asked.

Zechariah gestured impatiently, and Hezekiah returned to his work, carefully copying Moses' final commands to the Israelites. He worked as fast as he dared, barely noticing what the words said, and when he finished, he quickly rolled up the scroll. Zechariah stopped him, placing his hand on top of Hezekiah's.

"Son, I want you to keep these words of Moses very close to your heart. They were Yahweh's promise to Joshua as he prepared to lead His people. And they will be God's promise to you, too: `Be strong and courageous.... Yahweh himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.'

"There have been times in my life when I have been very discouraged," Zechariah said, "and even a time when I turned away from Yahweh altogether. But one truth I know-He never abandoned me. You have a huge task ahead of

you as you lead this nation back to God, and you'll be forced to make some difficult and dangerous decisions. Yahweh never promised that your life would be without problems. But meditate on what He has promised. Let it be your strength. God will never leave you or forsake you. He commands you not to be afraid, so to be fearful is to doubt God. And that is a sin."

Hezekiah gazed down at Zechariah's wrinkled hand resting on his own and remembered his warm, reassuring touch from childhood. He trusted his grandfather as he trusted no other person on earth, and he knew Zechariah would give an honest answer to the question that haunted Hezekiah's thoughts like an endless refrain. His eyes met Zechariah's clear, keen eyes and held.

"Am I making a mistake in not sending the tribute to Assyria?" Hezekiah asked.

Zechariah studied him gravely for a long time without answering.

"Am I?" Hezekiah repeated.

"No, son. It's never a mistake to trust God" He squeezed Hezekiah's hand reassuringly, then gathered his scrolls together. "Sometimes you may feel like you're all alone, especially after I'm gone...."

"What do you mean, after you're gone?"

"But Yahweh will be with you. He will never leave you."

Hezekiah knew that his grandfather's words were meant to comfort him, but they gave him an unsettled feeling, as if they were Zechariah's parting words instead of Moses'. He wanted to question him, but Zechariah gathered the scrolls together and rose to his feet.

"You're right, son. It's too hot to work. Let's quit for today."

Hezekiah walked Zechariah to the door, and when they embraced, he was aware that he held someone very precious in his arms.

Zechariah paused to catch his breath several times as he walked up the hill to the Temple. It was hard to breathe the stifling air, and the dust burned his lungs. When he reached his room in the Temple side chambers, he felt dizzy. He lay down on his bed to rest for a few moments, and the next thing he knew, his friend Shimei was shaking him awake.

"Zechariah-we've been looking all over for you. It's time for the evening sacrifice"

"Evening? You mean I've been asleep all afternoon?" He felt groggy and disoriented. He tried to sit up and couldn't.

"It's the heat, my friend. Don't worry about it. Besides, it's too hot to do much of anything except sleep. Someone else can take over your duties if-"

"No thank you, Shimei. I'm fine. I'll be right there." Zechariah closed his eyes for a moment after Shimei left, marshaling his strength for the tasks ahead. He remembered a time when his body felt vigorous and strong, a time when his life stretched before him and his beloved wife stood by his side, a time when he had important work to accomplish for King Uzziah-a lifetime ago.

The heat was still oppressive even as evening drew near. The water in the Bronze Sea felt lukewarm as Zechariah stood with the others in the Temple courtyard to wash. The sun perched on the crest of the mountains west of the city, but as soon as it set the Sabbath would begin, and Zechariah would have extra duties to perform in preparation for it.

He helped Azariah with the evening sacrifice, feeling as if he were floating, every movement dreamlike. When the service ended, Zechariah fetched the fresh loaves of bread along with a jug of olive oil to replenish the lamps. The other Levites helped him wash his hands and feet again before he entered the Holy Place, working quickly as the sun set.

The symmetry and perfection of Yahweh's Holy Place struck Zechariah as he entered the sanctuary. Everything had been built according to God's design, and now that it was restored, Yahweh's order and beauty shone through. Zechariah turned to the golden lampstand first, trimming the wicks and replenishing the oil so that the flames would burn all night. Then he replaced the old bread with the

fresh loaves, working by the light of the flickering lamps.

As he prepared to leave, Zechariah thought he heard a fluttering noise coming from behind the holy veil. He stood still to listen. It sounded like a bird had gotten inside the Holy of Holies. But how could that be? Then in the hushed silence, the room slowly grew brighter, as if the sun were emerging from behind a cloud.

But the sun had already set.

Zechariah heard the fluttering sound again, like a soft whisper. He was certain that none of the priests had gone inside the Holy of Holies, but that was where the whispering sound came from. The Law forbade him to enter the holiest place. If something were amiss, the high priest would have to investigate.

Zechariah walked closer to the thick veil and listened again. The room had grown noticeably brighter now, the light emanating from beyond the veil. Zechariah shivered. He heard the noise again, like the sound of rustling silk.

"Zechariah ... Yahweh has remembered."

"Yahweh has remembered "-it was the meaning of his name. He fell to his knees, trembling. The room grew brighter and brighter until the light forced Zechariah to close his eyes, shielding them from its glow. It shone brighter than the sun, brighter than ten thousand suns. He felt the light soak through his robe and touch his skin, washing over him, engulfing him in wave after wave of brilliance and love.

Overwhelming love.

He never could have put the feeling into words. It was the love he felt for his children and grandchildren. It was the tender intimacy of his wife's embrace. It was the love he'd felt as a child, wrapped in his mother's bosom or sheltered in his father's protecting arms. It was all of these and more.

Yahweh.

Wave after wave of Yahweh's presence washed over Zechariah until he felt completely consumed. He bowed his forehead to the floor, aware that he was

unworthy of such love. He reached out for something to hold on to and grasped the hem of the holy veil. He wanted to look up, to see his God face-to-face, but he was afraid.

"Zechariah."

Another wave of love washed over him.

"Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Look up."

Zechariah's fear dissolved. He slowly raised his head and opened his eyes.

When the Sabbath meal ended, Hezekiah led Hephzibah up the winding stairs to the palace rooftop. The day had been unbearably hot, but he hoped the roof would catch a cool evening breeze from the Great Sea now that the sun had set. A faint light shone in the west, but above the Mount of Olives the first stars already twinkled in the darkened sky.

"Have you ever been up here before?" Hezekiah asked her.

"No. The view is magnificent!"

He studied Hephzibah as she looked all around, loving the way the tiny tendrils of her hair curled around her face, the way her tawny skin glowed like ivory in the pale starlight. She gazed in awe at the canopy of sunset sky, at the square houses with lamplight flickering through their windows, at the distant hills fading away like specters into the night. Hezekiah was glad he had decided to share his favorite place with her.

"I come up here a lot," he said, "just to think-or sometimes to pray. And I'm always reminded of my ancestor, King David. He liked it on the rooftop, too."

She looked up at him, her dark eyes luminous. He put his arm around her slender waist and drew her close to his side. "Look up!" he told her. "Sometimes the stars seem so close I could touch them"

They stood together, enjoying the infinite sky and the everincreasing number

of stars. "I always feel so small when I look at the stars," Hephzibah murmured.

"'When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers," Hezekiah recited, "'the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?' I always think of those words when I look at the stars. Maybe David wrote that psalm on a night like this, when he was up on this rooftop."

He pulled her close, resting his cheek on her fragrant hair.

"I want to tell you something," she murmured.

"Hmm?"

"I wasn't going to say anything until I was sure-but ..."

Hezekiah smiled in anticipation. "Tell me anyway."

"Well, I think that I-I mean, we--are going to have a baby."

He hugged her tightly. "Didn't I tell you Yahweh would give us an heir?"

"Well, I think He had a little help from you," she teased.

As Hezekiah bent to kiss her, he thought he heard a rustling in the shadows by the stairway, then the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Excuse me ... Your Majesty?" a voice called hoarsely. It was too dark to see who had spoken.

Hezekiah released Hephzibah and walked toward the shadowy figure. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Shimei the Levite. I'm sorry to disturb you, my lord."

A knot of dread tightened in Hezekiah's stomach at the sound of Shimei's faltering voice.

"Yes? What is it, Shimei?"

"Your Majesty ... it's Zechariah ..."

Hezekiah closed his eyes and waited. He heard Shimei draw a shuddering breath.

"I woke him before the evening sacrifice. I even talked to him, but he never came out to the courtyard. We had to hold the sacrifice without him. When it was time for Zechariah to perform the Sabbath duties afterward, I went back to his room again to look for him. At first I thought he was still asleep. I called to him ... but he didn't move.

Hezekiah wanted to cry out, to call Shimei a liar, but he waited in silence for him to finish.

"He was dead, Your Majesty ... just lying there peacefully. He must have died in his sleep before the evening sacrifice. But his face ... when I saw the radiance on his face ..:' Shimei couldn't finish.

Hezekiah stood in agonized silence, unable to speak, unable to cry out. Zechariah was dead. His beloved grandfather, gone forever. It couldn't be true. He needed Zechariah. There were so many questions he needed to ask him, so many things he needed to learn-and so much he wanted to tell him. Now he would never have the chance.

Hezekiah knew he was to blame. He had convinced Zechariah to come out of retirement to serve in the Temple again. But it was God's fault, too. Zechariah had labored hard for Yahweh. Too hard. Suddenly Hezekiah wanted to rage at God and question Him, to lash out at Him for stealing Zechariah away now, when he needed him the most. How could God let this happen?

"Thank you for coming, Shimei," he finally managed to say. His voice was strained as he struggled with his rising grief. "You may go."

As Shimei crept quietly down the stairs, Hezekiah grabbed the front of his tunic with both hands and tore it with all his strength. He ripped the fabric over and over until it hung in tattered shreds-but it was his heart that felt torn into pieces.

Hephzibah hesitated, holding her breath, not certain if she should go to Hezekiah or not. He stood a few feet away from her, unmoving, the front of his

beautiful robe ruined. He still hadn't opened his eyes, and it hurt Hephzibah to watch him struggling with his pain and grief. He had been so happy a moment ago when she had told him about their baby. Now that joy was forgotten. She wanted to hold him, comfort him, but she waited for him to call to her, certain that he would. Several minutes passed and he still didn't speak or move, a statue frozen in sorrow and despair.

"Hephzibah, I'd like to be alone now," he said at last.

She turned away. But as she slipped silently down the stairs, she heard his anguished cry in the darkness behind her.



14

SEARING PAIN TORE THROUGH Jerusha, blotting out everything else. She gripped Marah's hand and groaned.

"Go ahead and scream. Every woman does:' Marah said. But Jerusha gritted her teeth and stifled her cries, unwilling to show weakness in front of her enemies. "It won't be much longer now," Marah told her.

The resting times between Jerusha's pains were becoming shorter and shorter, and in those brief moments, while Marah splashed cool water on her face, Jerusha saw stars through the tent door, sprinkled across the sky. Her labor had begun after breakfast and seemed as if it would last forever. She was nearing the end of her strength.

When the pain became a constant fire, Jerusha could no longer stifle her cries. With a final burst of strength she didn't know she had, her agony was suddenly over. And, blending with the sounds of hyenas' screams and soldiers' voices around their campfires, Jerusha heard a tiny, pitiful cry.

"My baby," she whispered. Tears of joy and triumph welled up in her eyes. "Let me see my baby." Marah briskly washed the squalling child and rubbed it with salt. Her face was harsh and unsmiling.

"It's a girl," she told Jerusha. She made it sound like a curse.

"Let me see her-let me hold her." She reached out longingly.

Marah wrapped the baby in an old torn blanket and reluctantly placed her in Jerusha's arms. The tiny child cried pitifully, as if outraged by the indignities she had suffered.

"Shh ... don't cry, little one. Don't cry" Jerusha soothed.

The baby had long silky black hair that curled softly around her face. She looked Assyrian. Her hair, her eyes, her dusky complexion resembled Iddina's

and the other men's. Jerusha picked up her daughter's tiny, perfect hand, and as the dainty fingers wrapped around her own, Jerusha began to weep. They were Mama's hands, sturdy and square. Jerusha traced her child's delicate, upturned nose and saw her sister, Maacah.

How was it possible? How could this helpless, innocent child be such a perfect blend of her beloved family and her dreaded enemies? How was it possible to create a flawless new life from violence and hatred? Jerusha put her daughter to her breast, and she stopped crying and began to suck.

"Don't do that," Marah said sharply.

Jerusha drew her baby closer. "But she's hungry."

"You'll only grow to love her if you do that." She shook her head and stormed from the tent to empty the basins. Jerusha stroked her daughter's downy black head.

"I already do love you," she whispered.

Jerusha lay in her tent for hours, exhausted but unable to sleep. She stared at her baby by the fluttering light of the oil lamp, marveling at this miracle of perfection. It had been a long time since she had felt the power of love, and the emotion overwhelmed her as if she was feeling it for the first time. For more than a year her life had been a mere existence, her only emotions fear and hatred. Now, as if raised from the dead, Jerusha had a reason to live. She had someone who needed her, someone to love and who would love her in return. Her baby brought her family back to life, and she offered Jerusha a future, as well.

At last Jerusha slept, hugging her baby close to her side.

A sudden flood of light through the open tent flap awakened Jerusha. She squinted into the glare, groggy with sleep, and saw Iddina standing over her. Before she could react, he bent down and snatched the sleeping baby from her arms, then left.

"No!" she screamed. "Oh, please, God-no!"

She tried to scramble off her pallet, tried to run after him, but Marah stood in the doorway of the tent, blocking her path.

"Get out of my way!" Jerusha screamed. She beat Marah with her fists, trying to push past her and save her baby, but Marah was as immovable as stone. "My baby! He took my baby! Make him bring her back!"

Marah slapped Jerusha's face as they struggled. "Stop it! If you don't shut up he'll come back and give you a beating to remember."

"I don't care! My baby-he took my baby!" Marah struck Jerusha again, and Jerusha slumped to her knees, trembling from exhaustion and shock.

Iddina and her baby were gone.

"Oh, dear God ... where did he take her? What's he going to do with her?"

"Don't ask. You don't want to know" Marah's harsh face betrayed no sympathy as she gripped Jerusha beneath her arms, dragging her toward her bed.

"0 God, please-don't let him kill her! Make him bring my baby back!"

"Shut up!" Marah shouted. "Your baby is gone!"

"No ... no ..." Jerusha found the baby's blanket, which Iddina had left behind, and buried her face in it. It still carried her daughter's soft, sweet scent. "My little girl ... my baby ..."

Jerusha wept in anguish, pouring out all her grief and hatred. For one brief night she had felt love again, only to have it snatched away. God hadn't come to her baby's rescue, and now Jerusha knew that there was no God. She would never pray again.

Hours later Jerusha had no tears left to shed. It seemed as if her heart had stopped beating, leaving only a dull ache in her chest. Gradually she became aware of Marah sitting beside her, stroking her hair. Jerusha turned to look at her, and the harsh lines of Marah's face seemed softer, her eyes moist.

"Little fool," Marah whispered. "Did you really think they'd let you keep her?

Look around you. Do you see any children in this place? Any love or compassion? Any joy or happiness? No, only hatred and killing, brutality and death. That's all they know. That's why I destroy my babies before they're born into this godforsaken place. I tried to tell you. I offered to spare you from this, but you wouldn't listen."

Marah swiped impatiently at her tears, as if sorry for showing emotion. She rose to leave, then paused at the tent door. "We'd better start their noon meal. They'll be wanting it soon."

Jerusha watched Marah go. She didn't care about their noon meal. She didn't care about anything. In the stifling semidarkness, Jerusha crawled like a beaten animal into the farthest corner of the tent and crouched into a tight ball. She hugged her knees to her chest and clutched the tattered blanket to her face, then rocked slowly back and forth, staring through vacant, unseeing eyes.



i5

KING HEZEKIAH MOURNED DEEPLY for his grandfather, dressing in sackcloth day after day, trudging up to the Temple in a daze of grief to recite prayers for the dead. The daily sacrifices became a painful ordeal for him. Zechariah had played such a visible role in them that Hezekiah expected to see his grandfather there, standing beside the sacrificial altar or the Bronze Sea. His absence was conspicuous; the void he left could not be filled. Zechariah's deep love for God had been the spark that had set the Temple worship ablaze, and without him the ritual seemed empty and flat.

Hezekiah knew he was angry with God. Why hadn't God given him more time with Zechariah after separating them for so many years? He needed his grandfather's strong, reassuring faith more than ever now that he had made the dangerous decision to rebel against Assyria. He felt as if God had cut him adrift, condemning him to sink helplessly below the rising tide of doubt. He had relied on Zechariah's support in order to govern. Now he had no one. Even Isaiah was too busy doing Yahweh's work.

Yahweh 's work. First it had caused his grandfather's long imprisonment, and now it had killed him. Zechariah had labored too hard for a man his age, restoring Yahweh's Temple, organizing all the sacrifices and feasts. Now God hadn't even allowed him to enjoy the fruit of his labors. Death seemed an unjust reward. Hezekiah raged at God, asking, Why?

More than a week passed before Hezekiah returned to see Hephzibah. When he did, he was unable to share his staggering burden of grief with her. Even her singing couldn't comfort him. As he plodded through his daily routine, he knew his leadership was faltering, but there was little he could do except hand the burden of government to Shebna. The Egyptian quietly took over, covering for Hezekiah and helping him hide the truth of how serious his depression really was.

Several weeks after Passover, Hezekiah stood in his private chambers, staring sadly through an open window as streams of pilgrims flowed into Jerusalem for

the Feast of Pentecost. He knew he would never be able to take a leading role in this joyful feast of thanksgiving. He had no reason to be thankful. He glanced over his shoulder as Shebna entered, then gazed out the window again.

"What is it, Shebna?" he asked dully.

"There seem to be even more pilgrims for this feast than for Passover.

"Maybe so."

"That should please you, my lord."

"I wish my grandfather could have lived to see it."

Shebna sighed, then drew a deep breath. "Your Majesty, at the risk of angering you, I have something I need to say."

Hezekiah turned to his friend and saw the concern in Shebna's dark eyes. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"You have brought this nation a long way in a short time, but now I am afraid it will all be in vain. All your reforms may be lost " unless you begin to put your grief aside."

"The government is functioning smoothly enough. What's your point?"

I have taken over many of your duties these past few weeks, but I cannot take your place at the festival. You know that I am forbidden to go beyond the Court of the Gentiles. Your Majesty, you must lead these pilgrims in thanksgiving."

Hezekiah turned away from Shebna to stare out of the window again. Shebna's tone had been that of a tutor admonishing his pupil, and it irritated Hezekiah. Yet in his heart he knew that Shebna spoke as a friend.

"I'm not sure I can do that," Hezekiah said at last.

"But you must. You've led these people to discard their idols and renew their covenant with Yahweh. You reminded them of their history at Passover and urged them to follow the laws of your God. Now they have come in obedience to

those laws, bringing their tithes and offerings. You have led them this far, Your Majesty. You have brought them to this day, a day of great rejoicing for your people. If you do not lead them and encourage them in what they are doing, then all that your grandfather worked for will be lost."

Hezekiah knew Zechariah would want him to continue leading the spiritual revival. But how could anyone expect him to lead a feast of joy and thanksgiving when there was anger and bitterness toward God in his heart? Hezekiah had the overpowering conviction that he didn't owe God a thank offering. Instead, God owed him a debt for taking away his grandfather a second time.

"I can't do it, Shebna. It would be a lie"

"Very well," Shebna said quietly. `But will you come for a short walk with me, please? There is something I need to show you at the Temple."

"At the Temple?" Hezekiah recognized the bitterness in his voice. "Is this really necessary?"

"Yes. Please."

Neither of them spoke as they climbed the steps of the royal walkway to the Temple Mount. When they reached the Court of the Gentiles, Shebna stopped. "I can go no farther, but look ..

He pointed beyond the Temple to the side chambers and storehouses. Hezekiah shaded his eyes in the brilliant sunlight and saw several huge piles of sand, heaped in mounds near the storehouses.

"What is all that?"

"Please-I urge you to go look, Your Majesty. I cannot go with you.

Hezekiah strode impatiently across the courtyard toward the mounds, leaving Shebna behind. As he drew closer, he saw a huge layered pile of clay storage jars and more golden piles of sand behind the first ones. He was astonished to realize that it wasn't sand, but grain. Azariah and several other Levites stood near the mounds, taking inventory.

"Where did all this come from?" Hezekiah asked the high priest.

"These are the tithes, Your Majesty." Azariah seemed equally amazed. "We have been eating from these stores of food for many weeks, and still they grow bigger. God has blessed our land with a bountiful harvest, and He has moved the people's hearts to give Him the tenth portion in gratitude."

"And this isn't all of it, Your Majesty," Conaniah added. "Not only have the people given a tenth of their grain, but also their new wine, olive oil, cattle, sheep, silver, and gold. We can't keep track of it all."

"And since it isn't going to Assyria anymore, the people are giving more than their tithes," Azariah said. "They're giving freewill offerings, too. I've never seen anything like it-certainly not during your father's reign, or King Jotham's reign, either. This is just like the golden age of King Uzziah."

Hezekiah carried an awareness of his loss with him wherever he went, but suddenly it became an acute pain as he remembered sitting in the olive grove near the Gihon Spring with Zechariah, discussing the kings who had reigned before him. "There's a lot of Uzziah in you, son," his grandfather had said. Then Hezekiah remembered what else Zechariah had said-King Jotham had been destroyed by his bitterness.

Slowly Hezekiah began to see what Shebna had been desperate to show him. All his religious reforms, all the economic prosperity he saw before him stood at risk of being lost because of his own bitterness. He was doing exactly what King Jotham had done, allowing resentment toward God to bring his reign to a standstill. Hezekiah still didn't understand why Zechariah had to die, but he suddenly knew what these heaps of tithes really meant. This was the beginning of God's blessings on his nation. God had renewed his nation's prosperity as His part of their covenant, just as Zechariah had assured him He would. The evidence of Yahweh's fulfilled promises lay before him, too plentiful to fit into the storehouses.

Then Hezekiah remembered what else he had talked about with Zechariah that cold, wet morning: taking back the land that Ahaz had lost to the Philistines and Ammonites. "With God you can do anything," Zechariah had said. "Anything at all." If Hezekiah was forced to accept Zechariah's death as God's

will, then he believed God owed him victory over his enemies in return. And Hezekiah was ready to claim that debt.

As if suddenly awakening from a long sleep, Hezekiah turned to Azariah with renewed vigor and authority. "Start building more storehouses," he said to him. "Eliakim can plan their design and supervise construction. Conaniah, you and your brother Shimei will be in charge of all the storehouses. See to it that the tithes are evenly distributed among the priests and Levites throughout Judah."

The men appeared startled by the sudden change in him. "Yes, Your Majesty," they murmured.

Then, without a further word, Hezekiah strode back across the courtyard to where Shebna waited. As they walked down the hill, he told Shebna about his plans for the storehouses and saw surprise and pleasure on his friend's face.

"Find General Jonadab and bring him to my chambers for a conference at once," Hezekiah said when they reached the palace. He saw a broad smile spread across Shebna's face as he turned to leave.

"Oh, and Shebna..

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Thank you."

Hezekiah wasted no time. As soon as Shebna returned with General Jonadab, he began to plan his military strategy, pacing restlessly in front of the two men, gesturing forcefully as he talked. "The three of us are going to plan a campaign against the Philistines to win back our territory in the Shephelah and the Negev. It's time we took back the land that's rightfully ours"

Shebna appeared surprised, Jonadab pleased. "Shebna, you know how badly we need that farmland if we hope to be active in world trade again. And you both know how important those fortified cities are to us. If we win them back, we will control the main routes from Jerusalem to the Way of the Sea. Do you think we can do it?"

"Yes, sir. I'm ready," Jonadab said. If he had been wearing a sword, he would

have unsheathed it.

The corner of Shebna's mouth twitched as if suppressing a smile, and he gave a slight bow. "Yes, Your Majesty. I am sure you can do

"Good. Now, the storehouses and treasuries are starting to fill up with tithes from what formerly went to Assyria. We will use those resources to secretly purchase weapons and supplies for our armies. Jonadab, over the next few months I want you to mobilize an army for me, all volunteers. Train them and arm them-then let me know when they're ready. Lachish is the strongest fortified city in the area. We'll use it as a staging point for attacks on the Philistines in the Shephelah and on the Ammonites in the Negev. It'll be my headquarters."

"You are going into battle yourself?" Shebna asked.

"Yes, as field commander. I want you to move supplies down to Lachish a little at a time. Jonadab, train your army as secretly as possible. The Philistine army undoubtedly outnumbers ours, so we must achieve surprise at all costs"

Hezekiah's enthusiasm became contagious, and Jonadab could scarcely stay seated. "Your Majesty, we can do it! We can take back those cities and fortify them as Jerusalem's perimeter defenses. The Philistines will be easy prey."

"And if we win back all that rich, fertile farmland," Shebna said, "we can begin to export goods-which would mean an increase in the goods we could import"

"Exactly. Jonadab, send your best men out on a scouting mission. Have them report directly to me. Then we'll plan our battle strategy."

The planning in the weeks that followed rapidly consumed each day, diverting Hezekiah's thoughts from his grief. Gradually the military campaign began to take shape. The scouts returned with their reports, and Shebna stockpiled supplies at Lachish. Jonadab procured weapons and trained a strong corps of volunteer soldiers.

When everything was ready, King Hezekiah led the army into battle. His forces quickly routed the startled Philistines from Judean territory and chased them as far as the city of Gaza on the Great Sea. It was a stunning victory for Hezekiah and the Judean army. Their losses were minimal compared to the tremendous gains they made in taking back the cities in the Shephelah and the Negev that had once belonged to them.

The Philistines abandoned many of the cities without a fight, and destruction of the fertile countryside was kept to a minimum, with olive groves and vineyards left untouched. It seemed to Hezekiah that his victory was taken from the pages of the history books in which the Philistines had fled before the armies of his childhood hero, King David. He felt tremendous satisfaction that the campaign he had planned and commanded resulted in such a resounding victory.

When it was over and the territory was secured, Hezekiah returned to Jerusalem with the Judean army and the spoils of war, assured of his sovereignty and confident in his abilities. His monarchy was firmly established, his authority honored both in his own nation and by his neighboring states. He no longer feared a rebellion from among the nobility, for he had won their respect and homage.

On the Sabbath day, Hezekiah climbed the hill to the Temple to worship for the first time in many weeks. As he stood before Yahweh's altar, celebrating his victory, he realized that he had tested his God and found Him faithful to His covenant, just as Zechariah had promised. As the priests slew the sacrifices, and the praises of the Levite musicians reached their crescendo, Hezekiah entered into the praise and worship freely, his anger against Yahweh gone, his grief assuaged.

That night when Hezekiah came to her chambers, Hephzibah thought her husband seemed happier than he had for a long time. The oppressive cloud of depression he had suffered under had finally lifted. Hephzibah studied him as he lay stretched out comfortably on the ivory couch with his long legs propped on a footstool. His skin was deeply tanned, and his dark, curly hair and beard reflected glints of copper in the lamplight. He seemed changed since returning from battle, as if the war had hardened him, making him tougher, more decisive.

Hephzibah was awed by these changes, and sometimes it was difficult to think of him as her husband instead of as the king of Judah.

Each day Hephzibah had grown more excited about their baby, but she hadn't mentioned it to Hezekiah since the night his grandfather had died. She wished they could talk about it together and that he would share her excitement, but she wondered if Hezekiah even remembered what she had told him. Perhaps the tragic news of his grandfather's death had erased her news from his mind. Tonight, when she saw how happy he was and she felt the faint, fluttering movement of his child inside her, she decided the time had come to share her joy with him again.

"I want to sing a song for you, my lord," she said.

"I'd like that. I missed your singing while I was away."

Hephzibah picked up her lyre and sang a lullaby, one her mother had sung to her when she was a child. "Mmm-that was lovely," he said when she finished.

She put the lyre down and curled up beside him, resting her head against his chest. "Do you think our baby will like it, too?"

"Yes, I'm certain he will." Hezekiah played with a lock of her hair. "I'm very happy about the baby, Hephzibah. I know it must have seemed like I'd forgotten, but I didn't forget."

She hesitated, not sure if she dared to bring up the next subject, but at last she sat up to face him. "If it's a son, I think we should name him Zechariah-if that's all right with you" She held her breath, waiting for his reaction to his grandfather's name, but Hezekiah's expression of quiet contentment never changed. His warm brown eyes showed neither anger nor sorrow.

"Yes," he said. "I'd like that very much."



16

JERIMOTH HAD RETURNED HOME from the Passover feast convinced that he would find Jerusha waiting for him. He flung open the door of his house calling her name, but only his startled servant answered. Throughout each passing day, Jerimoth had paused from his labors and scanned the horizon, no longer looking for the dreaded Assyrian soldiers, but for his daughter, walking up the road toward home. Before retiring each evening, he gazed longingly in the direction the soldiers had carried Jerusha, watching for her long after the sun had set and the dim light of the flickering stars made visibility beyond the borders of his vineyard impossible. Jerimoth would he awake late into the night, listening in the darkness for the sound of Jerusha's footsteps on the hard-packed road. The first rays of dawn would find him hurrying to the highest point of his land, scanning the horizon for a glimpse of his daughter.

He had done the same when he returned home after celebrating the Feast of Pentecost-but no Jerusha.

When harvesttime ended and Jerimoth had stored away the last of his crops, he and his family traveled to Jerusalem again for the Feast of Tabernacles, bringing the tenth portion of all his crops as a sacrifice for Yahweh. Once again they stayed with Hilkiah, and, like the other pilgrims, they slept outside on the rooftop in rustic booths to celebrate the long wanderings of their forefathers in the wilderness. The Feast of Tabernacles was a joyful feast, and on the last night the men sang and danced and waved branches in joyful praise to Yahweh.

But Jerimoth couldn't rejoice as the other men did. He was eager to return home, to be reunited with his daughter. He knew she would be waiting for him. And as his feet moved in rhythm beside Hilkiah's, Jerimoth's dance became an endless, silent plea to God for his daughter Jerusha's return.

On the last night of the feast, Eliakim returned home from the festivities with the other men long after sunset. His feet hurt from dancing in his new sandals,

and he was ready to sleep. But his father and Jerimoth seemed oblivious to the late hour. Instead of heading to bed, they settled down in the large main room of Hilkiah's house, lighting all the oil lamps, talking together.

"It's hard to believe that the festival is over already," Jerimoth said.

"Yes, it has gone quickly, hasn't it?" Hilkiah agreed. "Tomorrow is the final convocation already. I suppose you'll need to start for home afterward?"

"That's when our caravan is leaving."

"I hate to see you go, my friend. I can't tell you how much I enjoy our visits together." Hilkiah's eyes twinkled warmly in the lamplight. "Naturally, Eliakim and I will look forward to seeing you again in the spring for Passover. Right, son?"

"Absolutely!" Eliakim replied. As much as he hated to admit it, his father had been right once again. Eliakim had grown very fond of Jerimoth and Hodesh and their little girl. Only the ghost of their lost daughter, Jerusha, who intruded into every conversation, made Eliakim uncomfortable.

"Then it's settled, yes?" Hilkiah asked. "You will come to see us again in the spring?"

Jerimoth gave a tired smile, a rare sight on his mournful face. "Thank you. I'm honored to stay in your home. And next spring you will meet my older daughter, Jerusha."

"She will be our guest of honor!" Hilkiah said. "We will bring our thank offerings to the Temple and hold a huge feast, won't we, son?"

Eliakim didn't reply. The other two men didn't seem to notice as they talked on and on, making elaborate plans to celebrate Jerusha's homecoming next spring. Eliakim wanted to go to bed, but as he listened to them, he made up his mind not to sleep another night until he had a serious talk with his father about Jerimoth's unrealistic expectations. He didn't want to belittle his father's faith in Yahweh, but discussing Jerusha had become unbearable for Eliakim. It was time that Hilkiah admitted the truth: she was never coming back. Eliakim gazed sullenly at the floor, his head in his hands, until finally Jerimoth bade them

goodnight and retired to the roof.

Hilkiah yawned and stretched. "My, it's late. I guess I'll go to bed, too."

"Abba, wait. There's something we need to talk about first."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Abba, I don't know how to say this.... I don't want to hurt you, but we can't say good-bye to Jerimoth tomorrow until we straighten a few things out."

"Straighten out? What's to straighten?"

"I can't sit through any more evenings like tonight, Abba. I just can't."

"What are you talking about? We had a wonderful evening."

"Don't you understand? I can't bear to hear you talking to that poor man about this fantasy you've created and nurtured for so long. You keep encouraging Jerimoth as if-as if Jerusha could walk through our door any minute."

"Fantasy?"

"Yes, that's what it is-a fantasy. Jerusha isn't coming back, Abba. Not now, not next spring, not ever."

Hilkiah wore a look of incomprehension and confusion, as if Eliakim were speaking a foreign language. "How can you say such a thing?"

"No, Abba. The question is-how can you keep saying such a ridiculous thing? Jerimoth will never see his daughter again. Surely you know the truth in your heart." He rested his hand on his father's shoulder.

Hilkiah appeared stunned. Then the laughter always present in his eyes turned to anger, a rare emotion for Hilkiah. He shrugged Eliakim's hand away. "I know nothing of the sort. What I know in my heart is that Yahweh answers prayer!"

"Yes, yes. Yahweh answers some prayers-but not all prayers. Not one

hundred percent of the time. Surely you know how impossible this situation is, Abba. You're asking for a miracle."

"And surely you know that Yahweh is the God of miracles! Haven't I taught you anything at all about faith?"

"Abba, be reasonable. Think about it. She was captured more than a year ago. The Assyrians killed all the other girls-"

"But not Jerusha. They never found her body."

"Yes, but even if she's still alive, the Assyrians never set their slaves free. Never! And no one has ever escaped and returned home, least of all a woman. How can Yahweh possibly answer your prayers?"

Hilkiah's face was flushed with controlled fury. "I don't care if no one has ever escaped from the Assyrians before! There's a first time for everything! And as the Torah says, `Is anything too hard for Yahweh?'"

"But you're not being fair to Jerimoth. If you're his friend, you should help him face the truth so he can get on with his life. It's not fair to encourage this irrational hope that-"

"And you think it's fair to deprive him of that hope? Is that what you're asking me to do?"

"No, Abba, but-"

"What, then?"

Eliakim exhaled. "Jerimoth has a fine wife and another daughter to live for. I'm saying we should help him see that, help him accept the truth that Jerusha is gone. She's dead. He needs to admit it and get on with his life."

"Jerimoth has a right to have faith in God!"

"All right, then! All right!" Eliakim shouted. "Let Jerimoth believe what he wants to, no matter how irrational it is! But you don't have to encourage him, Abba. You can't honestly believe he'll ever see Jerusha again, so how can you go

to the Temple with him all the time and offer a bunch of useless, pious prayers? You're a hypocrite!"

The expression of rage and shock on Hilkiah's face was frightening. He drew his hand back as if to strike Eliakim-the first time he had ever done so in his life-then he stopped. He could barely speak through his anger. "I offer my prayers for Jerusha in faith! Because I believe that Yahweh answers prayer! And if there's any hypocrisy in this household, Eliakim, I might ask why you attend morning and evening prayers every day if you don't believe any of it!"

"Then why did Mama die?" he shouted. "We both prayed, we both believed, but she died anyway, Abba! She died! And so did my brothers! Where was Yahweh then? Why didn't He answer our prayers?"

Eliakim stopped, stunned by the bitterness in his voice, alarmed at the look of horror and pain on his father's face. Things had gone too far. They had both said things to hurt each other, words that could never be taken back. But before Eliakim could speak again, he heard Jerimoth's trembling voice behind him.

"Please ... don't let there be angry words and discord in this household because of me."

Eliakim's stomach knotted in shame. "Jerimoth, I'm sorry ... I-"

But Jerimoth held up his hand to silence Eliakim. "Forgive me, my friends. I never intended to eavesdrop. I came back to tell you something and heard you shouting." He sighed heavily, and his melancholy green eyes seemed more sorrowful than ever. "If I had known that I would cause a rift between father and son, I never would have set foot in your house. So listen to me, please. Eliakim, I'll go to my grave believing that God is able to answer my prayer. Somehow, someday, He will do the impossible and bring Jerusha home to me. Even if Hilkiah agreed with you-and I know that he doesn't-he could never talk me out of this conviction. Never. And, Hilkiah, my dear friend-I beg you not to be so hard on your son. Let him question his faith. Let him voice his doubts. You've taught him well, both with your words and by your example. His questions will make his faith stronger in the end. I know that his love for you is very, very deep. How I envy you, Hilkiah! How I wish that Eliakim were my son.

Agonized silence filled the room. Eliakim stared mutely at the floor. Never in his life had there been such a terrible, irreparable rift between him and his father. Hilkiah's faith was the most important thing in his life, and Eliakim had challenged that faith. Worse, he had called him a hypocrite.

Again Jerimoth broke the silence. "Please ... forgive me for interfering-but I beg you to reconcile, for my sake."

Eliakim slowly looked up, afraid to face his father, afraid to ask for the forgiveness he didn't deserve. "Abba ... I'm so sorry-" he began, but Eliakim's words were silenced by the strength of his father's embrace.

Hephzibah awoke while it was still dark, and at first she wasn't sure what had awakened her. But then she felt the dull, cramping ache inside and drew her knees up to her chest to ease the pain. When it died away, she lay still for a moment, listening in the darkness to Hezekiah's breathing as he slept beside her. A few minutes passed; then suddenly the pain returned, stronger than before. It was how she'd imagined labor pains would feel-but the baby shouldn't be coming this soon. Fear overwhelmed her.

She waited for the pain to ease, then slipped quietly from the bed. As she paused to pull the covers over her sleeping husband, she saw blood soaking the sheet. She cried out and sank to the floor beside the bed.

Hezekiah stirred, then sat up. "Hephzibah, what is it? What's wrong?" Another pain twisted through her before she could answer, and she cried out again. Hezekiah threw the covers aside and bounded out of bed. "Merab! Somebody-come quickly!" he shouted.

Merab tottered from her room, wrapping herself in a robe. When she reached Hephzibah's side she gasped. "Oh no-my lady-my lady!" More servants rushed into the room and lifted Hephzibah onto her bed. She saw Hezekiah standing over her, looking shaken and stunned. Merab took his arm and hustled him to the door.

"You'd better leave now, Your Majesty."

Hephzibah felt another pain intensifying. She began to scream.

Hezekiah returned to his chambers, but he couldn't sleep. "Dear God, please-don't take Hephzibah, too," he whispered.

He stared out of his window into the dark night, worrying about her, remembering the blood, pleading with Yahweh not to take her from him. Adjusting to Zechariah's death had been so difficult that he couldn't bear to think about losing Hephzibah. She was so much a part of his life now that he wouldn't be whole without her. Hephzibah was more to him than any other person had ever been-confidante, companion, lover, friend. How could he live without her laughter, her songs, her beauty, her love? He loved her. He had never acknowledged it before, but he knew it was true, and he was seized with the terrifying thought that she might die. With his hands bunched into fists, Hezekiah fell to his knees and prayed.

As the sun rose, he could no longer bear the agony of waiting. He returned to Hephzibah's room and tapped on the door. Merab opened it a crack.

"Is Hephzibah all right?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord. She's asleep. She'll be fine in a few days"

"Oh, thank God." His knees went weak as relief surged through him.

"But the baby is gone. I'm so sorry, Your Majesty."

For a moment Hezekiah didn't comprehend what Merab had said. In his concern for Hephzibah, he had never thought of their baby. Suddenly he understood.

"Let me see her, Merab. I won't wake her."

Hezekiah crept into the room and stood beside the bed. Hephzibah looked so fragile and pale as she lay against the pillows that he had to remind himself of Merab's words. Hephzibah would recover. She wasn't going to die. Yet the terrible fear that he might lose her was still too fresh.

"I love you," he whispered. He was surprised to realize how deeply he did love her. Hephzibah's eyelids fluttered open; then tears began to flow silently down her cheeks.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm glad you're here"

"How do you feel?" It was an absurd question, but he didn't know what else to say.

"Empty. I feel so empty-as if all the life has drained out of me and I'm just a hollow shell."

"Don't cry ... there will be others. We'll have more...." His words sounded glib and artificial. He groped for better ones but couldn't find them.

"I can't stop thinking about our baby," she said softly, "and wondering what he would have looked like-if he had your hair ... your

"Hephzibah, don't."

"They told me it was a boy."

Her words stunned him. For the first time he understood that the child had been a person, a living baby boy, his son. Now he was dead. Hezekiah knew that Hephzibah's grief far surpassed his own, but at that moment he shared a small part of it with her. Their son was dead.

"Can I do anything, Hephzibah?"

"Please hold me" She held her slender arms out to him. She looked so sorrowful, so lost in the piles of pillows and covers, that Hezekiah's heart twisted inside him. He could see how much she needed him. But he hesitated, remembering something else.

"Hephzibah, I can't. I'm sorry."

"Why not?" Her eyes pleaded with him, and he had to turn away.

"Because the Torah forbids it until ... until you're better. Then for seven more days after that." He was aware of how much his words hurt her. They sounded cold and unfeeling to him as he spoke them. "Afterward, you must go to the priest and offer two doves, one for a sin offering, the other a burnt offering"

"But why? How have I sinned? Is wanting our baby to live a sin?"

Hezekiah didn't know why the Torah required it. He only knew what was written. "The Torah says-"

"Our baby is dead and you're telling me I've sinned? Is that the kind of God you worship?" The anguish in her voice cut him deeply.

"No, Hephzibah. Yahweh isn't like that."

"Then why did He let our baby die? Can you tell me why? And why does He want more blood from me? How have I sinned?" Hezekiah couldn't answer. He didn't know. "I won't bring a sin offering," she said bitterly. "I have not sinned!"

Hezekiah's stomach churned as he wrestled with his own doubts. He still didn't understand all of Yahweh's laws, and he knew how it felt to be angry with God, to have someone very precious snatched away by death. But he had finally adjusted to his loss and had accepted it as the will of God whether he understood it or not. Hephzibah would have to do the same.

He stared at his feet, ashamed to face Hephzibah, afraid she would see through his facade of legalism and discover the doubts and questions beneath it. He ached to go to her, to take her in his arms and comfort her, but if he held her he would become unclean until evening. He wouldn't be able to worship in the Temple today. And as the King of Judah, he had the responsibility to lead the final convocation of the Feast of Tabernacles.

He stood beside Hephzibahs bed, torn between love and duty. Then, as the distant shofar trumpeted the call to worship, Hezekiah turned and left the room.



Part Two

So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left, and even Judah did not keep the commands of the Lord their God. They followed the practices Israel had introduced. Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence.

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1 KINGS 17:18 20 NIV



17

DARKNESS SETTLED OVER HEPHZIBAH'S soul as night fell and the pale light of oil lamps flickered to life in the houses below her palace window. She recalled tender family scenes from her own childhood and imagined them taking place in homes throughout the city. Families would gather for the evening meal, and their faces would glow in the lamplight as they shared the day's events with each other. Then the children, scrubbed and sleepy, would be tucked into their beds for the night.

If her baby had lived he would be nearly three years old, and perhaps she would be rocking him to sleep, singing him a lullaby. But her baby was dead, and Hephzibah's arms remained empty.

"My lady, that cool evening air isn't good for you," Merab said. "You'll catch a chill. Here-let me light a fire for you."

Hephzibah closed the shutters and turned away from the window. She watched her handmaiden fuss with the charcoal brazier, blowing noisily on the coals until they caught fire. "There. Maybe it'll warm up in here before the king arrives." Merab bustled around the room, plumping pillows and straightening rugs, then stopped when she glanced at Hephzibah. "What is it, my lady? What's wrong?"

"Oh, Merab, I hope my husband is too busy to come tonight."

"My lady! Why would you wish for such a thing?"

Hephzibah's grief spilled over in tears. "Because my monthly time has come again"

"Oh, don't start crying, honey. Your eyes will be all red and puffy. And he'll be here any minute." Merab dabbed at Hephzibah's eyes with a handkerchief.

"I don't want to tell him, Merab. I'm so afraid...."

"Afraid of what?"

In her despair Hephzibah voiced her greatest fear. "What if he divorces me?"

Merab stared at her in disbelief. "What? Divorce you? But the king is in love with you! Can't you see the way he looks at you-the way his eyes never leave your face? He'd sooner cut off his right arm than divorce you!"

Hephzibah knew that Hezekiah loved her. In the three years since their baby died she had felt his love grow stronger and deeper and had heard him say it many times over. Hezekiah was hers. But she also knew the strength of his devotion to Yahweh's laws.

"He'll have to divorce me, Merab, because I'm barren. I can't give him an heir."

"You're not barren! Don't even think such a thing!"

"Then why can't I get pregnant? After all this time?"

Merab wrapped her arms around Hephzibah, comforting her like a child. "Shh ... never mind, honey. You'll get pregnant again-I know it. And King Hezekiah loves you too much to divorce you."

"But if I don't give him a son he'll have to divorce me. It's a terrible disgrace if the king has no heir to the throne."

"He can always take another wife or a concubine-"

"But he won't do that. Yahweh's Law allows him to have only one wife. And the royal line of David must continue."

"You mean more to him than a silly old law," Merab said as she dabbed at Hephzibah's eyes. But Hephzibah remembered how he had refused to hold her on the night her baby died, and she knew that it wasn't true. "It's time to stop all this nonsense," Merab said. "Your husband is coming. Your face will be a mess."

Hephzibah tried to compose herself, fighting back her terrible fears. She splashed cold water on her face, then let Merab comb her long, thick hair. A few

minutes later she heard Hezekiah's familiar knock and looked up to see his tall frame and broad shoulders filling her doorway. He looked so regal in his gold and purple robe, so hand some as he stood smiling down at her that she longed to run to him, to feel his strong arms surrounding her, comforting her.

Instead, she turned away. "It is unlawful to touch me, my lord." She hated Yahweh's Law for making her feel like a leper, for forbidding the very thing she needed the most. The Law caused a separation from her husband, and Hephzibah feared that someday it would be permanent.

"It's not unlawful to talk," Hezekiah said quietly.

Hephzibah looked up at him and saw the love in his eyes just as Merab had said. "I'm sorry for failing you, my lord."

"I've told you before, Hephzibah-it doesn't matter to me. We have the rest of our lives to bear children. Yahweh has promised us a son.

Hephzibah cringed. She had never brought Yahweh the required sin offering, blaming Him for her baby's death. She worried that her barrenness was His punishment for breaking the Law, but she stubbornly refused to offer more blood. Yahweh had taken her baby; that was enough.

Hezekiah sat down beside the charcoal brazier and spread his hands before the coals to warm them. When he looked up, his expression was strained with worry. In an instant Hephzibah forgot all his reassurances, certain that he was contemplating divorce.

"What's wrong, my lord?"

"I'm worried about a report I received from Israel this afternoon. The Assyrians may be on the march again. Every year their empire expands, and it looks like they won't be content until they've conquered every nation, all the way to Egypt. The problem is, our nation straddles the road to Egypt"

"What will you do if they invade us?"

"Well, I'll have two choices. I can try to fight them off, or I can appease them by joining their empire as a vassal nation again."

"Which will you do?"

"I don't know-neither one until I have to. They haven't begun to march yet, but the rumors say it's inevitable." His hands knotted into fists as he talked.

Hephzibah saw the deep creases in his face and knew the threat must be serious, but she was incapable of worrying about a vague, future invasion from a distant enemy. Her thoughts focused only on her empty, aching arms.

"I'm sorry, Hephzibah," he said, looking up at her. "I didn't mean to burden you with all my problems. Maybe the rumors are wrong. Maybe the Assyrians will turn around and march home again."

"You didn't burden me, my lord. I wasn't worried about that."

"What is it, love? Why are you so sad tonight?"

Her eyes glistened with tears. "I'm just ... disappointed, that's all. I thought maybe this time ... this month ..."

Hezekiah moved as if to go to her, and she thought for a moment that he would take her in his arms and willingly become unclean for her sake. But he stopped before he reached her. His arms hung limply by his sides.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" he asked helplessly.

She would not ask to be held, knowing that if she forced him to choose between his God and her, she would never win. She hastily wiped her tears. "No, my lord."

"Are you sure?" He looked as if the burden of his reign weighed heavily on him, and she was stung by guilt. Hezekiah came to her for comfort, not the other way around. She tried to smile.

"Shall I sing for you, my lord?"

"Yes, I'd like that"

She picked up her lyre and began to sing one of his favorite songs. But as she

lost herself in the words and the melody, a flood of grief and disappointment suddenly overwhelmed her. She stopped, unable to finish, and covered her face.

"Hephzibah ... would it be easier for you if I left?" he asked softly.

She longed to cry out, "No, don't go! Hold me in your arms!" But she didn't.

"Yes, my lord," she said instead. She heard him get up and quietly leave, closing the door behind him.

Jerusha knelt before the hearth, slowly grinding grain into flour between the stones. On the horizon the rising sun was painting the sky with delicate shades of pink and mauve, but Jerusha barely noticed as she ground out her sorrow and hatred along with the grain. Today would be her last day in this camp. The city that the Assyrians had besieged for more than two years had finally fallen. As if in a dream, Jerusha had again witnessed thousands of helpless men, women, and children being clubbed to death, beheaded, tortured, impaled, flayed alive, or carried away into slavery.

Jerusha knew she couldn't live with this brutality much longer and stay sane. The first signs of madness had already appeared as her soul splintered and disintegrated like a rotted log. She hadn't smiled or laughed or felt any emotion besides fear and hatred since Iddina killed her baby. She thought of Marah's icy bitterness, her harsh, unsmiling features, and knew that she was becoming just like her. Jerusha wasn't a human being to the Assyrians-she was their possession, a plaything to use and discard. More than anything else, she feared becoming pregnant again. She couldn't kill her child in the womb, like Marah did, nor could she bear the agony of having her baby snatched from her arms again. It was only a matter of time before she would be forced to choose, but both options horrified her.

She poured the finished flour into the kneading trough, scooped another handful of grain between the grinding stones, and continued to grind. Tomorrow the tents would come down, and the army would march relentlessly forward to destroy another nation, enslave another helpless population. And Jerusha's life would also grind hopelessly on, with no choice but to submit to her captors or

die. She could no longer remember why she had wanted to live, and she often recalled Marah's words that first day in camp: "Die, little fool! Die while you still have the chance to die quickly!" Why hadn't she listened to her?

Jerusha finished the second batch of flour and poured it into the trough. She had enough to make the dough as soon as Marah returned with the water. But as Marah hurried back from the spring with the water jug, she appeared upset.

"What's the matter?" Jerusha asked her.

"I found out where the Assyrian army is marching next" Marah set the jug down and sank to her knees, pausing as if unable to speak the words. "They're going to invade Israel. And it won't be small raiding parties this time, either. They're sending the entire army."

Jerusha didn't respond. The news that she would witness the brutal destruction of her own homeland and people came as a blow to a soul too numb to feel more pain. For a moment she could almost picture the rolling green hills of Israel, the beautiful Jordan Valley, the shimmering Sea of Galilee; then she quickly closed her eyes against the vision of what the Assyrians would do.

All these years, against all reason, Jerusha had nurtured hope in her heart like a fragile seed-hope that someday she would go home, that she would see her family again. That hope had fueled her overwhelming drive to survive. But now the Assyrians had pronounced a death sentence on Israel. Her home and her family would no longer exist. Jerusha's delicate sprout of hope withered and died, and her will to live died along with it. She had managed to exist without love, but she could never survive without hope. They had finally destroyed the only thing she had left.

Silently, Jerusha made a well in the center of the flour, mixed in water and olive oil, and began to knead. As the dough took shape beneath her fingers, a firm resolve took shape in Jerusha's heart. She wouldn't live to witness the destruction of Israel, the enslavement of her people. She wouldn't endure another day of hopeless existence.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, Jerusha moved through her routine on instinct, unaware of her surroundings. As she packed dishes and food supplies,

then swept out her tent, she tried to decide how and when she would end her own life.

By evening, when she had loaded everything onto the carts except her tent and bedding, Jerusha had made up her mind. She would die tonight when one of the officers came to her tent. They always brought their weapons with them and kept them close at hand, as if not even trusting one another's treachery. If she acted swiftly, she could grab one of their knives and kill herself before they had time to stop her.

She helped Marah prepare the evening meal, but she couldn't eat any of it. Waves of terror washed over her as she faced the unknown. She had witnessed thousands of deaths, but now that it was her turn she wondered what it would be like. At last she decided that dying couldn't possibly be worse than living.

Her hands shook uncontrollably as she helped Marah wash up after the meal and pack away the cooking pots. Then Jerusha went into her tent and sat alone to wait. For the first time since Iddina had captured her, she hoped that one of the officers would come to her tent tonight. The long wait felt like hours, and the dark canopy of the tent hovered over her like a shroud. She held her baby's blanket against her cheek for courage, knowing that soon she would join her daughter in death.

Finally Jerusha heard footsteps approaching. She held her breath. The flap opened, sending a gust of cool air into the suffocating tent. Iddina stood in her doorway, his powerful, muscular stance unmistakable.

She thought it fitting that Iddina would be the one to watch her die, since he was the one who had captured her so long ago. She only wished she had let him end her life that first day instead of needlessly prolonging it all these years. He ducked inside the tent and staggered toward her. She could tell by his wavering, uncertain movements that he had been drinking, and she was glad. The alcohol would slow his reflexes, making it difficult for him to stop her in time.

Jerusha gazed longingly at the dagger strapped to his belt. Every morning Iddina honed it on his whetstone to keep it razor sharp. She hated the dull, rasping sound the metal made against the stone, but now she was grateful for his diligence. She wished he would hurry up and take it off. She was ready. Her

courage had reached its peak. If only he would lay it within her reach.

She reminded herself not to hesitate, but to plunge the knife hard and deep. Her suicide would make Iddina furious, and if she didn't die immediately he would prolong her death to torture her. Jerusha had no right to kill herself-that privilege belonged to him.

But Iddina was in no hurry tonight. His black eyes had a malicious gleam as if he were laughing at a secret joke. He sank down beside her, moving so close she felt his breath on her face and smelled the fruity wine he had drunk. Jerusha felt as if she were suffocating. Determination pounded through her veins until her ears rang, but she forced herself to be patient. She could never get her hands on the dagger unless he laid it down. Why didn't he take it off? She was afraid to look at him, afraid he would peer into her eyes and read the contract she had signed with death.

"I have a surprise for you, my little dog," he said at last.

Jerusha thought of his bloody trophies hanging outside on the tree branches, and she shuddered. He seized her face in his rough hands, forcing her to look at him.

"I don't know if I should tell you about my surprise tonight or make you wait until tomorrow."

Jerusha knew she would never see tomorrow. She looked into his pitiless black eyes, and when she spoke, the defiance in her own voice surprised her. "Tell me now"

Iddina smiled. His teeth were pointed, like a wolf's. "You'd better enjoy your last night with me ..."

Last night? He knows! Somehow Iddina had read her thoughts! That's why he still wore his weapon!

" ... because tomorrow I'm setting you free."

For a long moment Jerusha's heart seemed to stop beating. She must have misunderstood. She didn't speak his language very well. It had to be a mistake.

"What did you say?" she managed to whisper.

"You heard me-you're going free tomorrow. Free-like a birdie-to fly away to your nest."

Jerusha stifled a scream. He was lying. It was a trick-a horrible, cruel joke. Iddina would never set her free. Somehow he had discovered her plan and he'd invented this deception to stop her from doing it. The ringing in her ears grew so loud she could hardly stand it. Then slowly, with almost deliberate boredom, Iddina removed his belt and laid the dagger next to the sleeping mat. The polished handle gleamed. It was within her reach. All she had to do was grab it.

But what if Iddina was telling the truth? What if tomorrow morning, for whatever reason, he would really set her free?

Jerusha jumped when Iddina stroked her cheek with his rough hand. "Why are you looking so serious, my pretty dog? Doesn't my news make you happy?" She shook her head. "Why not? Would you rather stay here with me?"

Jerusha's stomach rolled over in revulsion. She glanced at the dagger, assuring herself that it was still there. "I don't believe that you'd really set me free," she said.

Without warning, Iddina's fist slammed into her jaw, and she turn bled backward against the side of the tent. She lay stunned, her face throbbing with pain.

"How dare you call me a liar?" He raised his fist again.

"No! I-I'm sorry-" She could barely force her aching jaw to move. "I didn't mean it that way-I only wondered why. Why are you setting me free?"

Iddina lowered his arm and studied her as if debating whether or not to tell her. "Because you're going to help me earn a promotion, you stupid little dog" He offered no further explanation as he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her toward him.

Hours later, Jerusha lay in the darkness thinking about his words, wondering what he had meant by them, wondering what to do. Iddina finally slept beside

her. His knife lay beyond him ready for her to use. It was time to carry out her plan.

But what if he was telling her the truth? What if she really would be free again in a few short hours? Jerusha lay awake throughout most of the long night, wondering what Iddina had meant-and wondering what she should do.

Then, as the eastern sky began to grow light and the jackals crawled away to their lairs, Jerusha realized that the slim thread of hope Iddina had dangled before her had been enough to hold on to. Her will to survive had come tentatively to life again. She would live for one more day.

Jerimoth paused in his labors and leaned against his hoe, watching another caravan of refugees rumble down the road past his land. He counted four-five-mix carts loaded with tools and children and household goods, and six weary farmers and their wives, trudging alongside.

Then Jerimoth gripped his hoe once again and attacked the weeds sprouting in his garden plot. He no longer bothered to cross his fields to the roadside to talk to the passing travelers. He would hear the same story from these refugees that he had heard from all the others during the past few weeks: the Assyrians were mobilizing to invade Israel. Everyone was fleeing to escape; some to the fortified capital of Samaria, others leaving Israel altogether, going south to the nation of Judah. If he spoke to them, they would urge him to join them, to escape while he still had a chance.

As his nation writhed in a state of upheaval, Jerimoth watched the quiet days of planting and reaping on his ancient plot of land draw to a close. Like a tremor before the earthquake, the masses of refugees would soon be followed by an even greater horde. No hope remained for Israel. Jerimoth would have to decide what to do. He was born on this land, and if he stayed he would probably die here, as well.

Eventually the caravan passed, but then in the trailing wake of dust Jerimoth spotted a solitary figure walking slowly up the road from the south. He watched as the figure drew near, then recognized his younger brother Saul. He hurried

over to the well to meet him and drew a fresh bucket of water.

"Ah, thank you," Saul said wearily. He held the drinking gourd awkwardly between his right hand and the ugly stump of his left. With his thirst quenched, he tilted his head back and poured water over it. Jerimoth guessed why Saul had come. They stood in silence, neither of them in a hurry to begin this conversation.

Finally Saul gulped more water, then wiped his lips. "We can't wait any longer, Jerimoth. We have to leave before it's too late."

"Just one more week"

"You said that last week and the week before. We can't wait any longer." He rubbed the stump of his hand nervously as he talked.

"But what about Jerusha? Maybe she will-"

"Jerusha is dead. Don't you realize that yet?"

He didn't reply. It was what Eliakim insisted, as well, but Jerimoth didn't believe it. He knew she was alive. He knew it.

Saul sighed heavily, as if tired of repeating a useless conversation. "Listen, Jerimoth-the Assyrians will kill us, too, if we don't get out soon and go someplace safe."

"But how will Jerusha ever find me again if-"

Saul didn't wait for Jerimoth to finish. He groaned and walked up the rise to Jerimoth's house. Hodesh came to the door to meet him.

"We can't wait any longer," Saul told her. "Please make him listen to reason."

"Take my wife and daughter with you, then," Jerimoth said, following Saul up to the house. "I've decided to wait here for Jerusha."

"Even if the Assyrians have Jerusha, even if she's still alive, how could you possibly rescue her? Be reasonable, will you? Think about it. There are

thousands and thousands of them."

"God has promised-"

"Enough! I've heard it all before. Now it's time to flee to safety. Come with me, Jerimoth, and save what's left of your family!"

Jerimoth didn't reply. He was torn between his concern for Hodesh and Maacah and his fear that Jerusha would return to an empty house.

"Yes or no?" Saul said. "For heaven's sake, don't you know enough to give up?"

"How can I give up on my daughter?"

"I lost both of my daughters! You still have one left! Don't you want to save her?"

Maacah suddenly appeared out of the shadows of the darkened house and wrapped her thin arms around Jerimoth's waist. She was almost fifteen and rapidly approaching womanhood, but she remained slender and wraithlike.

"We can't go yet, Abba. We have to wait for Jerusha."

Saul groaned and gestured in defeat. "I'll wait two more days, Jerimoth. Two days, but that's all. Whether Jerusha comes home or not, we must leave on the third day. That'll give you plenty of time to load everything and meet me in Dabbasheth."

"Yes. Yes. All right" Jerimoth tugged on his beard as he looked into his brother's sorrowful eyes. "Have you thought about where we should go?"

"We have to get out of Israel," Saul said. "Even Samaria won't be safe if the Assyrians attack it. I think we should go south to Judah."

Jerimoth nodded. "I have friends there-Hilkiah the merchant and his son. Maybe they can help us resettle somewhere-out in the countryside."

"Yes, you've spoken of Hilkiah before. It's a good plan." Saul reached out to

stroke Maacah's cheek as she stood with her arms around her father. "I miss my girls," he said. Then his eyes met Jerimoth's as he pleaded with him: "Two days, Jerimoth. If you don't come to Dabbasheth by then, I'll have to leave without you"



Ig

AS THE FIRST RAYS OF DAYLIGHT seeped through the seams of the tent, Iddina stirred in his sleep, then sat up. In one swift movement he reached for his dagger and strapped it to his waist, and Jerusha knew that her chance to die quickly had passed. Exhaustion numbed her. She had stayed awake most of the night, wondering what Iddina's words meant, trying to imagine why he would set her free.

Now she rose from her pallet and began preparing the morning meal, grinding grain into flour and kneading the sticky dough. She felt dazed, and her bruised jaw ached from where he had struck her. A great flurry of activity swept through the camp as the army prepared to march toward Israel, but Jerusha barely noticed. The tantalizing prospect of freedom danced through her mind as she watched the round, flat loaves of bread bake on the firestones. Perhaps Iddina had invented this he as more of the warfare that the Assyrians loved to wage in their victims' minds. It was their cruelest form of torture. Jerusha steeled herself for disappointment, vowing not to let Iddina see her suffer because of his lies.

When the meal was ready, Jerusha helped Marah spread the mat on the ground beneath the tree and lay out the officers' food. Then she squatted beside it, fanning away the black flies that hovered everywhere. As Iddina and the other officers approached, Jerusha saw them laughing and whispering behind their hands, casting odd glances at her.

Marah stopped swatting flies, her hand frozen in midair. "They're plotting something," she said. "Something evil."

Jerusha's heart pounded as if trying to escape from her chest, but she made up her mind not to let them see her fear-or her hope. The officers sat down, and as Jerusha placed Iddina's food in front of him, he grabbed her roughly by the wrist.

"Are you ready to fly away, my little bird?" he grinned.

Jerusha nearly cried aloud. Abba had always called her his happy little bird.

How dare Iddina use those words? She swallowed back her hatred and stared down at her bare feet. "Yes, my lord-I'm ready," she said.

Iddina and the others burst into loud, mocking laughter, and Jerusha felt a sob rising in her chest. Iddina had lied. They would never set her free. She should have died last night while she had the chance. She looked up at him.

"Go pack your things, then, little bird" Iddina gestured toward her tent. "Soon it will be time to fly." One of the officers muttered something, and they all laughed again. Why were they tormenting her like this? Why tantalize her with the hope of freedom if they had no intention of granting it? They were masters of torture, delighting in their game.

Jerusha fled into her tent to avoid their mocking stares, then looked around, wondering what to pack. This must be part of their game, to force her to get ready and then laugh at her again. Besides, what did she have to pack? She owned only the coarse, shapeless dress she wore and the tattered blanket that had once swaddled her daughter. But she knew they would force her to play their sadistic game to the end.

She carefully unfolded the blanket and wrapped some food inside it: yesterday's bread, a chunk of cheese, a cake of dates, some dried smoked meat, a handful of figs. She filled a small skin with water. It was enough to last three or four days, a week if she rationed it. Then she stepped outside again to face her tormentors. They were no longer laughing. They were arguing fiercely.

"Do you want to part with even more of your precious gold?" Iddina shouted.

"Make the stakes as high as you want, Iddina. But if you wager it all, you'll lose it all!"

"Then I'll raise your bet! Because I know I won't lose!" Iddina turned to face Jerusha. "Isn't that right, my pretty one? You're my little good-luck charm, aren't you?"

The men rose to their feet and led Jerusha down through the encampment to where the infantry divisions had their tents, and for the next half hour, the officers paraded her before their assembled ranks. Jerusha couldn't imagine what

cruel game they were playing. She felt confused and disoriented as thousands of cold black eyes studied her as if trying to memorize her face.

Then all at once it made sense. Jerusha nearly cried aloud at the terrible realization of what they had planned. They were setting her free to hunt her down again! She was the object of their wagers. Whichever officer recaptured her would probably receive the promotion Iddina had mentioned last night.

Jerusha felt as if she were sinking in cold, black waters. They would pursue her and track her down for sport as if she were a wild animal, then take her captive again. How long could she hope to stay free with four divisions of Assyrian soldiers trailing her, searching for her? She wanted to scream. Why hadn't she ended her life last night as she had planned? Why hadn't she realized that Iddina would plot something horrible? She knew that mercy played no part in his vicious nature. But before she could recover from her shock at what they were doing to her, they reached the edge of the camp, and the main road that led south toward Israel.

Iddina shoved her into the middle of the road. "Go on, little birdie! Fly away home! I found you the first time, and I can find you again.

She turned to face him, longing to throw herself at his feet and beg him not to do this to her. But he grinned like a wolf and flapped his arms, crying, "Fly! Fly away, little birdie! You have fire, my pretty one, and a strong will to live. I know you'll provide a good hunt."

The watching soldiers dissolved into laughter at his words. As if in a daze, Jerusha turned away from them and stumbled blindly down the road, clutching her bundle to her breast. The sound of their laughter rang in her ears.

Running was useless. She wasn't free from them, and she never would be. She would wander through an unknown land alone and barefoot while they pursued her with chariots and horses and thousands and thousands of men. She wanted to sink down in the dust and wait for them to come for her, refusing to play their sadistic game. But that would make Iddina furious, and he would torture her without mercy. She had to play along.

Jerusha knew that the Assyrians wouldn't break camp and follow her for a

few more hours, but once they did, the well-disciplined soldiers could travel at an exhausting pace. She could never outrun them. Why should she try? She had no reason to keep walking, except that Iddina expected her to. And so she plodded hopelessly on, not caring where the road led.

Jerusha had walked for more than an hour, never once looking back, when suddenly she became aware of a deep, eerie stillness all around her. The strangeness of it made her stop. For the first time in years she no longer heard the low rumble of the army camp, the raucous cries of the vultures, the dying moans of the condemned. Instead, in the echoing silence, she heard the hum of bees and insects, the sweet chirp of songbirds, the soft swish of the wind as it brushed through the treetops. She hadn't heard those sounds in such a long, long time that they seemed like music to her.

Jerusha sank down in the middle of the road to listen as tears streamed down her face. She drew a deep breath and smelled the fragrance of the earth-clean and fresh, free from the stench of smoke and rottenness and death. Dazzling colors replaced the black she had grown so accustomed to-the deep blue of the sky, the rich green of the trees and waving grasses, the snowy white of billowing clouds, the yellow and scarlet of dainty wild flowers. Jerusha had forgotten that such a beautiful world existed.

This was freedom-and this was torture. They would let her taste it and smell it for a while, then snatch it from her again.

"No!" she cried aloud. "Never!"

If only she could call upon God for help; if only He would deliver her. But Jerusha knew that there was no God. He hadn't answered her other prayers, and if she wanted freedom she would have to win it herself. Suddenly she realized how desperately she wanted to remain free. She wanted to beat Iddina at his game or die trying. She hated him, hated what he had done to her, and she vowed that no matter what, she would never return with him to that hell on earth.

Jerusha scrambled to her feet, her heart pounding with determination. She must get away from him, but how? The chariots and horses would overtake her first. Her only hope was to leave the road and climb the rocky hillsides where the horses and chariots couldn't follow. Immediately she left the road and began

blindly running and stumbling across the rugged terrain toward the safety of the steep hills and barren rocks. She imagined Iddina crouching by the side of the road, studying her trail as it cut toward the foothills, and smiling to himself. She hadn't disappointed him.

"All right, Iddina," she said fiercely. "You'll have your hunt."

King Hezekiah sat in his private chambers with Shebna, reading the daily reports. The sun had set more than an hour ago, and his servants had lit all the oil lamps, moving the tall bronze stands closer to him for more light. Reading the tiny lettering made Hezekiah's head ache, and when Shebna offered him a scroll with a long list of numbers, he closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Read it to me, Shebna."

"It is a report on the wheat harvest, Your Majesty with recordbreaking figures once again."

"Enough to export and trade?"

"More than enough. More than last year."

Hezekiah opened his eyes and leaned forward, scanning the list with growing excitement. "That's three years in a row! Think of the goods we can import with profits like these!"

"Our economy continues to prosper, my lord."

"Yes, and do you know why?"

"Certainly. It prospers because of your brilliant economic policies. First you won back valuable farmland where most of this surplus is grown, then you decided not to pay tribute to Assyria."

"That's not why, Shebna."

"I know, I know ... You are going to say it was because of your God."

"How else could we conquer that territory when the Philistine army outnumbered our inexperienced troops ten to one? And all that farmland would be worthless without rain to make the crops grow. You hold the proof right in your hands of how God has blessed this land since we renewed our covenant with Him, and you still refuse to believe it?"

"I am sorry, Your Majesty."

"But the evidence is so clear!"

"I interpret the evidence differently than you do."

Hezekiah's head pounded painfully, but he continued to argue, frustrated by Shebna's stubbornness. "How do you interpret it, then?"

"You are a bold, decisive leader, willing to take enormous risks, such as attacking the Philistines and rebelling against Assyria. And your risks have reaped astounding benefits."

"If I didn't know you better, I'd say you were trying to flatter me."

"Not true."

"Then how did my bold leadership bring three years of abundant rainfall and cause the crops and herds to multiply in record-breaking numbers?"

"I would have to evaluate the rainfall in nations that have not served your God and examine their crop yields before I would be willing to eliminate the possibility of a coincidence."

Hezekiah sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. "Time to quit, Shebna."

"Have I offended you, Your Majesty?"

"The better question is-have you offended God?"

Shebna appeared unconcerned. "Shall I read you this next report, Your Majesty?"

"No, I really want to quit for the day."

"So early? Are you unwell?"

"Just very tired, and this headache is making it difficult to concentrate."

"Well, there is one more issue that I have been wanting to discuss with you for some time," Shebna said.

"Is it important?"

"Yes. It is of vital importance."

Hezekiah closed his eyes. "Go ahead, then."

Shebna drew a deep breath. "The potential for a crisis in our nation is growing worse now that the Assyrian army has invaded Israel. They are only one hundred miles from our borders, and-"

"I'm very aware of that fact."

"-and they may invade our nation next. I would strongly advise you to organize a defensive treaty with some of our neighbors. No single nation can mobilize an army the size of Assyria's, but if we formed an alliance-"

"Shebna, are you forgetting that the reason the Assyrians are invading Israel is because they attempted to do that very thing?"

"We would be more subtle about it than they were, Your Majesty." He smiled slightly and folded his arms across his chest, looking very pleased with himself.

Hezekiah exhaled wearily. "What are you talking about?"

"As you know, we already have trade agreements with all our neighbors...."

"And?"

"So the foundation for a military alliance is already in place. The diplomatic ties, the network of roads, the economic interdependence and cooperation-they are all there. I am only suggesting that we take those trade agreements one step

further."

"How?"

"By establishing family links."

Hezekiah glared at Shebna. "You're talking about marrying the daughters of foreign kings, aren't you?"

"Just consider it for a moment, Your Majesty. Suppose you married Pharaoh's daughter; if the Assyrians threatened Jerusalem, he would send his armies here to defend her and his grandsons."

"Shebna, I'm ruling this nation by God's Law, and that Law says that the king should have only one wife. I won't even discuss marrying another one."

"Just a minute, please. I have reread that passage, Your Majesty, and it says, `the king must not take many wives.' It does not limit you to one."

"But I remember copying that portion with my grandfather. I'm sure he told me that it meant one wife"

"It says many. You may read it for yourself. Even King Solomon formed an alliance by marrying Pharaoh's daughter."

"Yes, and it led to his ruin. Did you read that part, too?"

Shebna's calm facade began to crumble. "Your Majesty, international politics are very complex. Marriage alliances are a modern necessity. You cannot govern this nation with a set of laws that are a thousand years old."

"I can and I will."

"But-"

"Foreign wives bring foreign gods with them, Shebna. They encourage their sons, my sons, to worship those gods. How would Pharaoh respond if I refused to let his daughter worship Isis or Pa or any of her other idols? I won't do it!"

"If you refuse to marry a foreign king's daughter, it might collapse the whole agreement. And the day may come when you will need the support of your neighbors."

"Well, you'll have to find another way to win their support, Shebna, because I won't do it."

The throbbing pain in Hezekiah's head seemed worse than before. Shebna stood abruptly and gathered his scrolls and tablets in icy silence, his dark eyes brooding. Then he stopped and looked up at Hezekiah in stubborn anger.

"I am sorry. But I still do not understand your refusal. I do not see how the Torah would be violated."

Hezekiah faced him with a steady gaze, carefully controlling his own anger. "This may come as a great surprise to you, Shebna, but I love my wife very much. I don't want to marry anyone else-not for Pharaoh, not for politics, not even for pleasure. I don't care if the Torah grants me a hundred wives."

Shebna looked away. "I see. However, I doubt that there are many kings in the world who would agree with you"

"You're probably right about that, Shebna. I doubt it, too."



r9

JERUSHA TRAILED THROUGH THE ROCKY underbrush until her feet bled, yet the mocking foothills appeared no closer than when she had first left the road and started toward them. By noon the sun blazed in the sky, a fiery enemy determined to defeat her. The skin of water was already half empty, and she desperately needed a drink, but the bleak, and countryside offered no water. It seemed useless to go on. She could never survive out here on her own.

She rested for a moment, dizzy and nauseated from the heat. She studied the sky to make sure she still headed south, then plodded forward. The road was no longer visible, but she knew that if she kept the sun's rising point on her left and setting point on her right, she would be going in the right direction. Occasionally she nibbled on some of her food for strength, rationing it carefully.

By dusk, a gradual upward slope in the terrain told Jerusha she had finally reached the foothills. She could no longer see the mountains through the thick forest ahead of her. She yearned to he down, to close her eyes and sleep, but she forced herself to keep going. Her enemies would stop at night, but every hour that she walked put more distance between them and her.

Shortly before dark she stumbled upon a shallow stream trickling down the rocky slopes of the mountain, and she sank down beside it to drink. With her thirst quenched, she refilled her waterskin, then sat for several minutes soaking her tired feet, searching for a way to carry more water. Her exhausted mind found no solution. Her eyes burned with the need to sleep, her legs trembled with fatigue, but she thought of Iddina and scrambled to her feet. She glanced behind her, half expecting to see him, and saw her own trail of crushed weeds winding through the thick brush. Iddina could follow her tracks effortlessly.

"Oh no!" Her voice seemed to echo like a thunderclap through the silent woods.

An inner voice of fear and despair urged Jerusha to quit. She could never escape from Iddina. She may as well give up. But another voice, just as clear, urged her to go on. She had given in to fear before, choosing to live as a slave,

but now something more powerful than fear motivated her: hatred. She would rather die than help Iddina win his evil wager, rather collapse from hunger and exhaustion than live with him for the rest of her life.

Jerusha sloshed into the frigid water. It would hide her tracks, and if she waded ashore carefully, she might lose him. She made slow progress in the knee-deep water. The rocky stream bed bruised the soles of her feet.

Near midnight, when her feet were numb with cold, Jerusha began shivering uncontrollably. She stopped to rest on a large boulder, swaddling her icy feet in her blanket, hugging her knees to her chest. Bears and lions probably roamed these mountain heights, but Jerusha felt strangely unafraid. No savage animal seemed as fierce and brutal as Iddina. At least she would die free.

As the need for sleep bore down on her, Jerusha stood and trudged on. She had to reach the top of the mountain before dawn. They might spot her on the barren upper slopes once daylight came. She waded into the icy water again, following the stream until the current grew too swift. Then, choosing a rocky bank to hide her trail, she abandoned the stream to climb the craggy slope to the summit. As the eastern sky grew light, she struggled over the jagged rocks, her hands and feet bloody and aching. She reached the summit just as the pale stars began to fade, and scrambled over the top, out of sight. She had done it!

Weeping with joy and pain, Jerusha collapsed among the rocks. She had accomplished much more than scaling a mountain. She had conquered a private mountain, as well, climbing out of the emotionless wasteland she had inhabited so long, feeling joy and victory for the first time since giving birth to her daughter. Even Jerusha's pain told her she was alive again, not one of Iddina's lifeless possessions.

But as the sun burned away the morning haze, Jerusha glimpsed the terrain that lay ahead and her triumph evaporated in defeat. She had merely scaled one of the foothills. A huge ridge of mountains loomed ahead, directly south. She couldn't possibly climb them.

Tears blurred her vision as she gazed at the cruel peaks blocking the path to freedom. If she returned to the road in order to find a mountain pass, she would never escape the horse patrols. But how else could she navigate such forbidding

terrain? Despair engulfed her as she counted the rows of mountains she would have to traverse. It was impossible.

Then, on the farthest peak, Jerusha spotted a patch of white. She leaped to her feet, squinting at the horizon, then cried for joy. It was Mount Hermon!

Back home she could see the snowy peak on a clear day. Abba said Mount Hermon was the only mountain in Israel with snow. Fear argued that she was wrong. It wasn't Mount Hermon-and she could never walk that far. But glimpsing the familiar landmark had renewed her hope. Jerusha clambered down the rocky slope toward home.

Descending seemed almost harder than ascending as Jerusha's aching legs continually buckled on the steep gradient, but she persevered, yearning to remain free, to go home. Three times the pitiless sun sank beneath the horizon on her right, and three times it quickly rose to become her enemy again, blazing in a cloudless sky, sucking moisture from her body until her tongue swelled and her lips cracked. She rested or slept only minutes at a time, then struggled to her feet to push on, never looking back.

On the fifth day she spotted a road, threading out of the foothills, crossing a broad valley, then disappearing into the steep mountain range ahead of her. She sat down to eat her last bite of food and to decide what to do. Traveling would be easier on the road, but what if it was the same road she had left five days ago? Then her exhausting journey through the wilderness would have been in vain. The Assyrians would find her again. Fatigue turned her limbs to lead, and she had crossed only the first ridge. Rows of steep mountains still stood between her and Mount Hermon's snowy peak-if it was Mount Hermon.

Suddenly a flicker of movement on the distant road caught Jerusha's eye. The Assyrians! Somehow they had overtaken her, even though she had walked nonstop. She sat motionless, straining to watch the tiny figures, and saw splashes of color instead of black. Then she noticed the slowly plodding camels. A caravan!

Tears of relief sprang to her eyes, and without thinking, Jerusha ran down the slope toward the road, tripping and stumbling, exhausting her last reserve of strength. She had to reach the caravan. They would help her get home.

But by the time Jerusha staggered onto the road, the caravan had disappeared. The flaming sun, now at its zenith, made her nauseated. Disappointment and fatigue left her defeated. Her food and water were gone. She couldn't will her quivering legs to take another step. Jerusha crawled beneath a clump of bushes along the side of the road to rest, to think, to escape the blinding sun for a moment before going on. But her eyes drifted closed in total exhaustion, and she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

She awoke hours later to the sound of breathing. She focused on a dark figure bending over her and saw a face, a bushy beard, a pair of dark eyes.

Jerusha screamed.

Jerimoth watched as Hodesh folded their bedding and tied it to the loaded cart outside their door. The family had eaten breakfast in silence, and when Maacah finished washing the dishes she added them to the cart, as well. Jerimoth gazed up the deserted road again, then reluctantly led his team of oxen from the stable and hitched them to the cart. His agonized wait for Jerusha had been unbearable. He couldn't sleep or eat, and his eyes ached from the strain of watching for her. Day and night he had never stopped pleading with God for her safe return. But when she still hadn't returned, he knew his brother wouldn't wait any longer.

Jerimoth looked north one final time. The pale dawn sky was clear, and he saw the snowy peak of Mount Hermon perched on the horizon. It was time to go. They had to flee Israel. Yet how could he abandon Jerusha? Jerimoth knew he could never leave.

Tears slowly coursed down his face as he turned to his wife. "Hodesh, listen to me. I'm taking you and Maacah into Dabbasheth so you can go with Saul. But I can't leave without Jerusha."

"Jerimoth, no!"

"Saul will take you to Jerusalem, where you'll both be safe. Hilkiah will look after you until Jerusha and I come."

Hodesh reached up to touch Jerimoth's cheek. "I'm not going anywhere without you," she said softly. "Saul can take Maacah to Jerusalem, but I'm staying here with you."

Jerimoth looked at his wife's determined face and knew it was useless to argue with her. He drew her into his arms. "All right, Hodesh. All right." His voice was thick with emotion. "I'll take Maacah into town so she can go with Saul."

"Abba, no!" Maacah's voice came from behind Jerimoth. "Don't make me go with Uncle Saul-please!"

"Your mother and I will come later, with Jerusha"

"But I want to wait for her, too! Please don't break our family apart again. Please, Abba!"

Jerimoth groaned and leaned against the cart. If only Jerusha would miraculously appear and end this agonizing dilemma he faced. Jerimoth understood the danger of remaining in Israel as the Assyrians marched closer and closer. He longed to send his wife and daughter to safety, but he didn't know how he could force them to go against their will. Nor could he leave without Jerusha.

As Jerimoth wrestled over what to do, Maacah quietly unloaded her bedding and an armload of cooking pots from the cart and carried them back into the house. Hodesh watched her disappear through the door, then picked up the bedroll she and Jerimoth shared and followed her inside.

On the horizon another caravan of refugees rumbled down the road from the north, and Jerimoth watched in mournful silence as they streamed past his land-six wagons-seven-eight. He counted nineteen children perched on towering loads, carried on shoulders, or walking wearily alongside. Then, as the caravan disappeared into the trailing cloud of dust, Jerimoth unhitched his team of oxen and led them out to pasture.

Jerusha scrambled backward through the bushes, scratching her arms on the

branches in a desperate attempt to escape from the man who was bending over her. But instead of pursuing her, the man held out his hand, offering her a cup of water. It took her a moment to realize that he wasn't an Assyrian.

He was her father's age, dressed in a homespun tunic and sandals. His brown eyes looked kind, and he spoke soothingly, as if to a frightened animal, but Jerusha couldn't understand what he said. Her mouth and throat felt parched, and suddenly she didn't care what he did to her. She reached for the water and gulped it greedily, then glanced up at the man again. He extended his palm, offering a handful of dates. Jerusha's stomach ached from hunger; she snatched them from him and devoured the sweet fruit.

"Thank you," she murmured.

He looked surprised. "Israel?" he asked, pointing to her.

"Yes, I'm from Israel."

He beckoned to her, then turned and walked toward the road. Jerusha slowly rose to her feet and saw that he was traveling alone with a cart and a team of oxen. He turned and beckoned again, then pointed to the cart. What did he want with her?

Jerusha considered all the possibilities from slavery to rape, then realized that he couldn't do anything to her that hadn't already been done. Even if he killed her, she would still escape from the Assyrians. Besides, his cart was headed south. With nothing to lose, Jerusha walked toward the road.

But the sun felt so hot, her legs so weary, that the earth began to sway, and she collapsed a few feet from the road. The stranger hurried over and gently lifted her into the cart. He flicked his short whip over the oxen, and the cart jolted down the road with Jerusha's new captor walking alongside it. Before long, the warm sun and slowly swaying cart rocked her into an exhausted sleep.

The sun hung low in the afternoon sky when she awoke. Furrowed fields and vineyards dotted the rolling hills beside the road, but the country appeared deserted and strangely quiet. The Assyrians were coming. Everyone had fled. As the oxen plodded sluggishly down the road, Jerusha silently begged them to

move faster.

Fully awake now, she studied the stranger as he walked patiently beside his oxen. His clothing and features were not of an Israelite, and Jerusha guessed from his deep tan and brawny shoulders that he was a farmer or a laborer. She thought of him as her captor even though he hadn't taken her by force. Why had he helped her? What did he want with her? And what would happen if she tried to run away from him now? But Jerusha was much too exhausted to run, much too grateful for a chance to ride, even if the pace was maddeningly slow

The snow-capped mountain loomed closer now, and although she couldn't be certain, it did resemble the familiar peak of Mount Hermon. Once, when the man turned around, Jerusha pointed to it, asking, "Is that Mount Hermon?" But he shrugged and shook his head, muttering in a language she didn't understand. She tried saying a few words in the Assyrian tongue, but he didn't understand that either. Who was he? Why was he traveling this road all alone when everyone else had obviously fled before the approaching Assyrians?

As the sun set, the stranger led the oxen down a side road to a tiny village tucked between the shadowy hills. Jerusha knew what the Assyrians would do to this village. The town's thin walls would be pitifully inadequate against Assyrian battering rams. She wanted to run through the streets and warn the remaining inhabitants to flee for their lives, but they spoke a language she didn't understand, nor did they understand hers. As she passed through the gate she saw that the streets were nearly deserted. No oil lamps glowed through the shutters of the houses, no smoke rose from the hearths. Then the huge iron gates swung shut behind her for the night, and Jerusha felt trapped.

"Wait! Let me out," she cried, but no one listened to her. She didn't want to stay locked in this village, even for one night. But they had barred the gates and now she was their prisoner. Jerusha trembled as she followed the stranger through the narrow, twisting streets. She hadn't been in a town since she had been captured, and it seemed as though the houses and walls were about to tumble in on her, suffocating her. She would never be able to sleep in one of these terrifying buildings.

But her captor led her to the open market square, which was tightly shuttered and deserted except for a few weary travelers like themselves. He unhitched his

oxen to feed and water them, then prepared a simple meal, offering half to Jerusha. When she'd eaten, the stranger gave her his cloak and prepared a bed for her in the cart while he slept on the ground nearby, protecting her.

Why was he doing this? What did he want in return? The man reminded Jerusha of her father, and she realized that if Abba had found a hungry stranger, lost and alone, he would help her, too, expecting nothing in return. Could it be that simple?

Jerusha lay awake for a long time, staring at the starry sky until she fell into a fitful sleep.



20'

ELIAKIM TOUCHED THE MEZUZAH on the doorpost, absently performing the ritual before entering his house. He found his father pacing the foyer, his head bowed, his hands tightly clasped, his lips moving in silent prayer. As Eliakim entered, Hilkiah looked up.

"There you are at last! Any news?"

Exhaustion numbed Eliakim and slowed his thoughts. He stumbled to the bench and sank down. "News? About Jerimoth, you mean?"

"Yes-have you heard anything?"

"No, Abba. No news. I didn't see Jerimoth with this latest group of refugees, but there are so many of them... " Eliakim sighed and bent to untie his sandals.

"God of Abraham, keep our friends safe," Hilkiah murmured. His face looked strained, with no trace of his usual merry humor. He wrung his hands as he paced the length of the room again, then stopped when he glanced at Eliakim. "What happened to you, son?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you've been run over by a caravan."

"I feel like it, too" He slumped against the wall and closed his eyes. "I've never worked so hard in my life, Abba. And the refugees still keep pouring in. Israel must be deserted by now. We're running out of room to house them all."

"King Hezekiah must know you're capable, or he wouldn't have placed you in charge of such a big project."

"I don't think he realized it was going to be this big when we started. None of us did. We're building permanent housing for the refugees as fast as we can, but we still can't keep up with the demand."

"You look exhausted. Why don't you wash up and rest a bit before the evening sacrifice?"

"Sounds wonderful." He gripped his father's hand, and Hilkiah helped pull Eliakim to his feet. He went out to their courtyard to bathe in the mikveh, and the cool water rejuvenated him. After changing into clean clothes, he felt refreshed and hungry.

A servant met him as he reentered the house. "Master Eliakim, there's a stranger at the gate asking for your father."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, my lord. But he looks like one of those Israeli refugees that have been pouring into the city."

"Where's Abba?"

"He's still resting."

"Good. Let the stranger in quietly and don't wake my father, or we'll probably be stuck with a houseful of strangers for dinner."

Eliakim stood in front of a bronze mirror and smoothed down his curly wet hair as he waited. The servant returned shortly, followed by a bewildered-looking man in ragged clothing and blistered, dirt-caked feet. Eliakim had labored to resettle and house thousands of refugees over the past weeks, and here stood another one. He was glad that Hilkiah was still sleeping.

"I'm Hilkiah's son, Eliakim," he said just above a whisper. "How can I help you?"

The stranger's mouth opened but no sound came out. He stared at Eliakim, then glanced around the luxurious room and backed up a few steps as if he had made a terrible mistake and come to the wrong house. Eliakim looked him over, then gaped in shock when he saw that the stranger's left hand had been amputated.

The man thrust his hand behind his back when he saw Eliakim's reaction. "I

... I'm sorry."

"No, forgive me," Eliakim said. "I was rude to stare. Please, have a seat"

"I can't stay. I'm sorry for bothering you, my lord. I ... I never would have come if I had known-I mean, my brother never told me . . ." He glanced around the room nervously. Eliakim began to lose patience.

"Told you what? Who's your brother?"

"I saw you today in the refugee camp, my lord. You're King Hezekiah's representative, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right."

The man edged toward the door. "Forgive me for troubling you. Jerimoth never mentioned that you were a man of such importance."

Eliakim forgot about his sleeping father as he shouted, "Jerimoth! Is he here with you?"

"No, my lord."

"Well, where is he, then?"

"He's still in Israel."

"No! Why hasn't he left? Doesn't he realize the danger he's in?"

"I begged him to leave, my lord. Then I waited for him as long as I possibly could, but he wouldn't come with me"

"What about his family-Hodesh and Maacah?"

"I offered to bring them with me, but they wouldn't leave without him."

Eliakim saw Jerimoth's features mirrored in his brother's mournful face. He remembered Jerimoth's story of the day the Assyrians captured Jerusha and how his brother had lost his hand attempting to save his daughters. When he imagined Jerimoth and his family enduring another brutal invasion, Eliakim was

overwhelmed. He stumbled to the seat he had offered his guest and sank down.

"Go wake my father," he told the servant, then he looked at the stranger again. "I'm sorry-what's your name, my friend?"

"Saul. I'm from the village of Dabbasheth. Jerimoth is my older brother" He massaged his stump nervously as he talked. "Jerimoth inherited our father's ancestral land, and so I became-I was--a potter by trade." He hid his hand behind his back again.

"Don't return to the refugee camp, Saul. You're welcome to stay here as our guest. We'll be eating dinner in a little while, and I'm sure my father will want to talk to you. He has been worried sick about Jerimoth and his family. We're both very fond of them."

As Eliakim spoke, Hilkiah wandered into the room, blinking sleepily. "What's going on? Is there news of Jerimoth?"

"Abba, this is Jerimoth's brother, Saul."

Hilkiah gripped Saul's shoulders. "What's happened to him? Where is he?"

"He's still in Israel, my lord."

"But he's coming soon, isn't he? Tell me he's planning to get out of there!"

"I begged him to leave, my lord. I waited as long as I could. He ... he wouldn't go."

"Why not?" Hilkiah asked. "Why won't he leave?"

Saul stared at the floor. "He's waiting for his daughter. He still thinks Jerusha is coming home."

"Oh no," Eliakim groaned. "How could he be such afooP"

"Eliakim!" Hilkiah said sharply.

"I warned you, Abba. I tried to tell you not to encourage Jerimoth's hopes. I

begged you to make him see the truth but-"

"Saul, I'm sorry," Hilkiah said. "My son doesn't understand."

"My daughters are already dead," Saul said, "or maybe I would have stayed, too. But we never found Jerusha, and that makes Jerimoth think she's still alive."

"I know, Saul. I know. But please forgive my son. He doesn't have children of his own. If he did he would understand why Jerimoth-" Hilkiah's voice broke. "He would understand the strength of a father's love for his child."

"I'm sorry," Eliakim muttered.

"And if he understood that," Hilkiah continued, "he would understand why Jerimoth has faith in his heavenly Father's love, as well." He drew Saul into his embrace. "Ali, my poor friend. How you have suffered! Thank God you made it here. All we can do now is pray for your dear brother and his family." He released Saul as a shofar sounded from the Temple Mount.

"They're announcing the evening sacrifice," Hilkiah said. "Will you come with my son and me? We'll pray for their safe return."

Eliakim rose slowly to his feet. "I'm sorry, Abba, but I can't pray with you"

"What?"

"I can't pray that prayer. I don't believe it's possible for God to help Jerimoth and his family anymore."

Thousands of stars sparkled in the sky when the stranger shook Jerusha awake. Terror prickled through her veins, and she bolted out of the cart, ready to run. But the man whispered soothingly to her as he yoked the oxen and got the cart ready, and she realized that he was telling her it was time to leave.

The wagon wheels rumbled like thunder on the deserted cobblestone street. Jerusha saw that the city gates stood open, and she silently wept with relief. Neither of them glanced back at the doomed village as they headed south once

again. They traveled for an hour before the sun rose, then stopped to rest and to eat some dry bread and parched grain from the cart.

When they started down the road again, Jerusha felt restless and impatient with the oxen's lethargic pace. She had regained her strength and yearned to run ahead, aware that the Assyrians could quickly overtake the plodding oxen. Yet she was reluctant to leave this man who had saved her, feeling as if she owed him loyalty in return for his kindness. He had not only provided food and rest, but he had been a bridge between the world of the Assyrians and a world of trust and compassion.

Every time they came to the top of a rise, Jerusha glanced anxiously over her shoulder. They were so close to the snow-capped mountain now that the foothills hid it from view. The road climbed steadily upward, and Jerusha got out of the cart and walked to lighten the load. When the sun stood directly overhead and the roadbed burned beneath her bare feet, they reached a crossroad. The man started heading toward the right fork, but Jerusha stopped, seeking her bearings from the sun, scanning the horizon for a glimpse of Mount Hermon.

The stranger halted his oxen and watched her, then tried to convince her to take the right fork with him by pointing and chattering. But his route headed west, toward the setting sun and the Great Sea; Jerusha's home lay down the other path to the south.

"Israel?" she asked, indicating the left fork.

He studied her gravely, and she saw his concern for her safety. Finally he nodded. But then he gestured to the way they had come and pleaded with her, jabbering urgently. Tears sprang to Jerusha's eyes as his compassion overwhelmed her.

"I know they're coming," she said. "But I want to go home, to Israel."

He gazed at her, biting his lip, then he turned and rummaged through his cart. Jerusha panicked, fighting the urge to run as she imagined him brandishing a weapon and forcing her to stay with him. But a moment later he handed her a skin of water and her tattered blanket, filled with food.

Tears flowed silently down her face. She wanted to thank him but didn't know how She didn't even know his name. He mumbled something as he pushed the provisions into her hands, and Jerusha felt the tender stirrings of love for the first time since her baby died.

"Thank you," she murmured. "Shalom."

"Shalom." He smiled sadly and raised his hand in a little wave. Then he snapped his whip, and his cart headed west, leaving Jerusha alone in the middle of the road.



21

WHEN THE MORNING SACRIFICE ENDED, Hezekiah lingered on the royal platform for a moment, reluctant to leave the atmosphere of worship that permeated the Temple. The stirring music and daily confession of his sins left him with a quiet sense of Yahweh's presence that he wished would last all day. It seldom did.

The Temple courtyards emptied slowly, crowded with refugees fleeing the Assyrian invasion. Their presence unsettled Hezekiah, making him question his decision to rebel against Assyria. He sighed and started down the royal walkway to the palace, wishing he had his grandfather's unshakable faith in God.

"Your Majesty! Please wait!" He turned and saw Eliakim hurrying toward him with his robes flapping in the wind. Then the engineer leaped over the barrier that separated the royal dais from the courtyard. "Your Majesty-may I have a word with you, please?"

"This is neither the time nor the place, Eliakim. You may petition me at the palace through Shebna." He walked away, irritated at Eliakim's presumption, but Eliakim hurried to keep pace alongside him.

"Please, Your Majesty. I've tried to go through the proper channels, but Shebna refused my request."

"Shebna has the authority to speak on my behalf. If he refused your request, then I can't help you." Hezekiah continued walking, hoping Eliakim would have the sense to retreat.

"But, Your Majesty, Shebna doesn't understand God's Law"

Hezekiah glanced at Shebna waiting in the Court of the Gentiles. He was watching them from behind the barrier he was forbidden to cross, and his dark face smoldered with rage.

"Is this matter worth risking my anger?" Hezekiah asked.

"Yes, my lord-that's why I did it this way. I'm sorry."

"Come with me, then." He led Eliakim down the royal walkway until they reached the Court of the Gentiles, then held up his hand, cautioning Shebna to remain silent while he spoke. "I'm going to hear your petition, Eliakim, only because you've worked hard and served me faithfully. Don't use this as an excuse to bypass Shebna in the future. I've already warned you that he has the authority to speak for me.

"I understand" Eliakim drew a deep breath and pushed his hair off his forehead. "Your Majesty, I would like to request more funds for the refugees. The money you've allotted for housing has run out. I submitted the request formally, but-"

"I refused," Shebna said. "And I will continue to refuse it."

"But the flood of immigrants hasn't even begun to crest!" Eliakim said. "People are pouring in by the thousands every day, and they need housing and food and-"

"It is not in the economic interests of our nation to spend any more funds on the refugees," Shebna said.

"But it is! These people will become assets to our economy!"

Shebna gestured to the outer court, where a ragged group of refugees was begging alms from the Judeans as they filed through the Temple gates. "They are not assets," Shebna said. "They are worthless beggars looking for a free handout."

"They wouldn't have to beg if you'd give me the funds to help them!" Eliakim turned to plead with Hezekiah. "Your Majesty, they're forced to beg because they're desperate. But most of them were once farmers or potters or tanners or other craftsmen. They'd be willing to work if we gave them a chance."

Hezekiah watched as the refugees continued to beg, ignored by the wealthier Judeans. "What are you proposing, Eliakim?"

"Give me the funds to feed them and help them get a new start in our nation. I

promise you they'll work to pay it back."

Shebna exhaled angrily. "I have offered him government loans, Your Majesty, but he refused them. He wants a free handout. I did everything I could short of making these people a huge financial drain on our nation, but it was not enough for him. That is why I refused to pass his request on to you."

"Wait a minute," Hezekiah said. "Let me get this straight. If you requested funds, Eliakim, why did you refuse the loans?"

"Because they violate the Torah."

"And I suppose you are also an expert on the Law, as well as an engineer?" Shebna asked.

Eliakim grinned sheepishly. "I should be an expert-my father has been quoting it to me all my life."

Shebna crossed his arms. "Then how does accepting a loan violate the Law?"

"In the third book of Moses it says that if one of our countrymen becomes poor and is not able to support himself, we should help him so he can continue to live among us. We're not to take interest of any kind from him, but-"

"They are not our countrymen," Shebna interrupted.

"We're all sons of Abraham. And it also says that if you lend money to one of God's people who is needy, charge him no interest-"

"That is absurd!"

"No, he's right," Hezekiah said. "The Torah explains that we were all slaves before the Lord redeemed us, and so we shouldn't exact usury from one another"

"But an interest-free loan is the same as a free handout!" Shebna said. "You know we will never see that money again."

"Yes, we will," Eliakim insisted. "The Torah says, `If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands ... you will be blessed in the

city and blessed in the country. However, if you do not obey the Lord your God ... all these curses will come upon you and overtake you-'"

"Enough," Hezekiah said. "I know the rest: `You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed' . . . and so on. I'm sorry to overrule your deci sion, Shebna, but he's right." Eliakim exhaled in relief, but Shebna's anger and humiliation smoldered dangerously.

"Continue your work with the refugees, Eliakim, and I'll see that arrangements are made for some interest-free loans."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. You won't regret it-I promise." Eliakim bowed and quickly disappeared.

All that day and late into the night, one question continued to nag at Hezekiah. What if Eliakim hadn't been willing to speak up for the refugees? What if he had given up after Shebna's refusal? By not helping his brethren, Hezekiah would have violated God's Law-and that worried him deeply. Shebna's decision seemed logical, and Hezekiah had agreed with it at first, but God's Law often disagreed with human reasoning. By ignoring that Law, Shebna could have triggered a disaster-and Hezekiah's confidence in him had been seriously shaken. As much as he hated to do it, Hezekiah would have to monitor Shebna's decisions to make sure this never happened again.

Eliakim had risked a lot for the refugees' sake and had earned Hezekiah's respect. As he lay awake that night, Hezekiah found that he envied Eliakim. The engineer's integrity and compassion sprang from a source that Hezekiah had never known-the loving discipline of a godly father.

Iddina crouched by the fork in the road and studied the footprints lightly etched in the dust. "It's her. I know it's her." Three of Iddina's best trackers stood around him, observing him with cautious respect.

"Do you want one of us to keep following the oxcart, sir?"

"No. She turned south. A little birdie, flying home to her nest." He stood up,

brushing the dust from his hands, and studied the rutted road until it disappeared behind a small rise. "An excellent hunt," he said. "She provided a good chase. But she's close to home now, and she's growing careless. This is almost too easy." He twisted his sandal in the dirt, erasing the delicate footprint.

As the sun bore down with relentless heat, Iddina strode over to his horse and untied a skin of water. He gulped noisily, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"She made it farther than I thought she would, sir," one of the trackers said. "The way she started out that day, I figured we would have her back by nightfall."

"She didn't surprise me. She has a strong will to live-though only the gods know why. I wonder if my fellow officers have captured their pitiful village yet. They can sift through the rubble with a sieve:' Iddina said, laughing, "but they won't find her."

"Sir, with all those wagon tracks going in and out, how did you know she'd left the village?"

Iddina removed his dagger from his belt while he unwound his long, fringed sash and used it to wipe the sweat from his forehead. He glanced at the soldier who had asked the question. "Because I know her." He refastened his belt and tucked the weapon in place. "That's the first rule of any hunt: know your prey-what they would do, how they would think."

He stroked his lower lip as he studied his three trackers, pleased with their admiring gazes. "I know her," he repeated, "and she wouldn't like to be locked behind city walls."

Iddina mounted his horse in one swift, muscular leap, and the other men hurried to follow him. "We're close now-very close," he said. "Search inside every house and barn, under every rock and bush, until we get her back-understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"She's mine. She belongs to me. But when we find her, you will all have a

share."

Jerimoth awoke before dawn and lay on his mat, listening. Something had jolted him awake. He raised up on his elbows and cocked his head, straining to listen. He did hear something! He tossed the covers aside and leaped to his feet, startling Hodesh.

"What is it?"

"Shh! Listen!" He ran to the window overlooking the road and flung open the shutter, but it was too dark to see anything.

"You were dreaming, Jerimoth. There's nothing-"

But before Hodesh could finish, Jerimoth bolted from the house and ran down through his vineyard toward the road. He had waited for so many years to hear Jerusha's soft footsteps on the dusty road that he had imagined them many times before. Was he imagining them now? He stood in the semidarkness behind the leafy vines, his eyes straining for his first glimpse of her.

At last a lone figure came into view, a pale specter, a shade darker than the gloom around her. But even in the dim light before dawn Jerimoth knew her at once.

"Jerusha! Oh, thank God-my Jerusha!" He raced toward her, stumbling down the rutted road. The figure froze, startled by Jerimoth's sudden appearance. Then she began running toward him, arms outstretched.

"Abba! Abba!"

Jerimoth clasped his beloved daughter fiercely. He would never let her go. "Praise God! Oh, praise God!" He wanted to dance and leap and shout for joy. Yahweh had brought her home again. "Oh, thank you, God! Thank you for my Jerusha!"

She was alive! He leaned back to gaze at her beloved face and saw how thin

she was. He held a mere skeleton in his arms instead of his vibrant, healthy daughter. And she looked old, as old as the trees that had shaded his land for centuries-not in appearance, but in her spirit. He saw death in her vacant eyes and in her tattered soul.

"Dear God, what have they done to you?" he moaned. "What have they done to my little girl?" He lifted her into his arms and carried her up to the house, stumbling over vines in the path, his vision blinded by tears.

"Hodesh, look! She's home! Jerusha is home!"

Hodesh cried out with joy and clung to her daughter, too overwhelmed to speak.

A moment later Maacah scrambled down the ladder from the loft. "Jerusha, is it really you? Oh, thank God-it is! It really is you!" She threw her arms around her sister and wept.

"I never thought I'd see any of you again," Jerusha sobbed. "I never thought I'd come home again!"

"But you're here! Oh, God, thank you! Thank you!" Jerimoth murmured the words over and over as he rocked her in his arms. Yahweh had answered his prayers. He had done the impossible. God had brought his beloved daughter back from the dead.



22

JERUSHA HAD DREAMED OF THIS moment for so long that she could scarcely believe it was real. But she felt Abba's strong arms crushing her to his chest, smelled the sweet outdoors smell on his clothes, felt the soft brush of his beard. Mama's sturdy hands stroked her hair, caressed her face, dried her tears. It wasn't a dream.

"Mama ... Abba ... I never thought I'd see you again!" Jerusha sobbed.

She was home. She had made it home again. Everything seemed unchanged-the simple, handmade furnishings, the oxen in their stall opposite the living quarters, the soot-smudged cooking pots, even the clumps of fragrant herbs hanging from the ceiling beams seemed the same.

Yet everything seemed so different. Abba appeared older, thinner, and his broad shoulders were hunched as if he carried a heavy burden. She saw the jagged scar on his forehead, too white against his tanned face. Strands of gray streaked Mama's mahogany hair, and she looked shrunken and small. Maacah was no longer a wispy eleven-year-old but had grown into a handsome young woman. Jerusha recognized her by the freckles sprinkled across her upturned nose. How she loved her family! She would never let them out of her sight again.

"Look at you!" Jerimoth said as he stroked her swollen, blistered feet. "Look at your poor feet! Did you walk all the way from Nineveh?"

"No, Abba. I never went as far away as that. I've been living with the army, and they've been fighting just north of here all this time. I walked part of the way home, over the mountains, until a stranger let me ride in his cart."

"An angel-God sent His angel," Jerimoth murmured. "I knew you were alive. When we didn't find your body with the others ..."

Jerusha turned away, ashamed. What would her family think of her if they knew how she had survived? She could never tell them what she had become.

Jerusha shivered, but it wasn't the damp air inside the house that chilled her. The coldness crept out from her soul as she lied to her parents.

"They let me live so that I could cook for them-for their officers.

"And now you escaped?" Jerimoth asked.

"No, Abba. They let me go. This is a game for them, a sport. They set me free so they could track me down again"

"They would hunt my daughter like an animal?"

Jerusha knew Abba could never comprehend how evil they were, how brutal and vicious. She shivered again as she remembered her pursuers. Home was not the end of her journey; it was only the beginning. She scrambled to her feet, tugging on Jerimoth's hands.

"Abba, we've got to get out of here! They're coming!"

Jerimoth clasped her tightly to his chest. "I will never let them have you again. Never!"

"But they're right behind me-chasing me! I can't stop running!" She struggled out of his embrace. "We all have to get out of here, Abba. I don't want to go back with them! I'd rather die!"

"The Assyrians are still tracking you?"

"Yes, Abba! Please, we can't stay here! We've got to hurry!"

But Jerimoth stood paralyzed, as if he didn't believe her. Why didn't he move? Why didn't he run?

"You'll be safe here," he said at last. "There's a hiding place under the house." He kicked the rug aside and lifted the flagstone to show her the empty cistern. "When the Assyrians come you can all hide in there. They won't find you-you'll be safe."

"You don't understand!" she cried. "When the Assyrians came all those other

times, they were only idle soldiers on a binge for fun. This time their entire army is invading us! They won't leave us here, Abba. They'll kill us all, or worse-they'll make us their slaves! Nothing will be left of Israel when they're through with it!"

"I won't leave my land," Jerimoth said quietly. "If what you say is true, then there is no safe place to go. IT die here, on the land of my fathers."

Despair overwhelmed Jerusha until she felt as if she was drowning. She struggled to breathe as she turned to her mother, gripping her hands. "Mama, please talk to him, make him listen to me! We can't stay here!"

Hodesh nodded toward Jerimoth, who stood in the doorway, gazing at the fields and vineyards he had tended all his life. "I could never persuade him to leave. Where could he go? This is his land. He is rooted here, like his vines and olive trees"

Jerusha fought the urge to scream. "How can I make you understand? I've struggled for so long to survive, to come home and see you again! We can't let them'win now-we can't!"

Suddenly Jerimoth stiffened. "It's too late," he said, staring at the horizon. "They're coming. I can see the dust cloud on the horizon and a few riders out in front"

"NO!" she screamed. The Assyrians had caught up with her! They had found her! Jerusha bolted for the door, desperate to escape, but Jerimoth blocked her path. "Move out of my way! Let me go!" she screamed, beating her father's chest, struggling to push past him and flee from the house. She wanted to run and run forever. It took all three of them to subdue her and keep her inside the house.

At last Jerusha collapsed to the floor, trembling and weeping with fear. Then she drew her knees to her chest as her mind began to splinter into madness. Dimly, she heard her father's voice trying to call her back.

"I'll hide you from them, Jerusha. I'll keep you safe. I won't let them find you again. Yahweh is merciful. He'll let me die on my land, and He'll keep the rest of

you safe underground."

Jerusha looked up, slowly comprehending what he was telling her. She saw the open cistern and clutched him desperately. "You have to hide, too, Abba."

"There isn't enough room. Besides, I don't want to live to see what they do to my land."

"Abba, please," Maacah begged.

"No, we have Jerusha back," he said. "Yahweh answered our prayers; that is enough for me. Yahweh will protect all three of you."

Hodesh shook her head. "I'm staying with you, Jerimoth. I'm your wife, and my place is with you."

"Don't be foolish. Who will take care of our girls?"

"Look," Hodesh said, pointing to the cistern. "There isn't enough room for me, either. Please, let me stay with you."

Jerimoth pulled her into his arms. "All right, Hodesh. All right."

Jerusha could barely comprehend what was happening. She was losing Mama and Abba all over again! She fell into their arms, clinging to them in sorrow, memorizing their faces for eternity. The life they had shared in this ancient stone house was coming to an end ... this time forever. They clung to each other for the last few moments that remained.

At last Jerimoth wiped his eyes. "Enough. It's time. God has helped you survive, Jerusha. Promise me that you'll take care of your sister now"

The room seemed to whirl. "I promise, Abbas"

While Hodesh lowered dried fruit, cheese, and bread into the cistern, Jerimoth tenderly laid his hands on Jerusha and Maacah and prayed for them. "Ah, Sovereign Lord, keep them in the hollow of your hand. Take care of my precious girls for me. You saved Jerusha for a reason, Lord. May she find that reason and be a living testimony to your goodness and grace"

Then he wrapped his arms around them, crushing them to his heart. "My beloved daughters! I wanted to recite the blessing for each of you on your wedding day, but it can never be. Somehow-someday-God will turn your tears of sorrow into joy again. In faith that such a day will come-in faith that one day you will laugh and sing and hold my grandchildren in your arms-yes, in faith I will bless you now...

"May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May He make you as Sarah and Rebecca. May He bless you with His love and grant you His peace. Amen."

He kissed Jerusha, then pushed her away. Mama helped her climb into the cistern, then Maacah slid in beside her.

"I love you both," Abba whispered. "Shalom."

A moment later he moved the stone into place, covering the hole and plunging Jerusha into total darkness.

Jerimoth wiped his eyes and peered out the door again. The dust cloud on the horizon loomed larger than before, and he heard a rumbling sound, like summer thunder. Four Assyrian soldiers had stopped beside his vineyard and were dismounting. Jerimoth ducked inside the adjoining stable and unlatched the outside gate, then slapped his oxen on their rumps, setting them free to fend for themselves.

When he returned, he drew his wife into his arms, clinging to her in silence. Finally he tilted her face up and looked into her eyes, gently wiping her tears with his callused hand.

"I love you, Hodesh. Don't be afraid. Yahweh is with us."

"I know," she nodded.

"Our girls will live. Yahweh will keep them safe."

Then, holding his wife by the hand, Jerimoth walked outside into the sunlight and down through his vineyard, silently praising God as he faced the approaching holocaust.

Iddina dismounted beside the vineyard and stooped to examine the footprints he had been following. The trail halted abruptly in the middle of the road as if the girl had floated away. But then he saw a larger set of prints leading up the path through the vineyard. Of course-someone had carried her.

As Iddina stood, he heard the soft whoosh of an arrow and a dull thud as it struck flesh, followed by a startled, agonized cry. In quick succession another arrow swished from a bow, another thump sounded as it hit its mark, and another victim moaned in pain and surprise. Iddina whirled around and saw two bodies sprawled in the vineyard. He turned to his men in time to see one of them sliding his bow back into its quiver.

"Why did you shoot them?" he asked angrily.

"They were coming toward us, sir. I was afraid they might be armed."

Iddina lifted the soldier by his tunic and hurled him to the ground, then pushed his face into the dirt. "Look at that trail, you fool! She's here! Those two people probably know where she is. And now you've killed them!"

Iddina kicked the soldier onto his back, drew a dagger from his belt and slit his throat. As the soldier lay dying, Iddina turned to his other two men.

"No more stupid mistakes! Spread out and search every inch of this place until you find her."

Iddina followed a well-worn path through the vineyard, which led to the stone house on the rise. He paused beside the two bodies-a man's and a woman's-sprawled side by side in a spreading puddle of blood. He rolled them over, then braced his foot on each chest in turn, jerking the arrows out and placing them in his own quiver. He felt a momentary, grudging respect for the soldier he had just killedthe warrior had shot his arrows straight through their hearts, killing them instantly.

From the doorway of the house Iddina saw the infantry advancing down the road. He would have to hurry before hordes of tramping soldiers wiped out every trace of the girl's trail. He stormed into the house and began ripping it apart, smashing cooking pots and storage jars, kicking at piles of hay and manure in

the stable, slashing through straw pallets and bedding with his dagger. The fire on the hearth was warm, the food fresh, the house recently inhabited, unlike the hundreds of other houses they had searched along the way. Again he cursed the foolish soldier for killing the two occupants.

Suddenly Iddina froze. Two occupants. Yet he had just ripped open three sleeping pallets, two down here and one in the loft. All three had been rolled out on the floor, recently used. With deliberate patience, Iddina searched every inch of the house, examining every crack, testing every stone, looking for a missed clue or secret hiding place. He would find her. The game had become challenging to him again, and he sniffed the air for her scent, smiling with anticipation and delight.

Jerusha huddled in the cramped hole beside her sister and sobbed. Not even a pinhole of light penetrated around the edges of the stone lid or through the plastered walls of the cistern. She couldn't tell if her eyes were open or shut, and the darkness and confining space terrified her. She whimpered, trying not to scream. She was buried alive!

Maacah squeezed Jerusha's hand as if sensing her fear. "It's all right," she whispered. "No one will find you here."

But it wasn't true. Iddina would find her. He never lost his prey. Jerusha wanted to give up and die with her parents, but she knew what Iddina would do to Maacah. For her sister's sake, Jerusha had to survive. She had promised Abba.

Exhaustion numbed her. Dazed by grief and shock, surrounded by inky darkness, Jerusha longed to sleep. But then she heard the rumbling sound and felt the earth trembling beneath her. "They're here," she whispered. "The Assyrians are here." The noise grew louder and louder until the ground shook like an earthquake.

"There must be hundreds of them!" Maacah said.

"Not hundreds-thousands. Tens of thousands."

She remembered the numberless hordes of Assyrians-foot soldiers and cavalry, chariots and war machines, stretching across the horizon as far as the

eye could see-and Jerusha trembled along with the earth. The noise grew louder still, until it seemed as if the earth would shake apart. She heard the distant whinny of horses above the din and an occasional shout.

"Please, God ... please, God," Maacah sobbed.

Sticky with sweat and tears, Jerusha clung to her sister, weeping for their parents. And as they huddled together in the darkness, buried alive, she tried not to envision the horrifying scene above her head.



23

IDDINA KNELT TO EXAMINE the flagstone floor of the house, his eyes patiently scanning the stones, searching for the lid to an underground cistern or root cellar. They had hidden her well. The ground shook from thousands of trampling feet as his army approached, but Iddina barely noticed. Clamping his dagger between his teeth, he continued to study the stones.

He hadn't gotten very far when something heavy struck the roof, and he heard a whoosh of flames as the ceiling beams caught fire above his head. Another torch flew through the open window and landed at his feet. The straw pallet he had ripped apart burst into flames, singeing the hair on his legs. A third torch ignited the hay on the stable floor, and within seconds, flames engulfed the house.

Iddina staggered backward through clouds of choking smoke, groping for the door as flaming beams crashed to the floor. He stumbled from the burning house, his eyes watering, his lungs heaving from the suffocating smoke.

"What fool set fire to this house?" he bellowed. But no one heard him above the thunder of horses and troops.

Iddina's two trackers hurried up the hill toward him. "Are you all right, sir?"

He nodded, coughing smoke from his lungs. "Did you find any trace of the girl?"

"Nothing, sir."

Iddina cursed. "She was here-I know she was!"

Heat from the flaming house warmed his back, and he moved down the hill away from the inferno. The storehouses had ignited, too, and flames from the burning olive press spread to the ancient olive trees. Smoke swirled around him as he stalked down the path through the vineyard, walking over the bodies in the path. He couldn't wait around until the fire died out; he was supposed to stay in

front of the advancing troops. He'd have to come back later and complete his search.

He remounted his horse, furious with the stupid fool who had killed the two witnesses and with the incompetent archers who had set fire to the house before he finished his search. He spurred his horse, signaling impatiently to his two men.

"Let's go. Maybe we'll pick up her trail down the road."

The noise surrounding Jerusha thundered on and on, and it seemed as if the sun should have set by now. But the rumbling grew no fainter and the ground continued to shake.

Suddenly Maacah stiffened. "Jerusha, I smell smoke! Will they burn the house?"

"Yes! They'll burn everything!"

"But we'll die in here if they burn the house!"

Jerusha groped for the waterskin, then felt in the dark for the skirt of Maacah's dress and soaked the front of it. "Hold the wet part over your face, and breathe through it," she ordered. She did the same with her own skirt.

The sound of crackling flames and the scent of smoke grew stronger. At first Jerusha tried to stifle her coughs, but as the cistern filled with smoke it became impossible. She could scarcely breathe. The heat was unbearable.

Maacah struggled to stand up. "We've got to get out of here! We're going to die-we've got to get out!"

"No, Maacah. Stay here. We can't escape if the house is on fire. We have to stay here."

Jerusha held her sister down, fighting her own terror as the dark, airless hole filled with smoke. Fire raged above them, turning the cistern into an oven,

slowly roasting them alive. But she knew it was better to die in this stifling pit than to be recaptured.

"Please help us, God. Don't let us die," Maacah whispered.

Her sister's useless prayers made Jerusha angry. "There is no God:' she said. "Save your breath." But Maacah didn't seem to hear her.

"Please, God ... I don't want to die ... Please ..."

Jerusha held her sister in her arms, rocking her gently, waiting to die.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the noise and the heat and the rumbling of the earth began to fade. Jerusha was still alive, but she felt groggy and listless as her lungs strained to breathe. She had to let fresh air into the cistern soon. Suddenly she realized that Maacah hadn't moved for a long time, and Jerusha panicked. She had promised Abba that she would take care of her.

"Maacah! Don't die!" she begged, shaking her. "Please don't die!"

Maacah stirred and coughed weakly. Jerusha laid her sister down and groped above her head for the stone lid to the cistern. She would have to gamble that the Assyrians were gone. But no matter how hard she pushed, the stone lid wouldn't budge. It was too heavy for her to move alone, and she couldn't gain leverage from her cramped position. She shook her sister again.

"Maacah, you have to help me. We have to get this lid open."

"Abba-" she mumbled. "Abba will let us out."

Tears sprang to Jerusha's eyes. "Abba can't come this time," she said gently. "You have to help me. Please try?"

- Jerusha helped her sister up, and they groped above their heads until they felt the stone. "Now, push!"

The stone shifted slightly, and a shower of dirt and soot rained down on them.

Pale, smoky sunlight streamed in through a crack, and Jerusha saw her sister's dirt-streaked face. She appeared too exhausted to push again.

"That's good enough for now," Jerusha said. "At least we'll get air and a little light." She found the waterskin and made Maacah take a drink, then she broke off two pieces of bread for them to eat. "We'll wait until night. It'll be safer after dark. Let's try to get some sleep." She gathered her sister in her arms, and they soon slept, clinging to each other and to life.

Jerusha awoke to total darkness and to the suffocating panic of being buried alive. She felt her eyes to see if they were sealed shut and saw the dim outline of her hands. It must be night. She moved closer to the faint crack of light and peered out. The roof of their house was gone, and stars shone through a haze of lingering smoke. She listened, but the night seemed eerily silent. The stone lid still wouldn't budge. She shook her sister awake.

"Maacah-Maacah, wake up. Help me move this stone."

Maacah stirred and tried to sit up. "Why is it so dark?"

"It's night. The soldiers are gone. I think it's safe to climb out now.

"What about Mama and Abba?"

"I ... I don't know. Come on-help me shove the lid off."

They pushed together until the stone shifted, making enough room for Jerusha to crawl out. Then she helped Maacah. They stood in the center of their gutted home, speechless with shock.

Only the outer stone walls remained standing among the smoldering ruins. A gentle breeze stirred warm ashes beneath her feet. Jerusha looked up and saw a pale sliver of moon and thousands of flickering stars shining in the sky. How could the night be so beautiful, she wondered, when the world around her had been so devastated? She drew a deep breath for the next task.

"Stay here until I'm sure it's safe," she told Maacah.

"No-I'm going with you" Maacah gripped her arm tightly.

Beyond the gaping hole where the door once hung, the ruins of their father's land lay naked in the moonlight. A charred pile of stones marked his emptied storehouses; his slaughtered oxen lay strewn in a heap of bones and entrails; his ancient olive grove with its centuriesold branches lay trampled and burned. The Assyrians had torn his stone winepress apart and left it a smoldering ruin. His farmland and all his crops lay black and smoking.

"Jerusha-over there" Maacah pointed to something sprawled along the vineyard path.

"Stay here," Jerusha said, but Maacah shook her head, still gripping her arm.

Together they walked through the vineyard in the pale starlight and knelt beside their parents' bodies. A ragged hole pierced Mama's heart; Abba's body looked the same. Jerusha closed their staring eyes, then cradled her mother's head in her arms and sobbed. She had thought she had no tears left to shed, but Mama and Abba were dead, and Jerusha wished she had died with them.

Gradually she became aware that Maacah's weeping had faded to soft sniffles. Jerusha felt her sister's hand on her shoulder. "Abba would want to be buried on his land," Maacah said.

Jerusha nodded in agreement. They worked together for the next few hours to dig a shallow grave beside the vineyard. They buried Hodesh and Jerimoth side by side, then piled stones from the winepress in a mound on the grave. When they finished, the sky was growing light.

Jerusha sat on the stone steps of her house and stared at the desolation before her. The Assyrians had swept across the face of the earth like a merciless plague, killing everyone in their path, leaving a legacy of destruction and death-a holocaust-behind them.

"What are we going to do now?" Maacah asked quietly.

"I don't know; just survive." It had been Jerusha's goal for as long as she could remember, but she no longer knew why. She wished the blackened earth would open up and swallow her.

"Maybe we can plant again next spring," Maacah said. "We can grow enough food to live on and-"

"I don't want to live anymore. I'm sick of struggling to survivesick of it all! Mama and Abba are dead, and I wish it was me. I wish I was dead."

Maacah turned on her fiercely, grabbing Jerusha's shoulders and shaking her hard. "Don't say that! Abba and Mama prayed for you! They refused to leave and go where it was safe because they were waiting for you! They died so you could live! You owe them your life, Jerusha! Don't you ever talk like that again!" She stopped shaking Jerusha and threw her arms around her neck, sobbing. "Please-please live for them and for me. I don't want to die."

"All right," Jerusha whispered. "All right, don't cry."

Somehow she would figure out a way to keep the two of them alive. She had promised Abba. She and Maacah still had each other, and maybe that was reason enough to live.



24

IDDINA STOOD BESIDE THE ROAD and stared at the well-worn path that led through Jerimoth's vineyard. The body of the soldier he had killed still lay beside the road, but the other two bodies had vanished. Dried blood marked the place where they had fallen. He had found no sign of Jerusha farther down the road, and after the army had passed, he returned with his men to where he had lost her trail, hoping to find a clue he had overlooked. Instead, Iddina discovered that the bodies were missing.

If they had simply burned along with everything else, some evidence would remain. But there was none. Nor did he see signs of scavengers. Iddina peered closer and saw a flattened trail, as if the bodies had been dragged, leading through the burnt stubble. When he reached the end of it he found the grave near the winepress, heaped with stones.

Every muscle in his body tensed. "Spread out. Search every inch of this farm," he told his men. "Someone lived through this."

With mounting anger, Iddina hurried up the hill to the gutted house, guessing what he might find. Charred beams and rubble lay scattered over the flagstone floor, but in the center of the room a stone had been pushed aside, revealing an empty cistern.

Iddina howled in rage. The little dog had beaten him! And Iddina hated to lose. He no longer cared about his promotion. This was no longer a hunt for sport. He wanted revenge.

He and his men searched every inch of the farm but found no sign of the girl. As the day grew late, Iddina knew that he had to catch up with his troops. He had soldiers to command, the city of Samaria to besiege. For now, he couldn't waste any more time on the girl. But Iddina silently vowed to find her and recapture her-even if it took the rest of his life.

Corpses-bloated, stinking corpses so numerous that they would never all be buried. Jerusha and Maacah had wandered the countryside for days, scavenging for food, sleeping in gutted ruins and in caves, searching for signs of life, for someone who had survived the destruction along with them. But all they found were smoldering ruins, desolate, blackened land, and the eerie silence of death. They were the sole survivors. With every step Jerusha took, with every dead body she saw, her guilt deepened. She didn't deserve to be alive. Why had she survived when so many, many others had perished?

Eventually she and Maacah wandered into Dabbasheth, where Jerusha's long nightmare had first begun. The village lay flattened and burned as if crushed beneath God's heel. As the wind blew soot through the rubble-strewn streets, even the birds were silent. Jerusha sat on the foundation of Uncle Saul's house, trying not to stare at the pitiful bodies impaled on stakes around the village, trying not to look into any of the faces in search of a familiar one. Her cousin's wedding seemed a lifetime ago, part of another world of laughter and song, a world forever lost.

"I don't know where else we can go," she told Maacah. "We've tried all of our relatives' houses ... all of our friends ..."

Maacah didn't reply. It seemed she had also run out of tears to shed at the horror all around them. Instead she bowed her head and closed her eyes to pray. The futility of her prayers angered Jerusha.

"Are you out of your mind?" she asked. "How can you still believe in God? Was He deaf to the cries of all these people? Is He blind to what's happening to His promised land? Doesn't He care about any of this?"

"Jerusha, don't talk that way. You-"

"Have you gone insane, or have I? How can you pray to God after seeing all of this?"

"But Abba believed, and-"

"Abba didn't have to see dead bodies piled up like cordwood! He didn't have to smell the stench of death and decay, day after day, or cry out to God to deliver

him from this hell! Go ahead and pray if you want to, but believe me-it won't do any good!"

Jerusha jumped down and stalked away from Maacah, then stooped to sift through the debris of her uncle's house until her hands were black and gritty with soot. She found the blade of a flint knife and a clay storage jar of grain. Most of the wheat kernels were too charred to eat, but she sorted out a few edible grains.

Maacah came over and squatted beside her a few minutes later. " "Jerusha, I know where we can go."

"Where?"

"To Jerusalem. We'll be safe there. I know the way, and-"

"Maacah, you do not!"

64 -and we can stay with Hilkiah and Eliakim"

Jerusha stared at her sister as if she had spoken gibberish. "Who?"

"Abba took us to Jerusalem for all the festivals, so we could pray for you. I know the way. We have friends there who will help us."

Jerusha felt a crushing weariness, not only from the thought of another long journey, but also from the hopelessness of it all. How could they travel that far? How could they avoid the Assyrians who were camped between here and Jerusalem? It seemed useless to try. It would be better to die here and get it over with. If only she hadn't promised.

"Is that what you want to do?" she asked wearily.

"I know we can make it."

"All right, then. We'll go to Jerusalem. But don't ask me how" She stared down at the kernels of grain in her hand, then held them out to her sister. "Here. You need to eat"

"So do you."

"Then we'll share them." They divided the kernels between them; they tasted burnt and bitter.

"What else did you find?" Maacah asked. Jerusha gave her the broken knife blade, and Maacah knelt to draw in the dirt with it, twirling her thick braid around her finger as she worked. "I'll show you how to get to Jerusalem. First we follow the road to the Sea of Galilee-"

"Maacah," Jerusha interrupted. "We have to cut our hair."

Her sister stopped drawing and stared at her. "Why?"

"We have to look like boys. We'll be safer that way." She took the knife from her. "Do you want me to cut yours first?"

"No! I don't want to cut my hair at all!" She clutched her braids protectively.

"You have to:' Jerusha said gently. "It's for your own good. It'll grow back. Here-cut mine first, then." She handed her the blade, then drew her hair into a loose bunch and held it out for Maacah.

"Are you sure, Jerusha?"

"Yes."

Maacah sighed and reluctantly started cutting. Jerusha watched her long, brown hair drop in thick clumps at her feet, and some of it blew away with the breeze. She felt relieved, unburdened, as she reached up to feel her head. "Make it shorter, like a man's."

"But, Jerusha-"

"We'll wear men's clothing, too. Maybe from one of those corpses.

"I can't!" Maacah shuddered.

"Just do it. Then you can show me how to get to Jerusalem."

Sunlight glared off the white stones as King Hezekiah climbed the narrow stairs to the top of the city wall. General Jonadab sprinted up the steps ahead of him, familiar with their sloping unevenness and the dizzying, unguarded view of rooftops below. Shebna and Eliakim followed behind him, mindful of their footing and hugging the wall to avoid the forty-foot drop.

When he reached the top, Hezekiah shaded his eyes to gaze at the sprawling new city under construction for the refugees. The area crawled with activity as men labored to lay foundations, plaster mudbrick walls, or tamp earthen roofs with heavy rollers.

"I had no idea we would take in this many refugees," Hezekiah said. "You've built an entire city down there."

"And twice as many refugees have relocated in the Negev," Eliakim told him. "They wanted farmland and seemed grateful to get it, even though they'll have to struggle to raise crops."

General Jonadab wiped the sweat off his forehead. "But these houses are outside the walls. They have no protection."

"We ran out of room inside the walls," Eliakim told him.

"These people are working so hard to rebuild new lives in our nation," Hezekiah said. "Couldn't we extend the city walls to surround this new section of the city?"

"It would be very expensive," Shebna answered quickly, "and accomplish very little. These people are transients who might pack up and leave Jerusalem as quickly as they came"

"They'd be more likely to stay if we offered them some protection," Eliakim said.

"What do you think, General Jonadab?" Hezekiah asked.

"Well, I don't care much about defending the refugees, but from a military standpoint, double walls would be an excellent defense. And this northwest approach to Jerusalem has always been the most vulnerable to an attack."

Hezekiah quickly grasped Jonadab's strategy. "When the enemy breaches the first wall, we retreat behind the second."

"That's right, Your Majesty. Then they have to start all over again on the second wall, adding years to their campaign."

Hezekiah turned to his engineer. "Can it be done, Eliakim?"

"Sure. See the contour of that western ridge? That's where I'd build the wall-around the end of that valley. It would join the old wall there-on the northern side of the Temple Mount."

Hezekiah followed Eliakim's finger as he drew a wide arc. "That would double the size of Jerusalem!"

"That's right, leaving us plenty of room for growth."

Jonadab frowned. "Wait a minute. I think we should repair the old walls first. There are some places where-"

"Why can't we do both?" Eliakim asked.

"Because we do not have unlimited resources," Shebna said. "You are talking about thousands of hours of work."

"Well, there's your manpower!" Eliakim said, gesturing to the refugees in the valley. "I'm sure they'd be motivated to protect their new homes."

"And it has to be done," Hezekiah sighed. "These old walls couldn't possibly withstand an Assyrian siege. The sooner we start, the better prepared we'll be if they decide to invade us next. I think we should start on both projects as soon as we can."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Shebna said. "I will look for an engineer to assign to each project."

"But two engineers will have to compete with each other for manpower and materials," Eliakim said.

The constant bickering between Shebna and Eliakim frustrated Hezekiah. He wondered what lay at its source and how he could resolve it. "I want you to work together on this," he told them. "Shebna, prepare a reasonable budget and allot funds. Eliakim, you'll be in charge of both projects. How soon can you finish your work with the refugees?"

"Immigration has dropped off, now that the Assyrians have overrun Israel. But we can probably expect a few hundred more."

"Do you have someone who can take over for you?"

"Yes, my assistant knows what to do"

"Good. Then draw up plans for the, new walls as well as for repairing and reinforcing the old ones. Inspect the entire perimeter. General Jonadab will work with you and advise you from a military standpoint. Have you two worked together before?"

The two men exchanged glances. Hezekiah saw a look of recognition pass between them-and something more: wariness on Eliakim's part, discomfort on Jonadab's.

"You do know each other, then?" Hezekiah asked.

Jonadab wiped his forehead again. "Yes, we've met. I'm responsible for that scar across his throat."

"No hard feelings," Eliakim assured him. "You were following orders."

"Uriah's orders," Jonadab explained. "I didn't know any better."

"Just keep it in the past, all right?" Hezekiah said. "I need you to work together"

Eliakim extended his hand to the general. "I have no problem with that." He managed a faint smile as Jonadab grasped it.

"The three of you must work together on our nation's defenses," Hezekiah told them. "We must be prepared to withstand an Assyrian attack. Any other

suggestions?"

"We should build fortified cities and army outposts throughout Judah to defend the borders and the main routes to Jerusalem," Jonadab said.

"I agree" His nation's weakened condition angered Hezekiah, and he was determined to remedy it, regardless of the cost. "Finish surveying Jerusalem's defenses, then you and Eliakim can do the same thing throughout the nation."

"We'll also need a communication network:' Eliakim said. "I'd like to build watchtowers with signal fires to relay information from outpost to outpost"

"Excellent idea. Let's get to work."

Hezekiah knew he had found three outstanding men, and he greatly admired each of them for their unique strengths. But as he glanced at the scar on Eliakim's neck and at the silently brooding Shebna, he wished he could be sure they felt the same respect for one another.



25

IT TOOK ELIAKIM MORE THAN a month to inspect Jerusalem's walls and supporting terraces with General Jonadab. Before they had completed their circuit, the Assyrians laid siege to the northern capital of Samaria. Ehakim knew he would have to hurry if he hoped to make Judah secure before Samaria fell.

He sat at his worktable late into the night, searching for ways to save time and improve efficiency. He worked by lamplight, barely able to see what he was doing, with clay tablets and scrolls scattered everywhere. As he bent over his drawings, he heard footsteps and looked up to see Hilkiah dressed in his nightclothes, carrying an oil lamp.

"Such an hour to be working!" his father scolded. "How can you see what you're doing? Must you finish it tonight?"

Eliakim leaned back and rubbed his eyes. "I'm almost finished, Abba. And yes, this has to be ready by tomorrow. General Jonadab and I are presenting our plans for the city walls to the king's advisory council. Have a look." Hilkiah leaned over his shoulder as Eliakim pointed to his drawings. "See? These are the city walls as they currently stand. But the king wants me to expand them like this...

"Around the new city?"

"Right. Ever since the Assyrians laid siege to Samaria, King Hezekiah has been anxious to start working on these double walls." Neither of them mentioned Jerimoth and his family, but Eliakim knew that their friends filled his father's thoughts and prayers. "So now you know what keeps me up so late."

"My son-such an important man. Working for the king's advisory council, no less! Who would have ever believed it? You should thank God every day for such a blessing as this!"

Eliakim frowned. "I've worked hard to get where I am."

"I know, son. I know you have. But remember what the psalmist has written: 'No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.' "

Eliakim wasn't persuaded. He believed God could do a lot of things, but he also believed in himself. The fact that his father gave God all the credit irritated Eliakim. But before he could argue further, a sleepy servant appeared in the doorway.

"Master Hilkiah, two young boys just came to your back gate. They look like beggars, sir, but they asked for you by name."

Eliakim rolled his eyes. "Another charity case. You are hopeless, Abba-trying to feed the whole world." He tried to scowl but finally broke into a grin. "You're a pushover!"

"'Whoever is kind to the needy honors God,' you know. But I honestly can't imagine who this could be. I don't remember any beggar boys" He shuffled through the door behind the servant.

Eliakim returned to his work. Then, worried that his father might invite the strangers to stay, he picked up a lamp and hurried after him. Two ragged youths stood in the shadows, their hair matted and dirty, their filthy bodies as thin as cadavers.

"You poor children!" Hilkiah murmured.

One of the youths began to cry. "Oh, Uncle Hilkiah! Eliakim! It's me-Maacah!"

"God of Abraham!" Hilkiah's lamp slipped from his hand and crashed to the floor. He swayed and nearly fell over before Eliakim caught him.

Eliakim recognized Maacah now, even without her thick braids, but she looked haggard and exhausted. She motioned to the taller youth standing beside her.

"This is my sister, Jerusha"

"What?" Eliakim cried out. "That's not possible!"

This couldn't be Jerusha. No one ever escaped from the Assyrians. It was impossible! He couldn't be more stunned if someone told him his dead mother had returned to life and was standing in his doorway.

"This ... this must be a ... a joke," he stammered. "It ... it can't be..."

He fought the urge to laugh out loud. He had argued with his father over the impossibility of Jerusha's return. He had insisted that Yahweh would never answer Jerimoth's prayers. He had begged Hilkiah to accept the fact that Jerusha was dead. Yet here she stood in his doorway, gazing at him with haunting green eyes Jerimoth's eyes. It simply couldn't be true.

But it was.

Hilkiah recovered his balance first and pulled Maacah into his arms. "Oh, my sweet child! Praise God-you're alive! Come in, come in!" He bustled her into the house, shouting, "Wake all the servants! Fix these poor girls some food! They're half starved!"

Eliakim stared at Jerusha as she trailed after Hilkiah into the sitting room. She had an inhuman wildness about her-not the fierceness of the hunter, but the pursued look of the prey, wary and alert. She walked hesitantly, gazing uneasily at the thick carpets and bronze lampstands, the scented incense burners and lavish ivory furnishings. She seemed reluctant to sit down on any of the cushions in her filthy condition and chose a place on the cold stone floor, not quite on the carpet. Eliakim took a seat near her. He was aware that he was staring at her, but he couldn't stop himself.

The servants scurried around the room, lighting all the lamps, stoking the fires in the charcoal braziers, carrying in trays of fruit while Hilkiah called for more food and warm broth. Eliakim felt light-headed, unable to comprehend why his father called for food. Ghosts didn't need to eat-and these two skeletons had to be ghosts.

"You're really Jerusha?" he asked. She nodded. He had the urge to touch her to see if she was real. "Where's Jerimoth? And your mother?"

"My parents are dead." She closed her eyes, and Eliakim saw how utterly exhausted she was.

"No!" Hilkiah cried. "My dear friends? Oh, Maacah! I'm so sorry!" He pulled her into his arms again and wept, heartbroken. "God of Abraham, hold them close to your bosom:' he prayed. "Jerimoth was such a good man. Thank you for rewarding his faith."

Eliakim swallowed the lump of grief in his throat. "I ... I'm sorry, Jerusha"

But she showed no emotion as she stared silently at the floor. He wanted to hold her and comfort her the way his father was comforting Maacah, but he hesitated, remembering that he was a stranger to her.

"How did you get here?" he finally asked.

She raised her head proudly, almost defiantly. "We walked."

"But ... how did you escape from the Assyrians?"

She met his gaze, and her haunting, lifeless eyes startled him. "They let me go."

"But that's impossible-they never let anyone go!"

"Well, they did-so they could hunt me down again, like an animal." Her eyes glittered with hatred. "My mother and father died hiding us from them."

"But how-"

"Not now, son," Hilkiah said, wiping his tears. "Let her eat something first-and rest. Ah, here's some warm broth."

Eliakim forced himself to keep quiet as he watched Jerusha eat, but he longed to barrage her with the hundreds of questions that were collecting in his brain. She sat tensed and alert as if ready to flee, but in spite of her hunger, she ate slowly, her long limbs moving gracefully as she reached for the food, like a palm tree swaying in a gentle wind. Her slender hands were callused but still elegant, and when she held her head high and lifted her chin as she had done a moment

ago, her long, graceful neck was stunning. Eliakim saw rounded curves beneath her shapeless clothes. In spite of the short hair and man's clothing, she was indeed a woman.

Before long, so many unanswered questions were burning inside Eliakim that he could no longer stop himself. "You actually lived with the Assyrians?"

"Yes-with their army."

"All this time?"

She nodded and her vacant stare unnerved him. She seemed to shrink away every time he looked at her, as if drawing inside herself. He had never met a human being so empty and haunted before. Whatever they had done to her had robbed her of her humanity and ripped her soul from her.

Suddenly Eliakim had another thought. "Have you actually watched how they lay siege to a city and wage war?"

"Yes. I lived with their army for more than three years."

"You could be a tremendous help to me, Jerusha. I work for King Hezekiah, and-"

"Eliakim-let it wait," Hilkiah said.

"Okay, okay ... but would you be willing to talk about it with me sometime?" he asked her. "After you've rested? Maybe in a couple of days?"

"Son, drop it," Hilkiah warned.

But Eliakim knew how important her experiences were, and he held her gaze until she finally nodded in agreement. "Thank you. Your experience could prove invaluable to us."

"You poor, sweet girls," Hilkiah murmured. "I can't even imagine what you've been through, how you must have suffered. But it's over now. You're here, and I promise to take good care of you"

"We had no place else to go," Maacah said. "Everyone is deadall our friends, all our relatives ..."

"Not all your relatives," Eliakim said. "Your Uncle Saul came here."

"He did? Where is he?" Maacah asked.

Eliakim winced. "We wanted to help him, but your uncle is a very proud man."

"Yes, I offered him a job in my shop," Hilkiah said, "but he told me he couldn't accept charity."

"He left for the Negev," Eliakim finished, "and we haven't heard from him since"

"This is your home now," Hilkiah said. "We are your family. It's the very least I can do for your dear father. Ali, God of Abraham, how I will miss him-" Hilkiah's voice broke. "I can't believe he's really gone."

Eliakim grieved for their friends, too. And he knew that every feast day, every holiday, he would be reminded of Jerimoth and his unshakable faith in God-a faith that magnified Eliakim's own unbelief. God had finally rewarded Jerimoth's faith. Jerusha sat a few feet away as if resurrected from the dead.

"I have prepared a hot bath for your guests, master, and clean beds:' a servant announced.

They all stood, and when Eliakim hugged Maacah, he felt every one of her bones through her thin clothes.

"Thank you for helping us," she said tearfully.

"You don't need to thank us," Hilkiah said. "This is your home now. I just praise God that you're safe. Good night, and sleep well. We'll talk in the morning, after you've rested."

When they were alone, Eliakim rested his hand on his father's shoulder. "Are you all right, Abba?"

Hilkiah blinked back his tears. "We must go to the Temple together-to recite prayers for the dead."

"Yes, of course."

He wondered if his father would remind him of Jerimoth's faith or chide him for his stubborn unbelief. Now was the appropriate time to say, "I told you so." But instead, Hilkiah wandered slowly from the room without uttering another word.

Eliakim returned to his workroom. It would be so much easier to prepare for an Assyrian assault if he knew their strengths and weaknesses. Using Jerusha's experience, he could make sure Judah would be secure.

Jerusha!

Jerusha had returned from the dead. It was incredible. Impossible. Tonight Eliakim had witnessed a miracle.

Jerusha awoke enveloped in a cloud. She bolted upright and stared fearfully at her strange surroundings. The elegant room was like a palace, with polished bronze mirrors and lampstands, woven rugs and tapestries, ivory beds with creamy sheets and soft cushions. Everything felt wrong. She didn't belong here.

"What's the matter?" Maacah asked sleepily.

"Nothing. For a minute I forgot where I was, that's all."

"I know what you mean," Maacah sighed. "I can't believe we made it here."

Jerusha caressed the soft sheets, marveling at the way they felt next to her clean skin. The hot bath she had taken last night seemed like a dream. She hadn't felt this clean in a long, long time. But a sense of foreboding hovered over her, a feeling of wariness and mistrust, as if Iddina might burst through the door any moment and snatch her away.

"We can't stay here," she said.

"Why not?"

"They're so rich. Are they royalty?"

Maacah laughed. "No, Uncle Hilkiah is a merchant, and Eliakim builds things for King Hezekiah."

"Will their wives mind if we stay here?"

"Uncle Hilkiah's wife died a long time ago, and Eliakim isn't married yet."

"But we don't belong here, Maacah. Look at this place. It's like a palace." She tried to rake her fingers through her hair but found only short stubble.

"Uncle Hilkiah says this is our home now. He wants us to stay," Maacah insisted.

"Why are you calling him `Uncle'? These people aren't our relatives."

"Yes, they are. Well, they're almost family."

Jerusha shook her head. "The only way I'll stay is if they let us work as servants."

Maacah sat up in bed. "Jerusha, listen to me. Abba loved Uncle Hilkiah. They were like brothers. And we always stayed here whenever we came to Jerusalem for the feasts."

Jerusha couldn't comprehend Maacah's words. While she had suffered through hell, her family had stayed here with these strangers. This home represented a time in Jerusha's life she longed to forget. But before she could argue further, there was a knock on the door. A servant entered, carrying two bundles.

"Master Hilkiah asked me to buy you something to wear, so I bought these...."

Jerusha stared as the servant unfolded two dresses and laid them onto the bed. The gowns, made of deep blue linen, looked soft and silky. Exquisite gold

embroidery decorated the long sleeves and neckline. Jerusha had never seen such beautiful dresses. She couldn't speak. "I hope they're all right," the servant said.

"They're beautiful!" Maacah cried. "Where's Uncle Hilkiah? I want to thank him."

"He and Master Eliakim went to the Temple for the morning sacrifice. They'll be home soon. I'll call you for breakfast when they return"

After the servant left, Maacah scrambled out of bed and held up the dress, admiring herself in the tall bronze mirror. "It's so beautiful! Oh, Jerusha, feel it!"

The dresses and veils were designed for unmarried women-virgins. Jerusha remembered Iddina and the other officers, and shame overwhelmed her. The dress was a lie. She wasn't a virgin. The rape wasn't her fault, but what followed afterward had been her choice.

"I can't wear that dress, Maacah. I can't accept such a gift."

Her sister's smile faded. "Why not?"

Jerusha couldn't find words to express how she felt. Because I'm not u,orthy, she wanted to scream. The bath last night had cleansed her on the outside, but nothing could ever purify her on the inside. She had chosen to prostitute herself. How could she live with the shame?

"Jerusha, why not?" Maacah asked again.

"Because ... because ... Oh, what am I doing here?" she cried. "I don't belong here!"

Maacah sat down beside her and held her close. "Abba brought us to Jerusalem for Passover so we could pray for you. God led us here, to this house. And Uncle Hilkiah always prayed for you, too. He loved Abba as much as we did. He would do anything for Abba's sake. He means it when he says that this is our home now"

Jerusha heard her sister's words, but they didn't explain why she deserved to live-or how she could live with her shame. Finally Maacah grasped Jerusha's

hands and pulled her out of bed.

"Come on-try on your dress. Please? You have to wear something."

Reluctantly, Jerusha allowed Maacah to help her get dressed. The fabric felt soft and smooth as it draped around her body in gentle folds. She tied the sash around her waist, then helped Maacah get dressed.

"We made a terrible mess of our hair," Jerusha said as they stood in front of the mirror.

"Like you said-it'll grow. You still look beautiful, Jerusha. Be glad you don't have my horrible freckles."

Someone knocked on the door, and Jerusha pulled it open, expecting to see the servant again. But Eliakim stood in the doorway wearing an embroidered skullcap on his tousled hair and a prayer shawl draped over his shoulders. He stood a head taller than Jerusha, with the confident posture of a man of wealth and authority. Jerusha fought the urge to bow. She saw his mouth open in surprise as he appraised her in obvious admiration.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Maacah said.

"Y-yes ... she is," he stammered. He swallowed hard, and Jerusha noticed the long scar that stretched across his throat. Then she looked away, embarrassed by his lingering gaze. "You're both beautiful," he said. "Please, excuse me for staring, but I can't believe the transformation!"

"Your father bought these dresses for us," Maacah said.

"Abba did? They're lovely." He cleared his throat. "Listen, Jeru- sha-I need to ask a big favor of you."

She looked up at him again, and his eyes were warm and kind. He was unlike any man she had ever known. Abram had been rugged and robust, a man of the land, like Abba; Iddina had been vicious and brutal. But handsome Eliakim was sophisticated, refined, welleducated. Once again, Jerusha felt the urge to bow.

"It's a really big favor," he said. "I know you've been through a terrible ordeal

and that you probably need time to rest, but you could be such a tremendous help to me. I'm meeting with the king today to plan the defense of the nation. If you could come with me and-"

"Absolutely not!" Hilkiah's voice thundered from behind Eliakim. "You leave those girls alone! Give them a chance to recover from all they've been through. Such a son I raised! Asking such a thing!"

"But, Abba, it's urgent. She could tell us-"

"Absolutely not. It can wait." Hilkiah pushed past him into the room, pleading with Jerusha. "Will you please forgive my son? He has a head that he never uses."

Jerusha smiled faintly at the kind little merchant, and her emotions seemed to stir to life after lying dead for so long. She remembered the stranger who had helped her escape, and suddenly she wanted to help Eliakim, to repay the debt she felt she owed.

"There's nothing to forgive," Jerusha said. "I'll go with Eliakim. I'd like to help him."



26

KING HEZEKIAH SURVEYED THE somber faces of his councilmen as they assembled to hear his plans for the nation's defense.

"Is everyone here? Can we begin?" he asked Shebna, seated beside him.

"No, Your Majesty-we are waiting for Eliakim. He has the drawings "

A moment later Eliakim hurried in with his arms full. "I'm sorry for being late, Your Majesty," he said as he dropped his burdens on a table. "But I've brought a guest-someone we all should listen to."

"You know that all visitors must be approved by me first," Shebna said. "It is too late to change our agenda now"

"But I didn't have any advance notice myself. We only met for the first time late last night. Please, Your Majesty-I promise it'll be very helpful to our discussion of Judah's defenses."

Hezekiah hesitated, then decided to trust Eliakim's judgment. "All right. Bring him in."

"Well, it's ... uh ... it's a woman, Your Majesty."

Shebna appeared outraged. "A woman in council? No. That is unheard of. We cannot-"

Hezekiah held up his hand to silence him-and to stop the whispering among his advisors. "Are you certain this is relevant, Eliakim?" "Yes. Very relevant."

Again Hezekiah hesitated before making such an unprecedented decision. "Bring her in"

Shebna slouched in his seat, but Hezekiah's advisors sat up in amazement. Eliakim motioned to his guest. The woman who entered was painfully thin, her face so shrunken that her cheekbones protruded. Haunting green eyes dominated

her face, and fear dominated her skittish movements. She seemed terrified by the somber atmosphere and staring faces. How could this half-starved young woman possibly help with Judah's defenses?

"You may begin, Eliakim, whenever you're both ready," Hezekiah said.

"Your Majesty, this is Jerusha, daughter of Jerimoth. She is a refugee from Israel."

An eerie silence crept over the room. Hezekiah knew that the Assyrians had pronounced a death sentence on Israel, but to see living proof of it in this emaciated woman unnerved him.

"The fact that Jerusha is here at all is a miracle," Eliakim continued. "She was captured by the Assyrians and lived with their army for more than three years"

A murmur of astonishment swept the room. Hezekiah leaned forward. "I would like to hear everything you can tell us about the Assyrians, Jerusha," he said. "Would you share your story with us?"

Jerusha's trembling legs could barely hold her. Hezekiah waited, watching her anxiously. Eliakim took her arm to support her, and Hezekiah heard him say quietly to her, "Take your time. You've been through so many terrifying events already. You don't need to be scared now. You're among friends."

She nodded, then began to speak in a voice that was so soft that Hezekiah had to strain to hear her. "I lived with my family on my father's land until the Assyrians raided our village. They captured my two cousins ... and ... and. .

"It's all right-take your time," Eliakim soothed. "Forgive me for making you relive this, but it's so important. Please, Jerusha?"

She took a deep breath. "They killed my cousins, but I was allowed to live as ... as their slave. I served as a cook for four army officers, and I traveled with them as they waged war."

Hezekiah could scarcely stay seated. "You actually lived with the Assyrian army? You watched how they besiege cities?"

"Yes. I will tell you what I can about them."

"That would be a tremendous help to us, Jerusha," Hezekiah said. "But first, I'm curious to know how you escaped."

"I didn't escape. They set me free, just for fun. It was a contest to see who could track me down again."

"That's outrageous!" General Jonadab cried. "What kind of men would do such a thing?"

Hezekiah shook his head in disbelief. "And yet they obviously didn't recapture you. How did you escape from them?"

"I ... I walked night and day, across the mountains. And I made it back to my father's land. But they caught up to me and-" Tears filled her hollow eyes and slipped silently down her thin face. "My sister and I hid in a cistern beneath my father's house while the Assyrians killed my parents and destroyed our land. We wandered everywhere, searching for our relatives, but there's no one left. The country has been destroyed-thousands of people are dead.... It is a holocaust."

Hezekiah remembered Isaiah's prophecy: "Until their cities are destroyed-without a person left-and the whole country is an utter wasteland." He fought a surge of fear, the same fear that had destroyed his father.

"My sister and I walked to Jerusalem," Jerusha continued, "to stay with my father's friend, Master Hilkiah. We traveled at night over the mountains, avoiding the roads and Assyrian horse patrols. It took us three months to get here. We hid in caves and in tombs, sometimes for days, until it was safe to come out again. The Assyrian armies were swarming all over Israel, but we finally escaped and crossed the border into Judah"

The men stared at her in awe and respect. "I commend you for your incredible courage," Hezekiah said quietly. "Now, tell me--do you think the Assyrians will be able to conquer Samaria?"

"Yes, I'm certain they will."

General Jonadab stood up. "Wait a minute-Samaria is a great fortress city

with strong, thick walls. And it's built on a steep hill, much like Jerusalem. How can they defeat it?"

"The Assyrians use powerful weapons of war and machines that can break down even the strongest walls. Besides, they don't accept defeat. I've never seen them lose. They're willing to wait many years until a city starves to death or dies of thirst."

"And that is Jerusalem's greatest weakness," Shebna said. "Our water supply. We could never withstand an Assyrian siege."

"He's right:' Jonadab nodded in agreement. "Can you tell us about these war machines?"

"They build powerful battering rams on wheels, fortified so they can attack the walls without being set on fire from above. The men inside them are armored against arrows and spears. The machines keep attacking the wall in the same place until a breach is made and the wall crumbles."

"But if the city is built on a hill, like Samaria, how do these machines get near the base of the walls?" Shebna asked.

"They send men out ahead of the army to chop down trees and clear a path for the marching troops. They use the trees, along with rocks or mud bricks, to build ramps up to the walls. They have men who are trained to build these earthworks and handle the machines of war. They also have men who tunnel under the wall."

Hezekiah thought about Jerusalem's ancient, crumbling walls and knew the Assyrians already outmatched him. "What about their other weapons?" he asked grimly.

"Every soldier is well armed and extremely well trained. Discipline is very important to them. Cruelty is honored. All the soldiers wear thick, protective clothing and helmets, besides carrying shields. Their foot soldiers are highly skilled with bows and arrows and slings. They spend all their spare time practicing, and their aim is deadly accurate."

"What about the cavalry?" General Jonadab asked.

"For every hundred foot soldiers there are ten cavalrymen. They're sent ahead of the army to scout for ambushes or to size up the enemy. These horse patrols are so swift and skilled that they can appear and disappear suddenly before their enemies' eyes like ghosts, terrifying them. Some have spears and swords, some have bows and arrows, but they all carry a short dagger for hand-to-hand combat. They can use all of these weapons with deadly skill, even while riding on horseback at great speed. They guide their horses with their knees so both hands remain free to aim and shoot"

Shebna muttered a curse and shifted in his seat. "What about chariots?"

"For every ten cavalrymen there is a chariot, heavily armed with strong metal plates. Each chariot holds three men-the driver, the warrior, who is armed with bows and spears, and a third man to shield the other two. The chariots are pulled by two horses and are extremely fast. Some even have a third horse tied behind in case one of the others gets injured"

Jerusha drew a deep breath, as if summoning the strength to continue. "The chariots usually charge first, and very few armies can survive the first attack. Just the sight of them and the sound of their pounding wheels usually cause the enemy to run. The chariots fan out in pursuit, crushing the enemy beneath their wheels."

"You've painted a very vivid picture of our enemies," Hezekiah said. "Trained, disciplined, professional soldiers too numerous to count. We're not prepared for an assault by such a powerful foe. Do you have any idea what their plans are after they finish with Israel?"

"No, Your Majesty. I have no idea. But when they're ready to march, they can move with lightning speed"

"And are they as brutal and bloodthirsty as they're rumored to be?" Jonadab asked.

"They ... they .. " Her eyes darted wildly about, as if the Assyrians might be hiding in the next room. Her fear quickly became contagious. Hezekiah saw it written across the pale faces of his advisors.

"Their lust for blood and their love of torture make them seem ... inhuman," she said. "They study their enemies' weaknesses and use warfare of the mind to terrify them before they attack. After the battle, the soldiers make huge pyramids of severed heads, and they get paid for each one. Then they turn to their prisoners of war. The lucky ones are killed quickly. They're made to kneel down as the soldiers smash their skulls with clubs. Others are carried away into slavery like I was. The least fortunate prisoners are the nobles and kings-" She stopped as if suddenly remembering whom she was talking to.

"It's all right," Hezekiah assured her. "You may continue."

She twisted her thin hands nervously. "The Assyrians love to torture their captives. They prefer slow, agonizing deaths for the highestranking officers and nobility, torturing them for several days before impaling them on stakes and leaving them to slowly die. But they torture the king most horribly of all. Th-they stake him to the ground and ... and gradually skin him alive-"

"That's enough!" Shebna shouted. He leaped from his seat, and Jerusha shrank back in fear.

"You don't have to yell at her," Eliakim said. He moved to put his arm around Jerusha, but she shrank away from him, too.

"She has made her point," Shebna said. "The rumors of Assyrian atrocities are true. There is no need for her to continue."

Hezekiah felt the tension in the throne room. The Assyrians were a formidable enemy, mobilizing their entire empire into a massive war machine. No one could defeat them. Yet he had rebelled against them. He forced himself to appear calm and controlled.

"After Jerusha's report I think we all realize the critical situation we face. We must strengthen and fortify this city as well as others throughout Judah-" Hezekiah stopped, watching Jerusha with growing concern. She was trembling as if shaken by a mighty wind, and her gaunt face had turned pale, her eyes wide with horror. She looked as though she might collapse.

"Let's take a break," Hezekiah said. "I think Eliakim had better take Jerusha

home."

When Jerusha left the meeting with Eliakim, she could scarcely walk. She heard him talking to her, thanking her for coming with him, telling her how important her information was to the council, but a strange whirring sound, like the flapping of a thousand wings, drowned out most of his words.

Eliakim led her through a maze of corridors, then across an inner courtyard, but her legs felt heavy and slow. By the time they reached the outer courtyard of the palace, her knees buckled beneath her like a rag doll's, and she collapsed on the stone pavement. As her vision narrowed and darkness crept in, Jerusha saw thousands of demonic creatures swirling around her head, swooping and diving at her with sharp, bloodied beaks. She screamed and closed her eyes, shielding her head with her arms.

"No! No! Get away from me!"

Suddenly she was back in the Assyrian camp again, smelling the smoke and the stench of death, hearing the agonized cries of the dying, witnessing the endless torture and brutality, the forests of impaled bodies, the mounds of human heads, the ever-circling vultures. She began to scream, crying out in horror for all the years that she hadn't dared to scream.

"Jerusha? Jerusha, what's wrong?"

She heard Eliakim calling her, but his voice wasn't strong enough to pull her back. She began spiraling down into darkness as she relived the nightmare: the first horrible moment of rape, the years of living in the pit of hell, the day Iddina snatched her baby from her arms. She remembered her escape, running blindly, hopelessly, while the Assyrian army pursued her; almost being roasted alive in the stifling cistern; then holding her mother's lifeless body in her arms.

As Eliakim tried to help her to her feet, Jerusha remembered Iddina's brutality, and she lashed out blindly at him.

"No! Get away from me! Don't touch me!"

"Jerusha, it's all right! You're safe now-it's all right!"

He tried to soothe her, but she clawed at him, then struck him with her fists as he struggled to subdue her. Eliakim persevered, patiently enduring her wild blows until he held her tightly in his embrace.

"It's all right, Jerusha. I won't hurt you.... God of Abraham, please help her!"

Jerusha barely heard him. Once again she lived the nightmare that never ended, and her screams filled the courtyard.

Gradually the vivid scenes began to fade, and her terrible cries died down to a whimper. As if slowly awakening from a long sleep, she became aware of blue skies above her head, of cobblestones warmed by the sun beneath her, of open space all around her. Eliakim knelt on the ground with her, clasping her tightly. His cheek rested against her hair. Bloody scratches covered his arms where the whirring creatures had sunk their talons, but Eliakim had fought them off.

"I'm sorry, Jerusha-I'm so sorry," he murmured. "I never should have asked you to relive that. Can you ever forgive me?"

He was so gentle with her, his voice so soothing, that she lay in his arms with her face on his chest and wept for a long time. He made her feel safe, like Abba did, and she didn't want to leave his protecting arms. Then she noticed all the people clustered nearby, staring at her.

"Go on now," Eliakim told the gawking crowd. "Move along and leave us alone."

Jerusha finally managed to speak, her voice hoarse from screaming. "I was back there again."

"Shh ... it's all right now"

"It was so real-all their creatures ... the idols they worship ... horrible things-"

"Jerusha, hush." He covered her lips with his fingers. "Don't talk about it anymore. It's over, and I'll never make you relive it again-I promise."

"But ... but what if they come here?" Jerusha shivered, and Eliakim tightened his hold.

"Shh. They won't come here. They're a long way from here."

But she knew how swiftly they marched, how quickly they attacked, almost without warning. And they never lost a battle. Jerusha hadn't known any of the Assyrians' other victims, but now she knew Eliakim, and she had seen King Hezekiah and his nobles face-to-face. She shuddered, knowing what they would suffer at the hands of the Assyrians. Unwillingly, she envisioned King Hezekiah staked out to be skinned alive. She saw Eliakim impaled on a stake and left to die slowly. She had tried to warn them, but the king's chief counselor had cut her short. He hadn't wanted to hear it.

She drew a deep breath. "We can go home. I'm all right now"

"Are you sure?" He seemed reluctant to let her go.

"Yes. I ... I'll be fine" He finally released her and helped her to her feet. Her legs felt limp and watery.

"Do you feel like walking a little bit? I think it might help if you breathed some fresh air. And you haven't seen much of Jerusalem yet, have you?"

"It was dark when we arrived last night."

"Come on, then." His arm encircled her waist, supporting her as they descended the palace stairs. "By the way, how did you get through the city gates so late at night?"

"Maacah gave the watchman your name, and he let us in."

"I didn't realize I wielded so much power," he said, laughing. "It must have been someone who knew me. I've been inspecting all the city walls and gates, you see."

He led her down the hill from the palace past the guard tower, then followed the road through the water gate. As they walked down to the spring, Eliakim pointed out the vineyards and olive groves in the fertile Kidron Valley and the

carefully irrigated plots of the king's gardens near the lower pool. The green patches and leafy vines reminded Jerusha of home, the way it used to look. When they reached the spring, Eliakim coaxed a servant girl into lending them a dipper and he drew Jerusha a drink.

"Tastes good, doesn't it?" he said.

"Mmm. And it's so cold. Just like the water from Abba's well." She felt tears burning her eyes, and she blinked them back. As Eliakim returned the dipper, Jerusha noticed the deep scratches on his arms again. She unwound the sash of her dress and dipped it into the water.

"Here. Let me wash off the blood."

When Jerusha finished and tied her sash again, Eliakim turned her around and pointed to the city on the hill above them. "Look up, Jerusha. See? Those cliffs form a natural fortress. And once we strengthen our walls, the Assyrians will never be able to topple them."

Jerusha nodded vaguely. It was true that she had never seen the Assyrians besiege a fortress as steep as Jerusalem, but the greater the challenge, the more determined they were to master it. They would find a way. Jerusha was certain of it.

"You're safe here," Eliakim said. "They won't recapture you."

She wished she could believe him. Neither of them spoke as they walked up the ramp to the city again, but once inside the gates, Eliakim steered Jerusha toward the market square.

"Come. I'll show you Abba's shop."

The marketplace in Jerusalem was unlike anything Jerusha had seen before, much bigger and busier than the tiny one in Dabbasheth. She slowed almost to a standstill, trying to take in all the varied sights, the mixture of exotic smells, the strident sounds. She saw piles of pottery bowls and oil lamps, baskets of every shape and size, colorful heaps of fruit and vegetables, bolts of fine cloth and embroidered work, mounds of savory spices. Above it all, she heard the sound of haggling and the shouts of vendors as they hawked their goods. But she stared

the longest at a glittering display of gold and silver jewelry-earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and rings-decorated with a beautiful bluish-green stone that Jerusha had never seen before.

She picked up a silver chain with an oval pendant stone. "What is this gem called?" she asked Eliakim.

"Do you like it? That's an Elath stone. It's found only in southern Judah, by the copper mines of Elath."

"It's beautiful." She caressed the cool, smooth rock. The deep green reminded her of Abba's fields after the spring rains, the blue of the sky back home on a cloudless summer day.

"How much?" Eliakim asked the old shopkeeper.

The jeweler named an exorbitant price, and Eliakim gasped dramatically. "What? It's not worth half that!"

"Thief! Robber! You would take bread from my children?"

They began to dicker, so loudly at times that Jerusha feared they would strike each other. But before long the jeweler was weighing Eliakim's silver pieces on a scale and smiling as Eliakim fastened the beautiful necklace around Jerusha's neck.

"Look at that-it was made for her," the old man said. "It matches her beautiful green eyes."

Jerusha was overwhelmed. "Oh, Eliakim, I can't accept such a gift! I ... I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Please, accept it with my apologies. I want you to know how sorry I am."

The old shopkeeper sighed. "Ahhh-young lovers."

Eliakim glanced at him nervously. "Come on, Jerusha. I'll show you Abba's shop."

He led her through the crush of-people to Hilkiah's shop, nestled between an Arabian incense dealer and a booth of imported pottery. His servant ran out to greet them.

"Where's Abba?" Eliakim asked.

"You just missed him, my lord. But if you wait here, he might have good news for you when he comes back"

"What kind of news?"

"Oh, I shouldn't give it away! You'd better wait for Master Hilkiah. He'll tell you." The man grinned, hopping from one foot to the other in excitement.

Eliakim smiled at Jerusha, then turned back to the servant. "Listen-I hate surprises. Why don't you just tell me where my father went?"

"To a very rich man's house. Royalty, I think."

"What for? Is the man buying cloth from Abba?"

"Oh, no, no, no, Master Eliakim! Your father isn't selling cloth! He's bargaining for your wife!"

Eliakim gaped speechlessly, then began to blush. Jerusha watched his skin turn red, even beneath his curly black beard.

"Come on, Jerusha," he said weakly. "Let's go home."

After the long, stressful day, King Hezekiah went up to the palace rooftop with Shebna to escape the stifling confines of his chambers. He usually found the view soothing, but tonight the ribbon of walls surrounding Jerusalem seemed flimsy to him, an insubstantial barrier against an impossibly superior foe-one that was camped a mere three days' march away. Hezekiah's army remained poorly armed and trained, his water supply unavailable to him in a siege, his situation hopeless. He had tried to reign well for the last four years, to reverse the economic ruin and chaos of his father's rule, but he wondered if all his efforts

would be wasted because of his rebellion against Assyria.

"The plans for the new walls looked good, Your Majesty," Shebna said. "They should greatly improve our city's defenses."

"I'm doing everything I can to strengthen this nation," he replied. "I only hope we don't run out of time."

"I understand your urgency. The woman's report this morning was very vivid. The Assyrians have wasted no time laying siege to Samaria. How long does General Jonadab think they can hold out?"

Hezekiah shrugged. "I haven't asked. Samaria has a water supply within its walls, which will help prolong the siege."

He rested his arms on the parapet and stared at his city, feeling discouraged and sick at heart. "Shebna, have I been a fool not to send the tribute these past few years?"

Shebna hesitated. "It would be very unwise to tell the king that he was a fool, my lord."

"Don't play games with me, Shebna. I want the truth."

Shebna faced him squarely. "All right. The truth is that I did not agree with your decision in the beginning. Even so, I must admit that the wealth that would have gone to Assyria has helped Judah prosper again. We would still be impoverished if you had sent the tribute all these years."

"I know. And we'll be able to strengthen our defenses with some of that wealth." But what was going to happen to his nation because he'd rebelled?

All at once Hezekiah wished Zechariah was still alive. His grandfather had been convinced that rebelling was the right decision. Now that Zechariah was gone, Hezekiah had no one to encourage him except Shebna. He leaned against the parapet and stared at his friend gravely.

"Now that Samaria has been besieged, what do you think I should do?" Hezekiah asked. He saw Shebna's internal struggle.

"Your Majesty, I think this would be a good time to send a gift to Assyria. Call it a peace offering. If you make an alliance with them now, perhaps they will return to Nineveh after they have conquered Israel."

"But my father made an alliance with the Assyrians, and you know where that led him."

"I will be glad to audit the royal treasuries and tally our nation's resources, then present a taxation proposal. I will even head the delegation to Assyria to request the alliance if you would like me to. That is my advice end the tribute quickly."

"But I think I'd be deceiving myself if I thought I could send tribute once and that would solve all my problems. It doesn't work that way. We'd be enslaved to them for life."

"Nevertheless, Your Majesty, becoming a vassal is a better choice than being totally destroyed. My advice stands. Pay the tribute. But if you decide not to take that advice, then for your nation's sake I urge you to form defensive alliances with your neighboring states. I suggest you approach Egypt, then maybe the Phoenicians. Judah cannot possibly face Assyria alone."

Hezekiah pulled on his beard as he wrestled with his decision, remembering Zechariah's warning about making alliances with other nations.

"What makes you so sure a foreign king would sign a treaty with us? Assyria is like a hungry lion aroused from a long slumber. And Judah would be easy prey after Israel."

"Then appeasing Assyria is the only answer."

Shebna's advice made sense to Hezekiah, but he hesitated, unwilling to reach the same conclusion that King Ahaz had. "Maybe it would be better for my people if I paid the tribute," he finally said. "Maybe it would spare them from an invasion, from bloodshed. . . His voice trailed off uncertainly.

The decision perplexed him. It seemed that either choice would end in disaster. He stood balanced on that narrow wall again, the same place he had stood four years ago when he made his decision to rebel. Yet he saw no way

down to safety.

"Your Majesty, I would like to go inside and start working on the taxation proposal," Shebna said. "Then if you decide to raise the tribute, it will be ready."

"Yes, maybe you should. You're excused, Shebna."

He went back to his chambers, leaving Hezekiah alone. As he stood in the growing twilight, discouraged and depressed, a gentle breeze from the north carried the sweet aroma of roasting meat down the hill from the Temple. And as the fragrance of the evening sacrifice reached him, Hezekiah suddenly remembered Yahweh. He had stopped paying tribute because he had put his faith in God.

Hezekiah tried to recall that Passover night when his faith had seemed so much stronger. He had worked hard to obey God's Law since then, purging the idolatry from the land-but had he done enough? Would Yahweh spare his nation because of his faithfulness? He wished he knew the answer.

He returned to his chambers, wandering idly through his rooms, his mind in turmoil. Had he done everything he could for God? Should he do something more? He rummaged through his scrolls until he found the one he had written with Zechariah, then he sat down beside the lampstand, searching for something he may have missed. When he read the words He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray, he stopped reading. Four years ago he had forsaken all his concubines for Hephzibah. But except for the baby that had died, Hephzibah had given him no children. Why hadn't Yahweh provided an heir?

"Where am I going wrong? Why is everything falling apart?" he asked aloud. God had forsaken him, betraying him to his enemies.

Hezekiah sat alone for more than an hour, allowing the winds of self-pity to blow, piling doubt all around him. His faith in Yahweh had been in vain, the promises of God, a lie. He remembered his last afternoon with his grandfather, and Moses' parting words to Joshua that became Zechariah's parting words: "Yahweh himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." He longed to have more faith in God, and he remembered how Zechariah had snatched the Torah

scroll out of his hand, saying, "Either your faith in God is absolute, or it's worthless."

Hezekiah slowly paged through the Torah, longing to discover the source of Zechariah's unshakable faith in God, searching for a promise he could cling to. He stopped when he found these words: "When you go to u'ar against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you."

Hezekiah bowed his head and prayed for the strength to believe that promise, for the courage to stand firm in his decision not to send tribute, for the power to become a man of faith.

"The struggle is always in the will," Zechariah had told him. Hezekiah willed to believe. He silently vowed never to doubt Yahweh's word again. He left the scroll open to the promise he had found and browsed through the stories of his childhood hero, King David, drawing strength from them. Then he stumbled upon the words that Nathan the prophet had spoken to David: "`Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me.'" It was Yahweh's promise-to David and now to Hezekiah. His reign would endure; he would have an heir.

He rolled up the scroll and put it away, then walked to Hephzibah's chambers. She was his oasis in the desert, and he longed for the comfort of her arms. But Hephzibah didn't run to him as she usually did. She never moved from her seat beside the window. He bent to kiss her and saw tears in her eyes.

"Hephzibah, what's wrong?" She didn't answer, and he lifted her chin to make her look at him. "Please tell me"

"My lord:' she began tearfully, "I'm so afraid . .

He thought of Jerusha's chilling report that morning and felt his stomach turn. "What are you afraid of, my love? Tell me. You know I'd do anything to make you happy."

"Would you really do anything?" she whispered.

"Tell me, my love."

She inhaled as if summoning courage. "My lord, I'm so afraid you'll have to divorce me because I'm barren. I beg you, please, go to one of your concubines tonight instead of me. Just until she gives you a child just until you have an heir. The child could become ours. Please, my lord?"

Hezekiah's faith in Yahweh's promises blew away in a gust of doubt: Hephzibah was barren. She would never give him an heir.

For a moment he considered doing what she asked. Then anger exploded inside him-anger at himself for doubting so soon after his vow of faith, anger at the impossible decisions he faced, anger at his own helplessness. He hated his helplessness most of all, remembering how he had stood helpless before Molech.

"No!" he shouted as he turned away from Hephzibah. "No, no, no! Yahweh promised that the house of David would endure forever! Do you think He's going to break His promise now?"

"Can't the promise be kept through a concubine?" she asked. Her stubbornness infuriated him.

"No, it can't! God promised Abraham an heir, but he listened to his wife and fathered Ishmael! Isaac was the son of the promise, not the concubine's son! I won't listen to you. Don't you have any faith in Yahweh at all?" She covered her face, but he pulled her hands away. "Why don't you stop feeling sorry for yourself and start trusting in God?"

He strode from the room, banging the door shut behind him. The irony of his words struck him as he walked back to his own chambers. He was as guilty of doubt and self-pity as Hephzibah was. And he knew that the great anger he felt was not toward his wife but toward himself.



27

ELIAKIM RUMMAGED THROUGH his scrolls and drawings, making a mess of his tiny workroom. "We're all waiting for you," his father called from the dining room. "Are you eating breakfast with us or not?"

"Start without me," Eliakim said, gazing at the mess he had made. "I'm busy."

"He's busy!" Hilkiah said, loudly enough for him to hear. "He's always busy, but too busy to eat? Well, never mind. We'll eat without him, won't we, girls? No sense in all of us starving."

Eliakim sorted uselessly through the mess for a few more minutes, then finally wandered out to where the others were seated around the low table. He bent to scoop up a handful of olives, then stood beside the table chewing absently, his mind on the dozens of projects he was supervising for King Hezekiah.

"What now?" Hilkiah scowled. "You're too busy to sit down?"

"What did you say, Abba?"

Hilkiah bowed with exaggerated politeness, indicating Eliakim's empty cushion. "Would you care to join us?"

Eliakim glanced across the table at Jerusha as he sat down, then quickly looked away. She wore the Elath stone necklace he had given her and the lovely deep blue dress she had worn the day she accompanied him to the king's advisory meeting. Hilkiah had bought the girls a dozen new dresses, but Eliakim's favorite was still this beautiful blue one. He had admired her courage so much that day. He also recalled his panic when she collapsed in his arms, struggling for sanity, but Jerusha had tremendous inner strength. Not many people could have survived her ordeal.

"What is it that has you too busy to eat?" Hilkiah asked.

Eliakim gulped down some yogurt, feeling foolishly selfconscious. "The city walls. There are still a dozen places that have to be reinforced, besides the new walls that-" He stopped midsentence as an idea struck him. He could take Jerusha with him to inspect the walls, and she could explain how the Assyrians would attack them. He looked up to ask if she would come with him, then abruptly lost his train of thought. Her hair had grown, and it now reached her chin, curling softly around her lovely face. He had never seen a woman with short hair before. It was unheard of. But it looked extremely attractive on Jerusha.

"Did you swallow an olive pit or something?" Hilkiah asked.

Eliakim looked at his father. "What?"

"You stopped in the middle of your sentence. I thought maybe you were choking on the food you've been bolting down. Have you bothered to taste it at all?"

Eliakim's face felt warm. Explaining his preoccupation would only make matters worse. "Uh ... the food's excellent. And we're laying the foundations for the new walls."

He didn't know what else to say, so he shoveled more food into his mouth, silently pondering the idea of taking Jerusha with him. It made a lot of sense, but he decided to wait until after his father left for work. Hilkiah was fiercely protective of his girls.

At last Hilkiah pushed away from the table. "Well, I'm off to my shop:' he said. Maacah walked with him to the door, leaving Eliakim alone with Jerusha. He watched her gather up the bowls and serving dishes, debating how to ask her without breaking his promise not to remind her of her ordeal. He remembered how it felt to hold her frail body as she trembled with terror, and he cleared his throat nervously.

"Uh ... Jerusha? I was wondering ..

She stopped stacking dishes and looked at him, fingering her necklace. He wished she were wearing a different dress.

"It ... uh ... it just occurred to me that you could help me with the walls-if you don't mind, that is."

"The walls?"

"Yes. I'd like you to come with me and see what we've done and what we've got planned, and maybe ... you know ... give us a different perspective-how the enemy would see it."

"I don't know anything about walls, Eliakim, but I'll come if you think it would help."

"I think you'd be a big help! Listen, I have to gather my things together, so you have a few minutes-if you want to go change your clothes or something...

She looked down at her dress in dismay. "Is there something wrong with this dress?"

"No, no! It's fine! It's just that it's so nice, and we'll be-you know-climbing on walls... " He left the sentence dangling and fled to his workroom to gather his project drawings and his wits. He hoped she would change out of that beautiful, distracting dress. He couldn't seem to think straight when she wore it. When Jerusha reappeared she had changed, but that dress proved every bit as distracting as the first. He sighed in resignation as they headed out the door.

For the first part of the morning they visited the older sections of the wall that had been damaged during King Ahaz's reign. Eliakim explained terms like "casemate" wall and "header and stretcher" construction, and Jerusha took an interest in everything, asking questions, offering comments.

Still, she had an eerie coldness about her, a lack of emotion that intrigued and challenged him. Ehakim found himself trying to amuse her, trying to make her laugh and come alive. Her smile, when it finally spread across her face, reminded him of the first tiny wild flowers that bloom after a freezing winter.

Shortly before noon he took her to one of the highest points on the wall, above the steep cliff overlooking the Kidron Valley. He watched her face as she stood with her hands resting on the top of the wall, looking across the beautiful valley toward the Mount of Olives. A gentle breeze rustled her skirts, and the sun

shone on her hair, edging it with gold.

"It's so beautiful up here!" she said. "Look how far you can see!"

"Yes. Isn't this some view?" He felt strangely short-winded, as if he had run up a steep hill. "You can even see the Judean wilderness, way over there. See?"

As Jerusha gazed at the horizon, Eliakim stared breathlessly at her long, slender neck. He felt an almost unbearable urge to kiss the hollow of her throat. He gripped the parapet with sweating hands, forcing himself to look away.

"I think I see it." She pointed to the distant horizon. "Those brownish-gray hills?"

"Uh-huh. That's where the wilderness starts."

When she lowered her hand it accidentally brushed against his, and an alarming, thrilling shock soared up Eliakim's arm and through his body. He had never felt anything like it before.

"It seems odd to be looking down from the top of the walls instead of being in the valley with the Assyrians," Jerusha said. "The city feels so secure up here, but-"

"But what? Tell me. That's why I asked you to come."

"The Assyrians would scarcely worry about these walls. They're just a trivial annoyance standing in front of their goal."

A wave of fear and frustration washed over Eliakim as Jerusha's words reduced months of hard work into rubble. "But they can't get their battering rams up to the base of these walls! Look how steep that cliff is!"

"They wouldn't attack here. They'd choose a weaker place."

Eliakim ran his fingers through his tousled hair. "Like the northwest section. That's why I plan to reinforce that area and build a casemate wall." Jerusha didn't reply. "Now what are you thinking?" he asked anxiously.

"You're working so hard, Eliakim, and all of your fortifications will certainly slow them down-"

"Slow them down!"

"But the Assyrians don't care how long it takes. Six months or six years-it's nothing to them."

"So I'm wasting my time and the king's money? If they decide to attack Jerusalem, nothing can save us? Is that what you're saying?"

"I don't know. It's just that I've never seen them lose."

"So if they decide to attack us-then what? It's hopeless?"

She stared into the distance, her eyes wide. When she spoke, something much deeper than ordinary fear edged her voice. "If I heard that the Assyrians were coming to besiege this city I'd run away-into the desert somewhere."

The wind blew her hair into her face, and as she brushed it away her hands shook. Eliakim felt ashamed of what he had done, and for a horrible moment he feared that she would collapse again. But when she spoke her voice sounded normal.

"I'm sorry, Eliakim, but you wanted to know what I thought."

"I'd better take you home," he said, exhaling. "It's nearly lunchtime."

"Eliakim, wait." Jerusha touched his arm, and Eliakim's heart began to race. "I'm really sorry. You've worked so hard on these walls, and I called them useless. They're not-it's just that I'm still so afraid. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?" Her beautiful green eyes filled with tears, and Eliakim's heart squeezed.

"I asked for your honest opinion, and that's what you gave me. There's nothing to forgive. Come on. Abba will worry if we're late." He took Jerusha's arm and helped her down the steep steps from the wall.

Hephzibah sat in her parents' garden beneath her favorite fig tree, but she

found no comfort in the familiar surroundings. Once again she had failed to conceive, and so she had come home rather than endure the bitterness of not being held by her husband. Mama would hold her and comfort her. Mama didn't care if she broke Yahweh's ridiculous law.

"I know I should mind my own business," Mama said as she tenderly stroked Hephzibah's thick hair, "but can't you tell me why you're so sad? Are you still mourning your baby?"

Hephzibah nodded, fighting tears. "Why do I still feel so empty? It's been almost four years."

Her mother drew her closer. "I know-I lost a baby, too."

"But you had more children, Mama. I have none."

"You will, darling. You will." Hephzibah's mother was silent for a moment, then fumbled for words. "I know we've never discussed your private life before, but-I just wondered-do you see your husband very often?"

Hephzibah guessed what her mother was trying to ask, and since she had no one else to talk to about her fears, she opened her heart to her mother.

"My husband has no other wives or concubines except me. I should have conceived by now. I feel like a failure."

"The king has no harem?" her mother asked in astonishment.

"He says it's against Yahweh's Law" She heard the bitterness in her voice and recognized a familiar prickle of jealousy at the mention of Hezekiah's God.

"You're the king's only wife?" her mother repeated.

"He says Yahweh's Law allows him only one wife. But that's the problem-don't you see? If I don't give him an heir, he'll have to divorce me and marry someone who isn't barren." She hated that word. It reminded her of the lifeless Judean wilderness, and she imagined her womb dry and shriveled like a withered leaf that would crumble at the touch.

"Couldn't a concubine give him a son?"

"No, he got very angry when I asked him that question. I've never seen him so angry. He made it very clear that he will never take a concubine."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"I love him so much, Mama, yet I can't enjoy being with him anymore. Every time he comes to see me I wish he would go away, because I know I'll fail him again. Yet I don't want him to go away! I love him, and I'm so afraid he'll leave me forever! I'm not even making sense, am I?"

Hephzibah cried quietly as her mother held her. "Sometimes I'm filled with hope-maybe this time, maybe this month. But then my time comes-and I've failed again." She tried to wipe away tears that wouldn't stop. "Do you think Yahweh is punishing me?"

"Punishing you? Why would He punish you?"

"After our baby died I was supposed to bring a sin offering to the Temple, but I didn't do it. Why should I? I didn't sin."

"Of course you didn't sin. Where did you hear such a thing?"

"The king said it's Yahweh's Law"

"Well, I don't care if your husband is the king-it's not right! How can he put one woman under so much pressure to give him an heir? That's why kings have harems in the first place. Everyone knows that as soon as a husband takes a concubine, his wife gets pregnant. Wasn't Isaac born after the concubine's son?"

"I guess so" Hephzibah was glad she had confided in her mother. She felt better after sharing the feelings she had hoarded so long.

"Listen, Hephzibah-I've never had much use for Yahweh and all His rules. He's an angry god, full of wrath and vengeance. Asherah gave me children, not Yahweh. The goddess understands women. And didn't she answer your prayers once before? Didn't you pray to Asherah when you wanted to marry the prince?"

"Yes"

Mama pondered something for a moment, then said, "I'll be right back."

She returned a few minutes later with a small bundle, wrapped in an embroidered cloth. At first Hephzibah thought it was a baby and she wondered where it had come from. Then her mother unwrapped a golden statue of Asherah and thrust it into Hephzibah's arms.

"Here. I want you to have this. She has blessed our home with children; now let her bless yours."

"But the king forbids it! He won't worship any god but Yahweh."

"And has Yahweh given him a son? Of course not! Asherah is the goddess of fertility, not Yahweh. Your marriage is unfruitful because the king has angered her. He turned his back on Asherah and destroyed all her sacred groves and altars, banished all her priests. Of course she's punishing him. And you're suffering because of it. But if you worship her faithfully and renew your vows, maybe she'll show forgiveness. Take this. Your husband doesn't even have to know about it.

Hephzibah hesitated, not sure if she could deliberately deceive Hezekiah. But what if her mother was right? What if her husband had offended Asherah? Yahweh seemed so cold and forbidding, demanding animals and sacrifices and blood. Asherah embodied life and love. The goddess would give Hephzibah a child, not rip it away from her. She looked down at the golden figure with the full bosom and pregnant belly. Then she wrapped the idol in the embroidered cloth again and held it to her breast.

"Thank you, Mama," she whispered.



28'

JERUSHA SAT ON THE STONE BENCH in Hilkiah's tiny garden and stared up at the starry sky, pretending she was home. She had grown accustomed to the confinements of city life, but her heart still longed for rolling green hills and open spaces. She remembered how millions of stars had twinkled in the clear night sky back home-sons of Abraham, Abba had called them. She missed the sound of the wind in the trees outside her window, the soothing hum of insects, the soft crunching of straw as the oxen chewed their feed in the stall beneath her room. City sounds were so different. They were strident noises, rushed and wearisome.

"It's a beautifiil night, isn't it?" Eliakim asked as he stopped beside her. "Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not" She moved to make room for him on the bench. "Do you like to look at the stars, too?"

"Yes, but I have to confess, that's not why I came out here. I came out to escape"

"What are you escaping from?"

"Another marriage proposal. They're becoming embarrassing." He sighed as he ran his fingers through his rumpled hair.

"Don't you want to get married?"

"Sure, but how am I supposed to choose? The best price? The prettiest maiden? The most impressive papa? It's all ridiculous, and I'm getting sick of it. I'm hardly worth haggling over"

He sighed again and fell into a long silence, not looking at the stars at all, but sitting hunched with his arms on his legs, his hands dangling between his knees. Jerusha understood why all the proud fathers fought over someone as handsome and important as Eliakim. As a country farmer's daughter, Jerusha had been

content to marry Abram, a poor, hardworking farmer like Abba. But she was no longer a suitable wife for any man.

"Why don't you just pick one, then, and get it over with?" she said at last. She played with the smooth Elath stone necklace he'd given her, envying the woman he chose.

"I probably should. Abba's disgusted with me for giving him such a hard time about it. But choosing a wife is a major decision, and I don't want to make it arbitrarily. After all, I'll be living with my choice for the rest of my life."

"Don't you like any of them?"

His eyes narrowed as he considered. "Want to know the truth? They're all shallow, pampered, over-painted brats."

"Eliakim!"

He laughed. "Well, it's true. Anyhow, I can't stand any of them, and I'm sick of talking about it. Let's talk about something else."

"How's your work on the walls coming?"

"Great! Remember that older section I showed you near the Dung Gate? You should come and see what I'm doing there. It will take an army to move that wall when I'm done with it!" They both laughed at the irony of his words. "Anyway, you know what I mean."

"Yes, I know. What about the new northwest wall?"

"Well, I'd planned a casemate wall for that section, but after what you said the other day, I'm still not convinced that it's going to be strong enough" He scratched his beard thoughtfully. "I just don't know what to do there. Any ideas?"

Eliakim was so kind and gentle-so serious, yet so boyishly natural. Jerusha knew she could easily fall in love with him, but she must never allow herself to do such a foolish thing. It was more than the obvious class differences or the fact that she was a penniless orphan and he was a wealthy aristocrat. Eliakim deserved someone pure and unsoiled for his wife, and Jerusha had been with

many men. Falling in love with Eliakim was a hopeless folly that could only lead to disappointment in the end.

"I don't know, Eliakim," she finally answered. "I think a casemate wall will probably be strong enough, won't it?" She couldn't bear to remind him that no wall was strong enough to keep out the Assyrians once they determined to get in.

"Why doesn't King Hezekiah appease them with tribute payments?" she asked. "Then he wouldn't have to worry about the walls."

"Because we'd forfeit our freedom. We'd be their slaves."

Jerusha looked away. "So King Hezekiah would rather die than be a slave to the Assyrians?"

"Well, it's a lot more complicated than that, but yes, that's basically what it boils down to."

A deep shame filled Jerusha. She had faced the same dilemma and had made the coward's choice. If she could go back in time, she would let Iddina plunge his dagger into her heart rather than submit to him. She shivered.

"Jerusha, you're getting cold. Maybe we should go inside."

"No, I'm fine. I want to look at the stars a while longer."

"Are you sure? The proud papa is probably gone by now. It's probably safe to go back in." Eliakim's mischievous grin made her smile. She hurried to change the subject, to say something to break the strong pull she felt toward him.

"Can I ask you a question?" she said.

"Sure ... anything."

"It's silly, really, but I was wondering how you got that scar on your neck."

"This?" He rubbed the thin line beneath his Adam's apple.

"It looks like someone tried to slit your throat."

"That's exactly what happened," Eliakim said, laughing. "This is General Jonadab's handiwork, the commander-in-chief of King Hezekiah's army. But we're good friends now"

"After he almost killed you?"

"Well, at the time he thought I was a dangerous rebel, plotting to overthrow King Hezekiah."

"You?"

He drew himself up straight and proudly threw back his shoulders. "Yes, me!"

The thought of gentle, scholarly Eliakim plotting a revolution made Jerusha laugh out loud. Against her will, she was drawn to him even more hopelessly than before. She knew she was being a fool. When Eliakim finally married his rich wife, her heart would break, but she was powerless to stop herself.

"Would you like to hear the story?" he asked.

"I'd love to."

And as a silvery moon rose above them, Eliakim told her the story of the night Micah prophesied to the king.

Hezekiah watched as the oxen strained to move a massive building block for the new city walls. A cheer rose from the workmen as the stone fell into place on the bedrock, and Hezekiah relaxed the muscles he had been unconsciously tensing. As he moved closer and ran his hand over the stone's rough surface, it seemed inconceivable to him that an army could topple such massive rocks. The fact that the Assyrians had toppled countless walls underscored the terrible power of his enemies.

"God, help us," he murmured.

Eliakim climbed out of the trench, his face and neck sunburned beneath a layer of dust and sweat. He stood with his hands on his hips, waiting for

Hezekiah's reaction.

"Very impressive, Eliakim. Now let's get out of this sun."

Eliakim followed him to a square patch of shade beneath the foreman's tent where Shebna and Jonadab waited, fanning themselves. They both looked wilted, and sweat poured offJonadab's bald head in a steady stream.

"Don't you have any water around here?" Jonadab asked Eliakim.

"Just this." Eliakim produced a dusty waterskin, sloshing it to see if there was any left. "It's probably warm-"

"I don't care!" Jonadab grabbed it and tipped the spout to his lips, gulping noisily, then held it out to Shebna.

Suddenly a look of horror crossed the general's face when he realized that he had quenched his own thirst before offering it to the king. "I ... I'm sorry, Your Majesty," he stammered, wiping the spout on his tunic. "I didn't mean to-"

"No, thanks, Jonadab," Hezekiah said. "But you've underscored a point I was about to raise-our critical need for water. The double walls, the weapons in the citadel, the fortifications we're building will all be useless if we die of thirst. The four of us are going down to the Gihon Spring right now, and we're going to find a way to safeguard our water supply."

Hezekiah led the way out of the tent, climbing over the clutter of rocks and debris from the construction. After filing through the gap where the new gate would stand, they followed the road down to the spring. Goats quietly grazed along the steep hillside beside the aqueduct, while workmen across the valley vigorously shook the first ripe olives from the branches. Life went on, unhurried, as if the Assyrian army didn't exist. But the peaceful scene in the Kidron Valley belied the sense of restless urgency Hezekiah felt.

When they reached the spring, he squatted beside the water, cupping his hands for a drink, splashing some onto his face and neck. The sun blazed in the hazy sky like the fires of Molech, and Jonadab found a patch of shade on the low wall of a terraced olive grove where they could sit. As Hezekiah stared at the city above him, the golden stones shimmered in the heat. He traced the line of

ancient walls that encircled the old city, then Solomon's walls, added to protect the upper hill and the Temple. The fortifications looked impressive from the valley.

Jonadab was looking up at the city, too. "It's an ideal city to defend, Your Majesty-a natural fortress, built on such a steep mountaintop that my armies could defend it forever if-" He stopped abruptly and looked at Hezekiah.

"I know," Hezekiah said. "If only we had water. But I refuse to give up. The defense of Jerusalem depends on it."

Shebna's blue-black hair glistened with sweat. He wiped the back of his hand across his brow "We could construct more cisterns inside the walls, haul water up to fill them during peacetime, then use it in times of war," he said.

"That's a possibility," Hezekiah said, "but a temporary water source such as a cistern causes problems with morale. People know that sooner or later it'll run dry, and they start hoarding water or trampling each other to get at it."

"I've considered constructing walls around the spring," Eliakim said, "but it would be impossible to connect them to the city walls. The slopes are too steep."

Hezekiah shaded his eyes and stared up at the city again, trying to see it from the enemy's viewpoint. "I came here with my grandfather when I was a child, and he told me the story of how King David's armies conquered Jerusalem."

"I learned that story, too," Eliakim said. "David's men found a secret passageway, didn't they? And it led them up into the city?"

"I do not think we can put much faith in those stories," Shebna said. "King David's exploits were greatly exaggerated after his death until they reached mythical proportions."

"Then how did they get inside the walls?" Eliakim asked.

"That's a fair question," Jonadab said. "Jerusalem would have been hard to conquer by conventional methods of war, especially in King David's time."

Hezekiah scooped up a stone and tossed it from one hand to the other as he

spoke. "My grandfather said that the Jebusites dug a shaft so they could draw water during a siege. David's men found the entrance here at the spring and crawled up the shaft into the city."

Shebna frowned skeptically. "That mountain is made of solid rock. How could they dig a tunnel through it?"

Hezekiah didn't answer. He had suddenly noticed a slight depression where the spring bordered the slope of the hill. He tossed the stone down and leaped to his feet.

"Do you suppose the tunnel is still here?" Eliakim asked, following Hezekiah as he skirted the water's edge.

"I don't know But my grandfather trusted the chronicles of David to be accurate."

When Hezekiah got as close as he could along the bank, he shed his sandals and outer robe, tucked the hem of his tunic into his belt, then waded into the icy waters of the spring. By the time he reached the curious depression on the side of the hill, he was soaked to his thighs.

For several minutes he and Eliaki n worked to pull out the over hanging weeds and stones until they saw a small, cavelike entrance leading into the side of the cliff.

"Get a torch!" Hezekiah shouted.

Jonadab hurried up the ramp to the guard tower by the Water Gate. While they waited, Eliakim and Shebna helped Hezekiah remove more rocks and rubble that had accumulated in front of the entrance to the cave. By the time they had cleared an opening large enough to squeeze through, Jonadab had returned. He handed the torch to Eliakim, who ducked through the hole and disappeared into the side of the hill.

"Your Majesty!" he shouted. "You've got to see this!"

Hezekiah squeezed through behind Eliakim and found himself in a narrow slit between two high rock walls. Eliakim stood several feet in front of him,

holding the torch, but beyond him the walls disappeared into inky darkness. The floor beneath Hezekiah's bare feet felt very rough. The walls, which were only a foot apart at the bottom, gradually grew wider apart until they reached the ceiling, just inches above his head.

"Shebna, come see this," Hezekiah called. He waded into the tunnel to make room for him. In the murky light he saw his friend gaze around, stunned.

Shebna leaned against a wall, mumbling, "I cannot believe it!"

"How far back does it go, Eliakim?"

"I don't know, Your Majesty. Let's find out"

Eliakim sloshed forward into the darkness, and Hezekiah waded behind him, barely able to see, feeling his way along the walls. The rock seemed to absorb what little light they had, and Shebna, who was in almost total darkness, had to hold on to Hezekiah's belt as they groped through the icy, knee-deep water. The crudely cut slit meandered as it wound for several yards into the mountain; then the ceiling gradually lowered until the tunnel ended in another arch-like entrance close to the water's surface. Eliakim ducked through first, momentarily plunging Hezekiah and Shebna into total darkness.

"I don't believe it!" Eliakim cried. "Come look at this!" Hezekiah entered a large, cavernous room, nearly round, with walls much smoother than the tunnel's walls. "It's a holding tank!" Eliakim exclaimed. "For the water!" He raised the torch as high as he could and shone it all around. "Look! There it is! That's where the shaft was!"

Hezekiah spotted a depression in the middle of the smooth ceiling, no wider than a small man's shoulders. Someone had packed it tightly with rocks and rubble. "King David probably didn't want his enemies to find it," Hezekiah said.

Eliakim's eyes were wide. "And I thought it was just a bedtime story! Who would have ever believed it?"

"It certainly looks man-made," Shebna said as he ran his hand across the walls.

"It probably was a cave originally," Eliakim said, "and the Jebusites enlarged it. The limestone in this area has a lot of natural caves and fissures. The spring itself comes from underground somewhere."

Hezekiah gazed around in amazement, not sure which astounded him more---discovering a possible way to secure their water supply or learning that the ancient story was true. This narrow, black tunnel carved in the mountain encouraged him, inspired him, and renewed his faith.

"Let's go," he said. His legs had begun to ache from the numbing water. He followed Eliakim out, then sat in the sun to warm himself.

Shebna bristled with excitement. "If that truly is a shaft that leads up to the city, then this could be our answer. We could reopen it, and-"

"I don't know," Jonadab said, frowning. "We'd have to get rid of the aqueduct and hide the spring, or the enemy could find the tunnel as easily as we did. I'd hate to risk it"

"Besides, our population is ten times the size of Jebusite Jerusalem," Eliakim said. "Without the spring or the lower pool, we'd never be able to draw enough water for the entire city from one narrow shaft."

"Maybe we could widen the shaft," Shebna said.

Eliakim thought a moment. "I suppose that's possible, but I'd estimate that the city is more than a hundred cubits above the spring. That's a long way to haul water every day."

"We would only need to use it in times of siege," Shebna argued.

Jonadab shook his head. "No, I don't like it. As long as the spring and the lower pool remain exposed, the enemy could find the shaft. And if we made it wider, we'd make it easier to crawl through, too."

"Let's consider this," Hezekiah said. "If the Jebusites could tunnel through solid rock, why couldn't we? We certainly have better tools than they did three or four hundred years ago. Let's forget the shaft and lengthen the existing tunnel. We could channel the water underground to a new pool inside the walls."

Eliakim grinned. "Then we could get rid of the aqueduct and hide the spring underground! They'd never know it was here!"

Jonadab mopped his forehead with his sleeve. "I'd like to see how long the Assyrians could last out here if they were the ones without water."

Hezekiah turned to Eliakim. "Do you think we could do it?"

"I can think of a few problems," Eliakim answered. His high forehead furrowed in thought. "But I won't say it's impossible. I'd like to come back with more torches and look it over carefully. Then I can give you a better answer."

"If it is possible:' Jonadab said, "then I'd say the king's idea of an underground watercourse is brilliant!"

As they walked up the hill, Hezekiah felt more encouraged than he had in months, and he was eager to begin work immediately. The men gathered in the council chamber with Eliakim's blueprint of the city spread in front of them.

"I'm impressed by the Jebusites' tenacity," Eliakim said. "It must have been difficult to carve through solid rock with primitive tools."

Hezekiah agreed. "I understand that the Phoenicians are experienced in mining operations like this. I'll send our trade minister to Tyre to negotiate for the tools we'll need."

Shebna seemed unusually quiet and moody.

"What are you thinking?" Hezekiah asked him.

"I think your tunnel is an excellent idea, Your Majesty, but I do not believe we will have enough time to dig it. We should concentrate our efforts on reopening the shaft first. That would provide a backup system."

"But why waste time on a temporary solution?" Eliakim said. "It would take a major operation to unblock the vertical shaft, because there's no trace of the other end up here in the city. And if we dig from the bottom up, all that rubble is going to come down onto our heads."

"Eliakim's right," Hezekiah said. "If we're going to spend time and money digging, then I'd like to dig a new tunnel that would channel the water over here." He pointed on the map to a place inside the southern wall of the city. "Could it be done?"

Eliakim studied the drawing. "Well, I see at least three obstacles, Your Majesty. First, it's a long way to dig-I'd say almost a third of a mile, maybe longer. Tunneling would be slow, and we'd have to transport the rubble a long way to the surface."

"What would we do with all the rubble?" Shebna asked. "If it is a secret project, piles of rock in the valley would certainly give it away.

"Second, it would be difficult to get fresh air into such a long tunnel," Eliakim continued. "And our torches would eat up more air. If we bored air shafts from the surface, it would add years to the project."

Hezekiah frowned. "We can't afford that kind of time."

"The Jebusite shaft has already been dug," Shebna insisted. "We should dig more cisterns and use the shaft when the cisterns run dry."

"And what if the enemy finds it?" Jonadab asked.

Shebna gave him a scathing look. "Only one soldier could climb up at a time, General. Surely your men could fend them off! Besides, they could find a tunnel just as easily."

"No, if we had a tunnel," Eliakim said, "we would bury the spring beneath the surface of the ground."

Shebna's voice slowly rose in volume. "So then why not bury the spring and use the shaft? It is already dug for you."

Eliakim's voice rose to match his. "Because the spring is a natural fountain. It surges intermittently, and the runoff has to be channeled somewhere. That's what the aqueduct and lower pool are for. If we dug a tunnel, we would make a pool inside the walls to hold the runoff."

Hezekiah grew impatient. "We could probably find a solution if you two would quit bickering. You said there were three obstacles, Eliakim. What's the third?"

"If you look at the underground route, the shortest, most direct path would take us right through here-"

"I see," Hezekiah sighed. "The tombs of King David and Solomon are in the way."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Even so, I refuse to give up the idea," Hezekiah insisted. "A water supply is crucial in siege warfare, and I know we have the skills to do the physical labor and planning. After all, the Jebusites did it. Keep working on it, Eliakim. Hire any extra help you need. But whatever we decide, let's keep one thing in mind: the Assyrians are camped less than fifty miles away. We may not have much time to find a solution."



29

ELIAKIM HATED FOR THE EVENING MEAL to end. Jerusha and Maacah added so much to the domestic life he'd long shared with his father that it seemed as though they had always been part of his family. But when the girls rose to help the servants clear the table and oversee the work in the kitchen, Eliakim reluctantly started to his feet to return to his workroom.

"Oh no, you don't," his father said, pulling him back. "You're not leaving this table until you give me your answer."

"What was the question?"

"Eliakim, do you listen to anything I say, or do my words simply bounce off your ears?"

"I'm sorry, Abba. I have a lot on my mind. Ask me again."

"All right:' he said with exaggerated patience. "As I told you at breakfast, I have two eager fathers who are waiting for your answer. Are you going to marry their daughters or not?"

"Both of them? I have to marry two wives now?" Eliakim asked with a grin.

Hilkiah did not look amused. "Eliakim, they are from good families. Doesn't either of them appeal to you?"

"What's the big hurry? Why the rush to marry me off?" As usual, the subject irritated him.

"So you don't want to get married at all?"

"I didn't say that. I just wondered what the big hurry was. Am I the last eligible bachelor in Jerusalem?"

"You want me to turn them both down?"

"Would you? And no more proposals for a while, Abba. I need a break from all this nonsense"

"If that's what you want...:. Hilkiah sighed and leaned back against the cushions. Eliakim glanced at his father to see if he was angry, but to his surprise Hilkiah was grinning.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing! This matchmaking is serious business!" But Hilkiah's eyes twinkled merrily as he began a long, rambling speech about the intricacies of the process and all the hardships Eliakim was putting him through.

Eliakim stopped listening, thinking instead about King Hezekiah's water system. He was anxious to go back to his room and work on it, aware that he had to come up with a proposal soon or the king would choose Shebna's plan to reopen the Jebusite shaft. Eliakim couldn't allow that to happen. He had promised Jerusha that the Assyrians would never get into the city, and Shebna's plan was too risky. Gradually Eliakim became aware that his father was still talking to him.

" ... and it seems like they've always been part of our household, doesn't it?"

"Huh? What did you say, Abba?"

"The girls, Jerusha and Maacah." Hilkiah nodded toward the kitchen. Eliakim could hear their voices and laughter as they supervised the servants.

"Uh, yes, Abba-I can't remember what it was like without them"

"Yes, and it'll certainly be quiet again after they're gone." Hilkiah sighed and sadly shook his head.

Eliakim suddenly woke up. "Gone? Where are they going? Not back to Israel?"

"Don't be absurd. I mean when they get married and move into homes of their own"

"What are you talking about?" Eliakim felt a surge of panic that he couldn't explain.

"Well, I'm their adoptive father, so it's my duty to see that they find husbands. And what wonderful wives they'll make, eh? They're such beautiful girls, aren't they? Especially now that we've put some meat on their bones."

"Yes, lovely. But what's the hurry, Abba? I think you're getting a little carried away with all this matchmaking business. Have they told you that they want to get married?"

"Well, no, but they're of age, and is there a healthy young woman who doesn't want to get married and have a family? Just because you want to stay single doesn't mean everyone else does."

Eliakim tugged on his beard, his concern about this conversation rapidly mounting. "I suppose that's true-"

"So I've begun to inquire around about husbands and-"

"You've what?"

"-and if I provide a nice dowry, it should be very easy to find suitable husbands for both of them."

"Abba, why are you rushing into this? The girls seem happy here."

"Yes, they do. And Jerusha has taken quite an interest in your building projects, hasn't she?"

"She understands everything, Abba. She's very bright and so easy to talk to, not silly and shallow like most other women-" Hilkiah's laughter interrupted him. "What's so funny? What did I say?"

Hilkiah wiped his eyes, then spread his arms wide as he looked toward heaven. "God of Abraham? How is it possible that my son, the brilliant engineer, is so stupid?"

"Stupid? Are you laughing at me because I think Jerusha is intelligent? How

do you think she survived? Have you ever talked to her? I've spent a great deal of time with her these past few months, and I'm telling you she's a beautiful, bright, wonderful woman who-"

Eliakim stopped short. Hilkiah had dissolved into laughter again, holding his stomach and shaking his head.

"Abba, why are you laughing at Jerusha this way?"

"I'm not laughing at Jerusha-I'm laughing at you!"

"At me? Why?"

"Because you're in love with her, and you're too thickheaded to realize it!"

Eliakim was speechless. He had never considered the possibility before. Was that why panic had seized him when his father spoke of her leaving? He tried to imagine the long evenings without Jerusha to talk to, and when he thought of her marrying another man, his heart leaped with fear. He stared at his father in amazement.

"Am I?"

"Yes, you crazy fool! Why else would you refuse at least two dozen excellent marriage proposals?"

Eliakim couldn't imagine marrying any other woman. None of them could compare to Jerusha. "I-I don't know what to say. Maybe you're right, Abba."

"Ali! At last!" Hilkiah leaned across the table toward him. "Now, what should my brilliant son the engineer do about it, eh?"

"Should I ask her to marry me?"

"Well, you'd save me the cost of a dowry if you did!"

Eliakim eyed his father suspiciously. "Have you really made inquiries about finding Jerusha a husband, or was that part of your little plot to trap me?"

Hilkiah rose from his seat and patted Eliakim's shoulder. "As the proverb says, `A wise son brings joy to his father.'" He whistled as he disappeared through the door.

Eliakim sat alone at the table for several minutes, thinking about what Hilkiah had said. The entire conversation seemed absurd. He had work to finish. But when Eliakim returned to his room, he found it impossible to concentrate as his mind wandered back to Jerusha. He picked up a clay tablet and dipped his finger into the bowl of water to wipe it clean, but his hand shook, and drops of water splattered all over his parchment scrolls. He chided himself for acting so foolishly and dried his sweating palms on the front of his tunic. He was a grown man, not a lovesick youth. He had never acted this way before. But he had never before met a woman as captivating as Jerusha. He picked up the tablet again. What if his father was right? What if Jerusha decided to marry someone else? Jerusha, in another man's arms? Unthinkable!

He recalled her sweet scent, the sound of her voice, the strange thrill he felt when he worked beside her. He remembered the foolish, giddy feeling he'd had when her hand brushed against his, and the nearly uncontrollable urge he'd had to kiss the lovely hollow of her throat. He felt a constant longing to be near her, and when he realized that she was probably sitting out in the garden right now, his heart began to race. His father was right. He was in love with her. And suddenly it mattered very much to Eliakim to know if she loved him, too.

He sprang to his feet and looked at himself in the mirror. She could never love him. He was too thin, his forehead too high, his hair never stayed in place. And Jerusha was so beautiful. He tried to smooth down his tousled hair, but it stayed hopelessly rumpled. Eliakim did his best to make himself presentable, raking his fingers through his beard and straightening his robes, then made his way breathlessly to the garden, hoping Jerusha was alone. He found her sitting on the stone bench, gazing up at the first few stars that twinkled in the sky.

` Jerusha ... may I join you?" His voice felt out of control.

"Of course."

She moved over and Eliakim sat beside her, convinced that his nervousness was obvious. He was afraid to look at her, afraid his heart would burst if her

beautiful green eyes met his gaze. He cleared a lump from his throat.

"You look so serious tonight," he said. "What are you thinking about?"

She brushed her hair from her eyes. "I was listening to your father's laughter and thinking about my own father. I really miss him."

Eliakim played with the hem of his tunic. "Your father was a good man, Jerusha, and a good friend. I miss him, too. He once told me that ... that he wished I were his son."

They sat in silence, and Eliakim was distressed to find himself speechless. He wanted to tell Jerusha in a beautiful, memorable way exactly how he felt about her, but his mind spun.

"Jerusha-" he began and cleared his throat again. "I've decided whom I want to marry."

She turned to face him, surprised. "You have?"

"Yes. I wish I were more eloquent, but I'm not, so I'll just say it. I ... I love you. I want to marry you" He reached to take her hand.

"Eliakim, no!" She leaped from the bench, jerking her hand away as if his touch had scalded her. She backed away from him, then covered her mouth and wept.

Eliakim stared down at his empty hands, stunned. He felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach.

"Oh, Eliakim, I'm so sorry," she sobbed, "but I can't marry you. I can never marry anyone"

Eliakim saw the anguish in her beautiful face, and he longed to hold her and comfort her. "But ... but why not?"

She struggled to force out the words as if pulling arrows from her flesh. "Because I'm not a suitable wife for you. I ... I've been with many men.

Eliakim swallowed a lump of grief that had risen in his throat to choke him. "Did the Assyrians rape you?"

"Yes„

"Jerusha, no one can blame you for that...." he began, but it was as if she didn't hear him. With tears streaming endlessly down her face, Jerusha told him the truth.

"It was more than rape, Eliakim. That was only the beginning. I wasn't their cook; I was their mistress. I had a child. I don't even know ... which one ... was her father"

"Oh, God of Abraham," Eliakim groaned, and a fist rammed into his stomach again at her words.

"She was such a beautiful baby, so tiny and perfect ... with huge, dark eyes like they have, and soft, curly hair, so shiny and black ..."

"Jerusha..." he whispered. He wanted her to stop. He could see that the memory caused her pain, and he felt her suffering as if it were his own.

"But they took my baby away from me the day after she was born, and ... and I never saw her again. They have rituals, for their gods. They take newborn babies and-"

"Jerusha, don't!" he said harshly, then his voice softened. "Please."

"I've never told anyone about her before, not even Maacah."

He wanted to hold her in his arms as he had that first day, but the memory of how she had recoiled from his touch was still sharp and painful. "Jerusha, it doesn't matter to me. You were raped-you had no choice."

"No, Eliakim. That isn't true. You don't know what I really am. You don't know what they've done to me."

"It doesn't matter. . . ." Eliakim loved her, and he couldn't bear to hear what the Assyrians had done to her. But Jerusha told him anyway, and her words tore

through his heart like hot irons.

"I let them make me into a harlot. I became a prostitute. I let them all do whatever they wanted to me, because I was a coward. That's why I lived when my cousins and all the others died."

Eliakim covered his face. "Oh, God, no ... no ..

"I didn't want to die, so I let them own me and use me like an object for their own pleasure. But I did die, Eliakim. I died inside."

"Please, Jerusha-stop!" He didn't want to believe what she was telling him.

"You couldn't possibly want me for your wife and the mother of your children. You don't know how filthy I feel inside. And I can never be pure and clean again. I would pollute you. You deserve someone better than me. I'm filth- I'm garbage"

"But you had no choice." It was what he wanted to believe.

"Oh yes, I had a choice," she said bitterly. "And I chose to be their prostitute."

Eliakim felt sick to his stomach. "Dear God," he moaned. "It's not true."

"I'm sorry, but it is true. I never meant to hurt you, Eliakim. But I knew you could never say you loved me if you knew the truth about me. You would hate me as much as I hate myself."

Eliakim felt numb with grief and rage. The Assyrians had used and destroyed this beautiful girl whom he loved so deeply. Anger and hatred rose up inside him until they seemed to strangle all the joy and love he had ever known. He wanted to mutilate the Assyrians, by the thousands and tens of thousands, for what they had done to Jerusha- and to him, for it was as if they had violated him, as well. Somehow he would get even. He would make them pay.

"Eliakim, please ... marry one of your father's brides--a virgin, someone who could give you a happy home. You're a member of the king's royal council. You can't marry a harlot."

Eliakim looked at her, and the thought ofJerusha willingly sleeping with dozens of men was more than he could bear. He rose from the bench and walked silently into the house.

When Eliakim was gone, Jerusha stood alone in the courtyard. Above her head the dazzling stars floated and swam as she gazed at them through silently falling tears. The moon on the horizon shone nearly as brightly as the sun, bathing the empty bench where Eliakim had sat in pale yellow light.

Gentle Eliakim, with his dark, tousled hair and warm brown eyes ... Jerusha loved hint. In spite of all her resolve, all her efforts not to, Jerusha loved him-so much that she had told him what she had hidden from her own family: the truth about herself. Jerusha had suffered the loss of her child, her parents, her freedom, her dreams. She had felt the deep wounds of death and sorrow and grief. She had known anguish and despair and pain. But on this achingly beautiful night, none of those feelings seemed as painful to her as love. Eliakim loved her. But she could never belong to him. And she would have to live the rest of her life without him.

Eliakim slumped at his worktable, staring blindly at the drawings in front of him while Jerusha's words echoed painfully through his heart. "Many men ... I chose to be a prostitute." The hatred that he felt toward the Assyrians was such a new feeling to him, yet it was so strong, it paralyzed him. In his imagination he held a sword, slaughtering thousands of them, avenging Jerusha's shame. They would never get past his walls. They would never get their cursed hands on Jerusha again.

But Eliakim wasn't a warrior. He couldn't fight the Assyrians with a sword. His only weapon was his agile nand and his ability to plan and build. As the drawings in front of him slid into focus, Eliakim suddenly realized how he would fight the Assyrians-the water tunnel.

It had probably taken the Jebusites years to expand a natural cave into a usable water system, yet the tunnel King Hezekiah had proposed would be four times as long and nearly impossible to dig. How could he work fast enough to complete it before the Assyrians marched south to Jerusalem? But if he told the

king that it couldn't be done, the Jebusite shaft would be reopened. And now Eliakim knew that he would never risk even one Assyrian soldier crawling up that shaft into his city.

Fighting his anguish and grief, Eliakim lit three more oil lamps and bent over his drawings with renewed determination. He would find a way to do the impossible, a way to bring water into his city, a way to defeat the cursed Assyrians. He would get revenge in his own way.

By the time the morning sun began to lighten the eastern sky, Eliakim was nearly finished. He heard sounds of activity in the kitchen as the household began to stir, and he sketched one last drawing. He was ready to present his plans to the king.

"Eliakim, are you almost ready to go?" Hilkiah called from the hallway outside his room. It was time for the morning sacrifice, but Eliakim knew that he couldn't go with his father to worship God. He couldn't pray or give thanks. He had nothing to pray for except revenge.

"I'll have to skip the sacrifice this morning," he called back. "Go ahead without me" He should have known that a moment later Hilkiah would hurry into his room.

"Why not? What's the matter? Are you sick?"

"No, it's just that-"

"You look terrible!" Hilkiah gasped.

As Eliakim rose to his feet, he caught a quick glimpse of himself in the mirror. He looked pale and tired, and his bloodshot eyes had dark circles beneath them. He could have feigned illness quite easily, but he had never lied to his father.

"I've been up all night working on these plans for the king," he said as he pushed his hair off his forehead. "I need to get washed up before the meeting at the palace. Go without me"

Hilkiah studied him carefully, then glanced down at the cluttered worktable before looking back up at him. "You proposed to her, didn't you?" he asked softly. Eliakim could only nod. "And she must have said no. I'm so sorry, son. I truly am."

Was his grief that obvious? Could his father and everyone else in Jerusalem look straight into his heart and see that it was shattered? The only way he could get through this day and the days and months to follow was to do what he had done all night-make the tunnel his reason for living, his obsession.

The blast of the shofar broke the silence. "You're going to be late, Abba," he said hoarsely. "Go without me" Hilkiah turned without a word and left.

Eliakim slowly gathered the drawings he'd worked on all night into a pile. They were more than a design for a water tunnel. They were his plans for revenge. He slammed his fist on the table with all his strength. "I hate them! May God curse them all!"

Eliakim made his way to the rear of the house and ducked out through the servants' door, afraid that he would run into Jerusha in the hallway or on the stairs. If it hurt this much to think about her, how could he bear to face her? His stomach rumbled as he trudged up the hill to the palace, but the thought of food made him sick.

The court chamberlain gave him an odd look when he arrived at the throne room. "You're much too early to meet with the king," he said. "He always goes to the morning sacrifice, and then-"

"I'll wait." Eliakim found a bench outside the throne room and collapsed onto it. He was tired, but a good night's sleep would remedy that. The deep ache he felt inside, however, would probably never go away. He twisted one of the parchment scrolls in his hands, rolling it up tightly, then unrolling it again as he waited. When he remembered that he would have to face Shebna, he cringed. Shebna hated him. He would probably argue against any plan of Eliakim's-especially this one. But Eliakim knew that his plan would succeed. It had to.

At last a scribe emerged from behind the closed door and motioned for Eliakim to come inside. His footsteps echoed hollowly in the high-ceilinged

room. He remembered the day he had brought Jerusha here, and he felt the balled fist slam into his gut again. He bowed to King Hezekiah, then quickly began his presentation.

"Your Majesty, with your permission I would like to begin construction immediately on what I've called the Siloam tunnel. As you've requested, the water will flow underground from the Gihon Spring to a new retaining pool within the city's walls." He produced a diagram showing the location of the new reservoir he'd labeled the Pool of Siloam.

The king appeared surprised but pleased. "Then you've found solutions to all the obstacles we discussed, Eliakim?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, I have. And I also believe we can complete the tunnel in less than a year's time."

"Oh, really?" Shebna said. "That sounds too good to be true."

"Yes, it does," Hezekiah said. "How are you going to accomplish all this?"

Eliakim tried to sound confident. "The first problem is the tombs of the kings. Since it would be a sacrilege to exhume them, we will simply tunnel around them"

"But that will take even longer," Shebna said.

"True, but I have two other ideas that will make up for the time we'll waste. They will also solve the second problem, which is a fresh air supply."

King Hezekiah sat forward on his throne, peering anxiously at Eliakim's drawings. "Let's hear them"

Eliakim was so tired that the room swam. He felt as if his speech was slow and ponderous. He drew a shaky breath. "The old Jebusite tunnel seems to meander aimlessly, as you may recall, and at first I wondered why. But when I looked more closely, I discovered that the Jebusites followed a natural fissure in the limestone and a vein of softer, more porous rock. The holding tank and shaft were part of a cave system, which was probably already there."

"Perhaps they were in a hurry, too," Hezekiah said.

"Yes. So if we follow natural fissures and use caves, too, it will make the tunneling proceed much faster. Now, as Shebna pointed out, there's also the problem of the accumulated rubble from the tunnel giving away our secret. To solve it, I have redesigned the northwest wall ...."

That was the wall Jerusha had said was the easiest to attack. Suddenly a vision of Jerusha filled Eliakim's tired mind. She was standing on the wall beside him, looking down at the city, her hair blowing gently in the wind. Lovely Jerusha-a prostitute. Eliakim cleared his throat.

"As you know, that section of the wall is very vulnerable to Assyrian battering rams. So instead of a casemate wall, hollow in the middle, we will fill in the space, some twenty feet thick, with the rubble from the tunnel. When the enemy's battering rams attack it, the rubble will avalanche down on them"

"Brilliant!" Hezekiah exclaimed, and even Shebna showed grudging respect.

But Eliakim knew that his final proposal was the one most likely to meet with opposition. He drew a deep breath. "Finally, to solve the problem of fresh air in such a lengthy tunnel and to greatly accelerate the digging schedule, I propose to begin digging at both ends of the tunnel simultaneously and work toward the middle"

Silence met him. Shebna and Hezekiah stared in disbelief.

"There would be fewer problems with fresh air in two short tunnels than in one long one," he hastily explained. "And two work crews, digging day and night, could accomplish twice as much as one."

Hezekiah stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I understand that, Eliakim, but how would you ever get them to meet in the middle?"

"Especially if you are following natural fissures in the rock instead of tunneling in a straight line?" Shebna added.

Eliakim produced another diagram. "Look-the tunnel that will start at the new Pool of Siloam will be running approximately west to east as it detours around

the graves. And the tunnel that begins at the Gihon Spring will curve like this and end up running approximately north to south. Eventually they will cross paths in the middle."

Shebna frowned skeptically. "Not necessarily. If you follow the natural fissures in the rock like the Jebusites did, the tunnel would twist and turn in all directions. How on earth would you ever make two meandering tunnels meet in the middle? You would have no way of knowing where they were, underground"

"No, my lord, I am sure it will work:' Eliakim said defiantly. He knew he could never explain to them the power of hatred that would drive him until he succeeded. "We'll dig the shaft just wide enough and high enough for the workmen to squeeze through, at first. Then once the two tunnels join, we can enlarge them and adjust the angle of descent so the water will flow. I will make careful measurements of all the distances and plot all the twists and turns on a map. We'll be able to hear the sound of the picks from the other side once we're close. I know it will work, Your Majesty. I know it."

Hezekiah took the scroll from him and studied it. Eliakim waited tensely, suddenly aware of how badly he needed sleep. The only sound he heard was the chirping of birds in the trees outside the palace window, and it annoyed Eliakim, as if they had no right to be so happy. Then a sparrow picked up the refrain that had been sounding in his ears all night and sang it to him over and over again: many men ... many men ... many men.

At last the king spoke. "Digging one tunnel through solid rock would be a challenging project for anyone to tackle. But digging two zigzagging tunnels that have to eventually meet in the middle has to be nearly impossible. Can't we find another way to-"

"No!" Eliakim felt sick with rage and disappointment. He knew better than to argue with the king, but he no longer cared what happened to him. "No, Your Majesty! If we do it any other way it will take too long! We don't have time! If the Assyrians attack us next-" He stopped, startled to find he was shouting at the king. He lowered his voice. "I know I can do it, Your Majesty. I know I can. Please give me a chance."

The king looked at Shebna for a moment, then back at Eliakim. "We all

understand the seriousness of the Assyrian threat and the critical need for water during a siege." Hezekiah paused, and Eliakim waited in agony for him to finish. Sweat ran down Eliakim's face and the back of his neck, even though the air in the throne room was cool.

"If you're sure this is the only way, Eliakim-very well. You may dig your tunnels."

"'I am my beloved's, and he is mine,'" Hephzibah sang. Her sweet voice had the power both to soothe and to stir Hezekiah, and he leaned back against the cushions to listen. The love he felt for her overwhelmed him.

Hezekiah had deeply regretted losing his temper with Hephzibah and had worked hard to reassure her of his love. "I don't care about an heir," he had told her. "I belong to you." The thought of sharing himself with anyone else repulsed him, just as he would never want to share Hephzibah with another man.

"'Place me like a seal over your heart," she sang, "'like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame.'"

He watched her delicate hands as they plucked the harp strings and thought of what his grandfather had once told him-God dwelt in the midst of married love. Hezekiah silently thanked God for making his love for Hephzibah possible. If he hadn't obeyed the commands to the king, he might have had many concubines, but he never would have known love. For the first time, Hezekiah saw God's laws not as negative commands but as His loving provision for His people.

"'Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.'"

As Hephzibah sang the beautiful words, a deep contentment filled Hezekiah. He knew love and joy and the rich blessings of God as his nation continued to prosper. Only the threat of Assyria cast a shadow over his kingdom and his happiness.

Hephzibah finished her song and laid down her harp. "What is it, my lord?

You looked so content lying there, then suddenly you looked so worried." She nestled close to him, melting into his arms as if she were part of him.

"It's nothing, my love, nothing," he murmured. Her arms twined tightly around his neck, and her skin felt cool and smooth.

"I love you, my lord."

Hezekiah sighed. Something about his beloved wife calling him "my lord" saddened him, and he struggled to define it. "Sometimes it's lonely being the king, Hephzibah. Everyone must keep their distance from me, and it's almost as if there's a fence all around me likelike the barrier around the royal dais at the Temple. No one dares to cross it. No one dares to be honest with me. No one dares to anger me. They tell me only what they think I want to hear. It's all necessary, I suppose, but it's lonely sometimes. Even those closest to me, like you and Shebna and Jonadab-you all call me `Your Majesty' or `my lord,' and the invisible barrier can never be crossed"

He stopped and shook his head, not sure what he was trying to say. "Sometimes I wonder about God. I wonder if He truly delights in all our religious forms and rituals or if they are barriers that keep us at arm's length from Him. I wonder if He wouldn't rather have our simple love, like a father with his children, instead of as a king and his subjects. Am I making any sense?"

Hephzibah took his face in her hands, gently smoothing his thick beard. She kissed him softly, then looked into his eyes. "Yes. I understand. And I love you with all my heart, Hezekiah."

Later that night, after Hezekiah left, Hephzibah knelt by the carved wooden chest beside her bed. She removed the small bundle wrapped in an embroidered cloth and took out two incense burners and a golden lampstand. She carefully spread the cloth on top of the chest and set the golden statue of Asherah in the middle of it. Then, murmuring the proper prayers, she laid out her offerings of grain and oil and incense before the smiling goddess. She gazed at Asherah's swollen belly, longing more than anything else in the world to give Hezekiah a son, an heir to rule after him in the land he loved so deeply.

"Please, my lady," she prayed. "I love him so much! Please forgive his unbelief and grant him a son."



Part Three

Hezekiah did ... what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. In everything that he undertook in the service of God's temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly.

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2 CHRONICLES 31:20--21 NIV



30

KING HEZEKIAH DUCKED INSIDE the foreman's tent beside the Gihon Spring. "I've come for that tour you promised me, Eliakim."

The engineer sat hunched on a low stool behind a makeshift table that was piled with scrolls, clay tablets, and chunks of rock. He looked up in surprise, then scrambled to his feet to bow.

"Certainly, Your Majesty. We've accomplished quite a lot already." Eliakim's words lacked enthusiasm, and he looked thin and haggard. His shoulders sagged as if still bent over the table.

"Are you ill, Eliakim? Do you need some time off?"

"No, I'm fine." But his boyish grin was missing, and dark circles rimmed his eyes.

"All right, then. Lead the way." Hezekiah stood aside.

Shebna was waiting outside the tent, kicking a huge mound of rock with his foot. "I thought you had a plan to get rid of all this rubble, Eliakim"

"I do. We're filling in the new extensions on the northwest wall, making a solid wall twenty feet thick."

"Then why are all these piles still here?"

"Well, we can't haul the rubble away instantly. It's a long, slow process, requiring a lot of manpower. In the meantime, it accumulates down here."

A work crew emerged from the tunnel with another load of rubble and added it to the pile as if to underscore Eliakim's point. Shebna shook his head in disgust.

Hezekiah had no idea what caused the friction between Shebna and Eliakim, but it wearied him. Eliakim was the only man on his council whose intellect

matched Shebna's, and they could accomplish a great deal if they put their minds together. Instead, they never failed to antagonize each other.

"Is it piling up by the other tunnel, too?" Shebna asked.

"Yes, but I can't help it. It'll all be used as fill eventually. I don't see the problem."

"It is ruining any secrecy we may have hoped for," Shebna said. "If we were mining the rock for fill, we would not be digging it out faster than we are using it."

"I'm supposed to dig this tunnel as quickly as possible, and-"

"Hire more workmen to haul it away," Hezekiah interrupted, "but don't slow down the digging. Now, we came to see the tunnel."

They skirted piles of tools and more rubble as they walked to the edge of the spring, then they stopped again as Eliakim explained the work to them. His obsession with the project was clear, despite his fatigue.

"We start with a natural fissure and dig a tunnel wide enough and high enough for one man to crawl through. Then a second crew enlarges the tunnel. My men work day and night-there's no difference down there. Each crew rotates jobs; digging for a while, then hauling out rubble, then resting. It's going very smoothly."

"Are we going to stand out here all day, or are you going to let us go inside?" Shebna asked.

"I have to get the work crew out first. I just told you-it's only wide enough for one man."

Hezekiah flashed Shebna a warning look as Eliakim went inside to order the workmen to take a short break. Only the worker at the tunnel's end was allowed to continue. When the path was clear, Eliakim led the way inside. He had enlarged the entrance and had cut grooves in the walls, several cubits apart, to hold oil lamps.

"It's a lot brighter in here than the last time we visited," Hezekiah said. "Where did you get these lamps?"

"I designed them. We can carry them like this-see? Or fit them in the grooves." He gave them each a lamp to carry.

"But they are burning your air supply," Shebna said, frowning.

"Yes, but that's better than stumbling around in the dark and bumping into walls. Would you like me to extinguish them and show you how dark it is?"

"No, that's not necessary," Hezekiah said. "I remember how dark it was."

They wound through the narrow slit in the rock until they reached the old Jebusite holding pool. The water barely reached their knees. The entrance to the new tunnel stood off to Hezekiah's left, and a small dam kept the spring water out of it.

"You should dam it up on the outside," Shebna said. "Then you could keep all of this dry."

Eliakim shook his head. "When the tunnel is farther along I plan to let some of the water trickle through the natural fissures so I can watch for seepage in the other tunnel."

"I still do not understand how you think they will meet."

"It's my job. I know what I'm doing."

Hezekiah grew tired of listening to them. "This arguing is unnecessary," he said sharply. "Lead the way, Eliakim"

As the three men started down the new tunnel, Hezekiah had to duck his head to keep from smashing it on the ceiling. Even with the oil lamp for light, the tunnel felt dark and oppressive. His broad shoulders brushed both walls, and he twisted sideways, fearing he would become stuck. It was such a tight fit he wondered if he could turn around again, or if he would have to back out. Unlike the ragged Jebusite tunnel, these walls and ceilings were neatly squared off. He ran his hand along the wall, feeling the slanting pick marks.

"We've had only one or two false starts," Eliakim explained as they came to an alcove off to one side. "We struck a vein of harder rock after a cubit or so and had to change direction."

They walked several more yards, winding first to the right, then meandering to the left, until Hezekiah lost all sense of direction. He could hear the clanging of a pick against stone in the distance.

Eliakim stopped when the opening tapered down to knee height. The rhythmic ring of hammer and chisel was very close. "This is as far as we can go-unless you'd like to crawl."

"No, thanks," Hezekiah said. "This is cramped enough for me." He could almost feel the weight of the mountain above his head and his own frailty beneath the tons of solid rock.

"How can the workmen stand it in here?" Shebna grumbled.

"We're all used to it, I guess."

"Well, it is too confining for me," Shebna said. "I am getting out." They managed to turn around, and Shebna, who had been last, led the way.

"I'm very impressed," Hezekiah told his engineer when they were outside in the warm air again. "You've made incredible progress in the last four months."

Eliakim managed a tired smile. "Thank you, Your Majesty. We're not quite halfway to where the two tunnels will meet"

" f they meet," Shebna mumbled. "Have you dug this much of the other tunnel, too?"

"No, the work on that side's been going a lot slower. The Jebusites gave us a head start on this end, remember. Over there, we had to clear the land, then dig a shaft down to the starting level, then find a cave system with a vein of the softer limestone. We're also digging the new Pool of Siloam to hold the water once the tunnel is functioning."

Eliakim turned to Shebna. "Is there anything else you'd like to see, my lord?"

Shebna shook his head. Hezekiah knew the brooding Egyptian well enough to know that he was deliberately holding back whatever opinions he held.

"Good job, Eliakim," Hezekiah said. "Thank you for the tour."

"Anytime, Your Majesty."

The sun blazed down on Hezekiah as he and Shebna followed the shadeless path up the ramp to the city, and he almost envied the workers in the cool tunnel. When he reached the Water Gate, he finally turned to the scowling Egyptian.

"All right, Shebna. Let's hear what you're thinking."

Shebna shook his head. "He will never do it, Your Majesty. You saw how that tunnel meanders. He will be groping like a blind man down there, trying to find the other end."

Hezekiah stopped walking and paused to catch his breath. "What is it between you two? What do you have against Eliakim?"

"It is nothing personal. Merely a difference of opinion."

"I've known you a long time, Shebna, and I think it's deeper than that. Are you still holding a grudge because of that refugee business when Eliakim came to me at the Temple?"

Shebna started walking again, and Hezekiah kept pace beside him. "Maybe you should ask Eliakim why he has never respected me"

"I wish you would work together instead of fighting all the time. Can't you forget your differences long enough to help him? We need this tunnel."

Shebna stopped abruptly. "There is nothing I can do to help him. I have studied his plans, and he will never get those two tunnels to meet. He is attempting the impossible."

Hezekiah remembered how crazily the tunnel had meandered, and he wondered if Shebna was right-if finding the other tunnel would mean groping in the darkness like a blind man. "'My God turns my darkness into light,'" he

recited to himself, and he hoped that Eliakim was praying.

"May I bring you anything else, Your Majesty?" Hezekiah's servant asked as he helped him remove his royal robes.

"No. I'm waiting for Shebna to bring me some documents, then I will be going to see my wife."

Hezekiah sank down on the window seat and stretched his long legs. The day had been hot, and all the shutters in his private chambers stood open to allow in the evening breezes. They carried with them the fragrance of the sacrifice from the Temple, and Hezekiah closed his eyes, trying to recall the words of the evening prayers: "'Find rest, 0 my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken'"

The words of David's psalms comforted him, and he made an effort every night to read and memorize some of them. He picked up his Torah scroll and unrolled it.

"Your Majesty, Lord Shebna is here," his servant announced.

"Good. Send him in."

"I am sorry for interrupting your privacy," Shebna said when he saw Hezekiah stretched out comfortably with the Torah scroll. "I've completed the itinerary, but it could have waited until tomorrow"

Hezekiah laid the scroll aside. "No, I've been expecting you. I want Eliakim and Jonadab to get an early start in the morning. Let me see it." Hezekiah studied the list of cities the two men were scheduled to visit, scattered along all the possible invasion routes. The men had orders to inspect the fortifications and offer advice on reinforcing them. As usual, Shebna had taken care of every detail, and the document was ready for Hezekiah's seal.

"You think it will take them about two months, then?" he asked.

"Two months at the very least, Your Majesty."

"It looks excellent, Shebna." Hezekiah pressed his ring into the small lump of clay, then handed it back to him. Shebna looked tired. "You work too hard, my friend. You should learn to relax. Would you like to take some time ofl?"

Shebna blinked in surprise. "No, of course not."

Hezekiah remembered how Eliakim had given him the same answer, and he realized again how alike the two men were. The tunnel foreman had told Hezekiah that Eliakim rarely went home, staying in the tunnels almost day and night. Maybe traveling would be good for him.

"Would you like to go along on this trip, too?" he asked Shebna.

He quickly shook his head. "Travel is not for me. I prefer my own bed at night. And I will need to observe the progress on the walls and the tunnels while Eliakim is away."

"I realize that's asking a lot of you, Shebna, but Eliakim has assured me that his project foremen are capable men. All the preliminary work is finished."

"Of course, my lord. I am happy to do it."

Hezekiah smiled slightly. "I know you don't think much of Eliakim's tunnel-"

"It is your tunnel, my lord, and it must be completed."

"I'm glad you see it that way, my friend."

As Hezekiah stood up to stretch, one of his servants hurried into the room. "Your Majesty, General Jonadab wishes to see you right away.

Shebna turned on the man. "Unless we are being invaded, it can wait. The king is tired, and Jonadab has no right to intrude in the king's private quarters"

"But the general said it was urgent-"

"It's okay, send him in," Hezekiah said. "I don't think Jonadab would come at this late hour unless it was important. Maybe it concerns tomorrow's trip." He sank down on the window seat to wait.

When Jonadab entered he seemed deeply shaken. He was a battlehardened soldier, but as he groped for words, Hezekiah could see how upset he was. "I'm very sorry to disturb you, Your Majesty, but something terrible happened tonight."

"Sit down, Jonadab, and take your time." But the general refused to sit.

"Your Majesty, one of my watchmen at the Valley Gate saw a man and a woman leave the city after sunset, carrying a small bundle. They headed down toward the Hinnom Valley, and a few minutes later the watchman saw what looked like a bonfire over by the cliffs."

An icy chill passed through Hezekiah. "Oh no ..."

The general drew a shaky breath. "I'm sorry, but we were too late. By the time we arrived, the baby was dead. This is all that was left."

He handed Hezekiah a small funeral urn. Tiny, charred bones lay on the bottom. Hezekiah's stomach turned as he read the inscription. The baby had been sacrificed to the goddess Asherah to fulfill a vow.

"Where is the couple now?"

"Outside your throne room."

"Let's go."

As soon as Hezekiah was seated on his throne, Jonadab's soldiers brought in the prisoners. The handsome couple was dressed as if attending a lavish social function, the woman adorned with expensive jewelry. But panic showed on their chalky faces as they cowered before the king, staring at the floor. The woman's quaked with silent sobs.

"Why did you do it?" Hezekiah asked. They made no reply. "I asked why you sacrificed your child!" he shouted. "Answer me!"

The husband finally looked up. His voice had the defiant tone of a man who knows he stands condemned and has nothing more to lose. "We made a sacred vow to the goddess a year ago. She answered our prayers and granted me what I

asked for, so we've kept our part of the vow in return."

"You vowed to kill your own child?"

"He's our son. Aren't we free to do whatever we want with him?"

Hezekiah gripped the urn until his knuckles turned white, controlling his anger with great effort. He didn't need to consult the Levites. He knew exactly what the Torah said. When he finally passed the tiny remains back to Jonadab, his hands shook.

"Give this little one a proper burial, then take his parents out of the city and stone them to death."

"No!" the woman screamed. She dropped to her knees. "Have mercy on us, please!"

"The same mercy you showed your own son?" Hezekiah asked. "You burned him alive, and you're asking for mercy?"

"We have other children at home," she pleaded as the soldiers hauled her to her feet.

"You should have thought of them before you committed murder. The sentence stands. Stone them both"

Her cries gradually faded as the soldiers hustled her away. Jonadab remained behind, clutching the urn. The room fell silent as Hezekiah struggled to compose himself.

Finally Shebna spoke for the first time since the incident began. "You should have waited until morning for this, Jonadab. The Law is very clear in this case. A lower court could have judged them without disturbing the king."

"No, he did the right thing," Hezekiah said quietly. "I asked him to report any incidence of idolatry directly to me."

"But why upset yourself with matters that can easily be judged by-"

"Because I started these religious reforms, and it's important to me that they succeed. It's important to our nation, too. Don't you understand that yet?" But he knew that Shebna didn't. Hezekiah sighed and walked out to the hallway with the two men. "Go home and go to bed, General. It's been a long night for all of us."

But as Jonadab turned to leave, Hezekiah stopped him. "Wait. Make sure that their other children are cared for, first."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The incident left Hezekiah badly shaken. An hour later he was still trembling, and he debated whether or not he should go to see Hephzibah. He needed her to help him erase the events from his mind, but he didn't want to burden her with what had been a revolting duty. At last he decided to go but to remain silent about what he had been forced to do.

"What happened, my love?" she cried the moment she saw him. "What's wrong?"

Hezekiah drew her into his arms, clinging to her. "You don't want to know."

"Please tell me. Maybe it will help if you talk about it."

He finally released her, and she led him over to a pile of cushions in front of the empty charcoal brazier. He sank down and stared at the smudges of soot on the bronze, feeling sick, while Hephzibah gently rubbed his shoulders.

"I had to order a couple to be executed," he said at last.

"They sacrificed their son to Asherah." For a moment Hephzibah's hands froze on his shoulders. "I remembered how we grieved when our son died," he continued. "We both wanted a son, and I ... I just can't ... I don't know how anyone could do that, Hephzibah. Sacrificing their own child to a ... to a lifeless slab of stone."

Hezekiah hadn't thought of his brothers in many years, and their faces had faded with the passing of time. But he remembered all too well the heat of the flames, the terror, and the stench of their burning. He pulled Hephzibah into his arms again and opened his heart to her, hoping to find relief from his painful

memories.

"When I was a child my father ordered the priests to sacrifice me to Molech."

"Hezekiah, no!"

"First he sacrificed my brother Eliab, and I had to watch him die. But that wasn't enough. He ordered them to sacrifice me, too." Hephzibah clung to him fiercely, and he remembered clinging to his mother the same way, desperate for her protection. "Someone made a mistake-and they sacrificed my brother Amariah instead of me. He died in my place, Hephzibah. But I was the oldest son. I was supposed to die-burned alive-like the little boy who died tonight."

Hezekiah stared at the cold black charcoal and heard the sound of the drums pounding in his ears. "My own father ... ordered his children put to death because he was in trouble. How could anyone do that, Hephzibah-to his own children?"

He felt her warm tears on his chest, but she didn't answer.

"And then this happened tonight. I thought I'd purged such abominations from my land. I thought I'd smashed all the idols. I thought ... I thought my people knew better than to worship lifeless stones."

Grief overwhelmed him, and he covered his eyes. "If you could have seen those tiny bones-he was so small, so small and helpless. . . ." His voice faded away as his heart raged at the monstrous injustice.

"We want a child so badly," he said at last. "We've been praying for one, trusting God for one ... and I had to condemn two people to death for murdering their own son."



3r

ELIAKIM WINCED AND SHIFTED in the saddle, trying to find a comfortable position. After riding horseback for three days, there wasn't one. "Are we still behind schedule?" he asked Jonadab.

The general smiled slightly. "Why? Do you want to walk awhile?"

Eliakim nodded sheepishly. They dismounted, and Eliakim groaned with relief "I'm sorry, General, but I'm a city boy. Horses are a new experience for me."

Jonadab laughed. "That's okay. I think Shebna wants to kill us both with his crazy schedule. He didn't even give us time to enjoy the scenery."

The road followed the banks of the winding Sorek River, with the beautiful rolling green hills of the Shephelah surrounding them on every side. It felt good to walk again.

Eliakim drew a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scent of the Sorek vineyards. "This certainly is beautiful country," he sighed.

"1 led the military campaign when we won this territory back from the Philistines-one of the wisest decisions King Hezekiah ever made. It's as fertile as Eden. My wife's from around here. I miss her already. But you wouldn't know about that. When are you going to get married and find out what you're missing?"

Eliakim hadn't thought about Jerusha for several days, and his depression had begun to lift for the first time in months. ButJonadab's gentle teasing reminded him, and Eliakim felt the familiar twisting pain in his gut. Many men.

"Sorry-guess it's none of my business," Jonadab mumbled.

Eliakim sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "No, it's all right. I, uh ... might be getting married when I get back home."

"You don't sound too thrilled. Is she ugly?"

Eliakim thought of beautiful Jerusha and smiled weakly. "I don't really know My father has several prospects for me. I'm not sure which one we'll choose"

Jonadab studied him as they walked. "But you're in love with someone else-is that it? And your father is against it-or maybe hers?"

"Something like that."

"Tell you what: I'll give you a little sword practice, and when you get home you can ride your horse up to her house and carry her away." Jonadab slapped Eliakim on the back good-naturedly. "What do you say?"

"When I get home I'm never getting on a horse again."

Jonadab laughed, but when he looked at Eliakim's grim face his smile changed to a frown. "Is it really that hopeless-with your girlfriend, I mean?"

Eliakim looked down at the road. "Yeah, it's hopeless."

"That's too bad. I'm sorry."

They walked along in silence for a few minutes, with the heavy plodding of the horses and the sweet chirping of birds sounding in their ears.

"Listen, Eliakim, if it's any consolation, I never met my wife until the day we got married. My father chose her for me. But I love her with all my heart now. We've had five children together and three grandchildren so far. Maybe you should give one of your father's brides a chance."

"Thanks. Maybe I will." But as they walked along, Eliakim wondered if he could learn to love anyone the way he had loved Jerusha.

They approached the outskirts of Lachish shortly before sunset, riding once again, but several hours behind schedule.

"I'm dreading this visit," Jonadab said.

"Why is that?"

"The governor of Lachish is the king's brother, Prince Gedaliah. Ever meet him?" Eliakim shook his head. "I tutored him for his military training, just like I tutored the king. But Gedaliah is very different from King Hezekiah, as you'll soon see, and ... well, maybe I should let you decide for yourself."

"You'd better tell me now, since we'll be working closely with him."

Jonadab scratched his beard. "I never liked Gedaliah. Never trusted him. It's hard to explain why exactly. King Hezekiah has a certain ... royalty about him. He gives an order, and you feel like obeying it. His brother gives orders, too, but they rub me the wrong way. Like petting a dog from the tail to the head you know what I mean?"

"I think so."

"I've always known the king to be fair, even when the decisions were tough. But Gedaliah? He's always in it for himself. Selfish little runt, like his father. I'd be willing to bet that he's lined his own pockets pretty nicely since he was appointed governor of Lachish."

"Does the king know what his brother is doing?"

Jonadab shrugged. "That's hard to say. Anyway, it was your friend Shebna who recommended him for the position of governor."

"My friend?"

Jonadab chuckled. "Someday you'll have to fill me in on why you two hate each other so much."

"It's not that bad."

"Come on, you and Shebna can't be in the same room together without going straight for each other's throats."

Eliakim sighed. "I don't really know how it started with Shebna. I never liked him and he never liked me. He's sure getting his revenge on this trip, though."

Eliakim shifted uneasily in the saddle. "But don't ever tell him that."

"Your secret is safe with me."

"I don't know; maybe it's Shebna's beliefs-or lack of beliefs, I should say. I have no use for people who don't believe in God. You can blame my father for instilling me with that prejudice."

"Then you won't like Gedaliah, either."

"He's an unbeliever?"

"Worse. He'll worship anything to further his own selfish ambitions."

"You're right. That's much worse"

By the time they rode through the triple gates of Lachish, Eliakim was convinced he would have to eat dinner standing up. They were welcomed by Governor Gedaliah and conducted on a tour of the city's impressive fortifications.

"Lachish seems well prepared for an Assyrian siege," Eliakirn said when they'd finished the tour and returned to the sumptuous governor's palace.

"I've made sure of that," Gedaliah said. "It's an important city, safeguarding the entire valley. The Assyrians could never conquer it."

"It would be a dangerous mistake to underestimate them," Jonadab warned.

"They'll never defeat Lachish," Gedaliah repeated. "But enough business. Time to relax. How long do you plan on visiting? I'd like to make your stay comfortable."

"We're scheduled for two days," Jonadab said.

"Stay as long as you like. I've assigned some slave girls to make sure all your needs are met. Let me know if you want anything at all."

"There is one thing," Eliakim said. "I understand this area manufactures

pottery. I'm trying to locate a friend, a potter by the name of Saul of Dabbasheth. He's a refugee from Israel."

Gedaliah turned to one of his aides and snapped his fingers. "You! Take care of it."

Outside the palace windows, Eliakim heard the blast of a shofar, identical to the call for the evening sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. Gedaliah smiled. "Ah, it's time for the evening sacrifice-would you like to accompany me?"

Eliakim stared. "How can you conduct a sacrifice here? The king has centralized all worship in Jerusalem."

"Some of our customs date back many centuries to a time when Lachish was under Egyptian influence. My brother is naive to think he can change centuries of worship with a single edict."

"That might explain why the local people worship other gods," Eliakim said. "But why do you?"

"I'm their governor. It's a token gesture to their customs."

"Has it occurred to you that you represent King Hezekiah? Perhaps you should make a token gesture to his wishes. He would never want you to condone idolatry by participating in it."

The prince's icy gaze told Eliakim that he had made an enemy. Jonadab's opinion of Gedaliah had been confirmed. "Since you obviously don't care to join me in worship," Gedaliah said, "you'll have to excuse me. The servants will show you to your rooms"

When the prince was gone, Eliakim turned to Jonadab and asked, "Are you sure he's the king's brother?"

Jerusha sat at the dinner table beside Maacah and listened as Hilkiah recited the blessing over their food. But she wouldn't bow her head for the nightly ritual, nor would she pray. She didn't believe in God.

Hilkiah finished reciting, and they were about to begin eating when they heard the front door open. A moment later Eliakim strode into the room.

"Son!" Hilkiah cried. He leaped up to embrace him, kissing Eliakim on both cheeks. "Welcome home! Look at you! Oh, how I've missed you!"

"Me too, Abba." Eliakim returned the embrace warmly. He nodded politely in Jerusha's direction but didn't look at her.

Eliakim appeared older, more mature, to Jerusha, and she saw a network of fine wrinkles around his tired eyes. But traveling had obviously agreed with him. His slim body had filled out, and with his skin deeply tanned from the sun, he looked even more handsome than before.

"You look tired, son. Did you just get in?"

"No, I arrived a little while ago. I stopped to check on the tunnels first."

"Well, here-sit down, sit down. We've just said the blessing, and we're about to eat."

"I'm really not hungry." Eliakim seemed ill at ease, but his father bustled him over to the table and made him sit in his usual place across the table from Jerusha.

"Sit down and talk to us. Tell us where you've been, what you've been doing. We haven't seen you in months! Oh, you look marvelous, son! Marvelous! And everyone I meet tells me what an important man my son is now"

Eliakim remained strangely subdued. He looked down at the table or up at his father, but Jerusha noticed that he avoided looking at her, as if unable to stand the sight of her.

"So where have you been all this time?" Hilkiah asked.

"I've been everywhere, Abba, from Beth Horon to Elath."

"All the way to Elath? Tell me. What's it like?"

" "Beautiful. But very hot. Almost unbearable."

Jerusha put her hand to her throat and felt the outline of the Elath stone necklace that Eliakim had given her, beneath the fabric of her dress.

I understand it's a major seaport now," Hilkiah said, "with ships coming and going from all over."

"It is. We watched some of them unloading, but we could only stay a few days."

Hilkiah passed him a basket of bread. "Here, eat something. You're not eating."

"I haven't washed, Abba."

"Well, where are those servants? Somebody bring him some water!"

Jerusha hadn't seen Hilkiah so flushed and excited in months, and she realized how lonely he must have been without his son. The two of them had shared a close relationship before she got in the way. The servants brought a basin and pitcher of water, and as Jerusha watched Eliakim perform the ritual, pouring water over his work-hardened hands, she remembered the night those strong hands had reached out to take hers.

"How many days did it take you to travel back from Elath?" Hilkiah asked.

"We made so many stops I lost track, Abba. We came back through Arad and Beersheba, then up through the Negev"

There was no enthusiasm in his voice, and Jerusha saw that in spite of his exciting travels, his depression hadn't lifted. Even Hilkiah seemed unable to draw him into the warm, animated conversation they had once shared.

"What about Uncle Saul?" Maacah asked. "Did you have any luck finding him?"

"No. I inquired everywhere I went, but there are so many displaced persons, it was hopeless."

"Well, he's a potter," Hilkiah said. "Did you try looking for him in the main pottery districts?"

"Yes, but I don't see how he could possibly work as a potter anymore"

"What do you mean?" Jerusha asked. Eliakim didn't answer, and she suddenly remembered the brutal slash of the soldier's sword and her uncle's bloody, amputated hand.

"They cut his hand off!" she cried out. An awkward silence filled the room.

Finally Hilkiah cleared his throat. "I was hoping you'd be able to locate him and urge him to come live with us. He doesn't even know he has two nieces here"

"I tried, Abbas"

For the remainder of the meal the conversation felt strained, and Jerusha knew she was the cause. Eliakim avoided coming home because of her, and she felt guilty for interfering in the life of this once-happy family. If only they could find Uncle Saul. If only she and Maacah had someplace else to go. She stole a final, fleeting look at Eliakim as he excused himself from the table, but as far as she could tell, Eliakim had never once looked at her.

When the meal finally ended, Eliakim fled to his room. He had longed to go home so many times during his travels, but now that he was here he felt like an outsider. It was so hard to see Jerusha again, so difficult to be in the same room with her. He had hoped that his feelings for her would fade with time, but when he saw her at the table, his longing seemed greater than ever. Eliakim had two days off before continuing his travels, but he knew he couldn't spend them at home.

He folded his clothes carelessly and stuffed them into a leather satchel with his scrolls, then paused to consider what else he needed to pack. When someone knocked on his door, he suddenly felt sick inside.

"Who is it?"

"May I come in?" Hilkiah asked. "Or do I need an appointment to see you?"

Eliakim opened the door, relieved to see that his father was alone. "Of course not, Abba. Come in."

"If we'd known you were coming home tonight we would have had a welcoming party for you, and-" His smile faded. "What are you doing?"

"Packing a few things."

"You're not planning to leave again?"

"Yes, I-"

"When?"

"Tonight."

"But you just got home! You've been gone for months, and now you're leaving us again? Where do you have to go this time?"

"Back to Timnah and then-"

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know; until I'm finished," he said irritably.

"And then you'll probably work all day and half the night at the tunnel again?"

Eliakim wadded up his prayer shawl and stuffed it into the bag. "Probably."

"Son, you need to slow down. I know why you're driving yourself, but-"

"I'm not driving myself, Abba. This is my job"

"It's your job to work day and night for six months and never come home?"

"Yes! The king has building projects all over the country, and it's my job to oversee them. We're fortifying dozens of cities. Lachish is a major fortress now, and we've started an underground water system there, too. I also have to stop at Timnah for a few days and check on their new fortifications and-"

"I'm tired just listening to you. And I'm worried about you."

"Well, don't be. I appreciate your concern, but I enjoy my work. It's very fulfilling" It was only partially true. Although he enjoyed the challenges of his job, Eliakim felt an emptiness inside that his work could never fill.

"And working so hard helps you avoid coming home to face Jerusha, doesn't it," Hilkiah said quietly.

Eliakim sighed and sank down on his bed. "That's probably part of it." He played with a loose thread on the coverlet. "I guess I still haven't gotten over her yet."

Hilkiah's face reflected his love and concern. Eliakim missed being with his father, laughing with him, sharing his work with him, going to the Temple together. By avoiding Jerusha he had cut himself off from his father, as well.

"Maybe I'll take some time off when I get back:' he said. "We haven't talked in a long time, and I have so much to tell you about the tunnel."

"How is it coming along?"

"Great. You should stop down and see it." As always, Eliakim grew excited when he talked about his tunnel. It would be an engineering masterpiece when it was finished. "I'd say we're about threequarters finished, so we'll have our water system in less than a year, just as I promised the king. When I get back in a few weeks, I'm going to start a signaling system so we can listen for sounds from the other side. It's going to work, Abba. I'm going to prove Shebna wrong. The two tunnels are going to meet."

"Then what will happen to the old aqueduct?"

"Once our water is flowing underground to the new Pool of Siloam, we'll get rid of the old aqueduct and bury the Gihon Spring underground. You'll never know it was there. Everything will be so well hidden that the Assyrians will never find it."

"Does King Hezekiah think our nation might be invaded next?"

"No one knows. But we're working to fortify more than forty cities throughout Judah, so we'll be ready for them"

"God of Abraham, I just pray it'll never come to that."

"Me too, Abba" He gazed affectionately at his father for a moment, then pushed the loose ends of his prayer shawl into the bag. "And now I'm sorry, Abba, but I have to go."

"All right, son. I understand." He pointed to Eliakim's overstuffed bag and smiled. "But I suggest you let the servants fold those things up properly for you, or you're going to arrive looking even more rumpled than you usually do."

The inside of the windowless storehouse felt cool and damp, offering Hezekiah blessed relief from the hot sun. By the dim light of a torch, he followed Eliakim to a tall pile of earthenware jars, stacked on their sides like cordwood. Each handle was inscribed with Hezekiah's seal, "Belonging to the king," and the name of the distribution city.

Eliakim rested his hand on one of the jars. "We're building storehouses like this all across the nation for army supplies. We'll be well prepared for an Assyrian siege"

"Tell me about Lachish," Hezekiah said. "I understand you and Jonadab just spent several days there." Hezekiah had heard unsettling rumors about the way his brother governed the city, and he trusted Eliakim to tell him the truth.

"Lachish is a very impressive fortress, Your Majesty-one of the strongest cities in Judah."

"How is my brother Gedaliah?"

Eliakim brushed invisible dust off the storage jars. "He's fine. He lives well. It's a very prosperous city."

"He's doing a good job as administrator, then?"

Eliakim wiped his hands on his tunic. "That's really not for me to judge. I'm only an engineer."

"I'm asking for your honest assessment, Eliakim. Forget that he's my brother-I need to know"

"The city appears to be running smoothly, and their standard of living is very high, if that's any indication of his leadership ability." Eliakim glanced briefly at Shebna. "But personally, I don't agree with all the decisions he's made. And I don't think you would, either."

"Which decisions?"

"He allows the people to worship at a temple to the sun god."

"It is not such a simple matter, Your Majesty," Shebna interrupted. "The elders of Lachish are very powerful men, and Gedaliah has had to deal carefully with them. Most of them never agreed with your religious reforms and would rebel against your brother if he pushed too hard."

Eliakim frowned. "I got the impression that he wasn't merely appeasing them, Your Majesty. I seriously question if Gedaliah himself supports your religious reforms."

"Are you saying my brother is an idolater?"

"He worships at the temple to the sun god-twice a day."

"Maybe he is pressured!" Shebna shouted. "You would do the same thing in his place."

"No, I would resign before I would worship idols," Eliakim said.

Shebna folded his arms across his chest. "Listen, Your Majesty-I am sure Lachish is not the only city that still has a foreign temple."

"It's the only one Jonadab and I found," Eliakim said. "The people have destroyed all the others. In Beersheba they not only tore the temple down, they brought me the pagan altar for building material. I used it to reinforce the city

wall."

Hezekiah smiled slightly. "That's putting it to good use." He decided to steer the conversation to another topic. "Jonadab has requested some leave time before he takes over our military training program. Would you like some time off, as well, Eliakim?"

"No, I'll be needed down at the tunnels. We're very close to the middle."

"Keep me informed, Eliakim. Let me know as soon as you hear the signals from the other side."

As they walked back into the sunlight, Hezekiah felt a surge of confidence. He had excellent men working for him, and he had spared no expense. When his plans were complete, every citizen in Judah would be within traveling distance to a well-fortified, wellsupplied city. At the first sign of an Assyrian attack, they could take refuge behind reinforced walls and wait out the siege. Now all Hezekiah could do was pray that his plans and fortifications would never be needed.



32

ELIAKIM CROUCHED IN THE COFFIN-LIKE TUNNEL with his measuring cord and clay tablets, checking his calculations for the third time. In the distance, chisels clashed against stone and one of the laborers hummed tunelessly as he worked. Eliakim bent close to the lamp to read his figures, and the oily smoke stung his eyes. These calculations couldn't be right! But where had he made a mistake? He wiped his burning eyes and added up the numbers again.

"We're hitting harder rock where you told us to dig, sir."

Eliakim looked up; his burly foreman filled the tunnel in front of him. The chiseling and the singing had stopped. "Not again."

"Afraid so, sir. The fissure in the limestone takes another twist to the left."

"Show me."

Eliakim pushed his measuring cord and tablets aside as the foreman ordered the workmen to take a short break. Then Eliakim led the way, crawling on his hands and knees toward the wall of rock at the end of the tunnel. Only one small lamp burned, mounted on the wall a few feet behind them. Their crouching shadows danced eerily on the wall. In the inky gloom, Eliakim couldn't see any fissures in the rock. He picked up a hammer and tapped the wall, listening for changes in pitch. Maybe the foreman was wrong; maybe the vein of limestone they followed would continue in a straight path. But after several minutes of testing, Eliakim knew the tunnel would have to make yet another sharp turn to the left.

He threw the hammer to the floor and crouched in the semidarkness, resting his forehead on his clenched fist. Silence filled the tunnel. Even the mumbling of the workers had stopped, and all he heard was the foreman's chesty breathing. The air felt damp, his skin clammy.

"What do you want us to do now, my lord?"

Eliakim tried to recall his latest measurements and to calculate in his head, but exhaustion slowed his efforts, frustrating him. "I don't know-follow the softer rock, I guess." He turned around to crawl out and cracked his head painfully on the low ceiling.

"But, my lord, if we follow the vein, won't we be veering away from the other tunnel again?"

Eliakim didn't know where the other tunnel was. That was the problem. According to his calculations, the two tunnels were perfectly aligned and within a few cubits of breaking through. But in reality the tunnels didn't seem to match his calculations. He rubbed the rising welt on his head and inched back to the end of the tunnel. He pressed his ear to the wall like an anxious physician on a dying patient's chest, listening in several places for sounds from the other side. If they were as close as he thought they were, he should be able to hear the ringing vibrations from the other tunnel, conducted through the stone. He heard nothing.

"Are you sure they're digging over there?" he asked.

"I can check-"

"Never mind. Let's try the signals again. We'll listen here, and then over here, where the softer vein lies"

"First thing tomorrow morning, you mean?"

"No! Right now! How else can we dig?"

"But it's the middle of the night-"

"I don't care!"

"But they have to blow the shofar to let us know when they're ready to signal, and we can't go blasting shofars now. We'll wake up the entire city. They'll think the Assyrians are coming."

The Assyrians. They were the reason he had gotten into this mess. Eliakim slumped against the cold stone wall in defeat. "I can't even remember if it's day or night anymore."

The foreman nervously toyed with his hammer. "Sir? You can tell me to mind my own business, but I think you should go home and get some rest. Maybe things will look different in the morning."

"Torches!" Eliakim suddenly shouted. "We can signal with torches instead of shofars!"

He squeezed past the stunned foreman and scrambled down the tunnel on his hands and knees to issue the orders. "Send a runner over to the other side and tell them to try the signals twice. Tell them to light a torch when they're ready to start and extinguish it when they're done. We'll do the same. Got that?"

Eliakim brushed the loose dirt off his knees and crawled back to his foreman. "You listen there and I'll listen here, then we'll switch."

The foreman's slippery sweat soaked Eliakim's tunic as they maneuvered into position, side by side, in a space large enough for only one man. The ceiling was just inches above Eliakim's head, and the man's salty odor nauseated him.

At last word traveled down the tunnel that the signaling had begun. Eliakim pressed his ear against the cold wall, now damp with his own condensed breath, and listened.

Nothing.

He watched the foreman's face, just inches from his, but it remained fixed in a scowl. When word reached them that the signaling was over, the foreman shook his head.

"All right. Switch places," Eliakim ordered.

In his haste, Eliakim smacked his head on the ceiling again and grunted in pain. As he listened for the second set of signals; he knew that if he closed his eyes he would probably fall asleep on the hard stone floor. He was sticky with sweat, his own and the foreman's, and coated with a layer of dirt. When he finished listening he would go home, get washed, and go to bed. It was hopeless.

At last the signaling ended. He had heard nothing. The foreman held out the hammer.

"Do you want to pound the signal, sir, or should l?"

"You do it. I'm going out for some air." He crawled down the tunnel to where he had left his drawings, then slumped against the wall to rest and promptly fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes, the foreman was crouching beside him, shaking him awake. "We can't dig until you tell us where, sir. They didn't hear our signals over on the other side, either." Eliakim looked down at his measurements, but they dissolved into an unreadable blur. "Follow the vein of softer rock," he said.

"But that means-"

"Then do whatever you want! It doesn't matter anymore. I'm going home to get some sleep."

Hilkiah lay in bed, staring into the darkness, listening. Eliakim had promised to come home for supper, but it was already after midnight, and he hadn't arrived. Hilkiah tried not to imagine a cave-in at the tunnel or some other disaster. Months had passed since he'd talked to Eliakim about slowing down, but if anything, he'd been working even harder. He was digging the tunnel to bury his broken heart.

Hilkiah couldn't remember when Eliakim had last gone to the Temple with him-or when he'd laughed or smiled. His depression was as deep and black as the tunnel shaft. Wealthy fathers continued to line up at Hilkiah's door, offering to match their daughters with Eliakim. Maybe his heart would heal faster if Hilkiah arranged a match for him. But Eliakim had been so short-tempered lately that he was afraid to suggest it.

At last Hilkiah heard the front door creak open, then slam shut. He leaped out of bed, grabbing his robe and an oil lamp on the way out. He saw by Eliakim's face that the news wasn't good.

"Abba, why are you still up?"

"I was worried about you. You said you'd be home for dinner."

"Yes-well, I'm sorry. I guess I forgot. I lose track of day and night when I'm inside the tunnel."

"We waited to eat-we were all worried about you."

Eliakim peeled off his dusty outer robe and let it drop to the floor. "Don't you have anything better to do than worry about me? You've got the girls now. Worry about them"

Eliakim smelled like stale sweat. He looked exhausted, but he stumbled around the front hall as if filled with nervous energy, his bloodshot eyes darting restlessly. "Look, if I'm causing you so much worry and distress, maybe I should move out for good. Then it won't matter when I come or go, and you can stop losing sleep over me."

"You hardly live here now as it is."

"We've been through all this before," he said wearily. "It's my job-you know that"

"And it's my job as your father to worry about you."

Eliakim rubbed his eyes, and Hilkiah saw that his hands were shaking. "I'm sorry, Abba. Maybe once the tunnel is finished we can all relax again"

"Any sound from the other side yet?" Hilkiah hated to ask.

"No. Nothing."

"How about water seepage?"

"We've got to be close! That's why I'm so late. I measured it all over again, and we've got to be within hearing range by now! I don't understand it!"

"I never did understand how you could get two narrow, winding tunnels to meet."

"You sound like Shebna. He's convinced I can't do it, but I know they're close. I know they are!" Eliakim's hands balled into fists.

"Then why are you so upset? You should be happy."

Eliakim stopped pacing, and his whole body sagged. "King Hezekiah received a report today. They've spotted Assyrians in Judean territory."

Hilkiah's heart seemed to stand still. "Are they invading us?"

"Not yet, but it doesn't look good."

"They're scouting Judean territory, Uncle Hilkiah." The voice came from behind him, and he jumped in surprise. Jerusha stood in the shadows, hugging her robe tightly around herself She looked beautiful in the pale lamplight with her long hair hanging loose. No wonder his son was smitten.

"The siege of Samaria must be nearing an end," she said. "That's why they're sending out their scouts."

"Oh, Jerusha. Are you sure?" Hilkiah asked.

"Yes, I'm positive. They scout their next target when the siege is about to break through"

Hilkiah wrung his hands. "God of Abraham! It's time for our nation to cry out to you. The Torah says that sometimes the Holy One sends a crisis to wake us up. Sometimes that's the only time men will call on Him, and the Torah also says-" Hilkiah stopped when he saw his son's face. All the color had drained from it, and he looked as though he might collapse. "Eliakim, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

"I have to go back to the tunnel."

"Go back? It's the middle of the night. You can't-"

"I told them to follow the softer rock, but they have to go straight!" Eliakim picked up his outer robe and struggled to put it on. His motions were jerky and out of control. Before Hilkiah could stop him, Eliakim disappeared through the door.

"God of Abraham, please help him. When does he eat? When does he sleep?

What can I do for my son?" He turned to Jerusha. She looked as pale and frightened as Eliakim had. "Jerusha, what's wrong?"

"Why did I ever think I could escape from them?" she asked. "Iddina's stalking me, I know he is-and there's no place left to hide!"

Hilkiah drew her into his arms and let her weep. God of Abraham ... what would become of all of them?

33

KING HEZEKIAH SAT ON HIS THRONE, holding court as usual, but deep inside, faith and doubt battled like two armies locked in mortal combat. Assyrian soldiers had been spotted in Judean territory, and Hezekiah knew he faced one of the greatest crises of his reign. Outside his throne room the air was still. No branches stirred, no birds sang, as if nature tensed with the strain of waiting. The steady pounding of hammers sounded in the streets as workmen labored to complete the walls around the palace complex and military fortress. The sound seemed to echo the Assyrian battering rams as they hammered against the walls of Samaria in the north. When the scribe announced that General Jonadab had arrived, Hezekiah knew why.

"Your Majesty, the siege of Samaria is over," the general said. "I just received word that the city fell to the Assyrians three days ago."

In the hush that filled the throne room, an overwhelming sadness filled Hezekiah. Israel was defeated. All the territory that had once belonged to the ten northern tribes was conquered. How could all those descendants of Abraham, once as numerous as the stars of heaven, be lost?

"It was inevitable," Jonadab said. "No one has ever defeated the Assyrians. Samaria held out bravely for three years, but the remaining inhabitants neared starvation at the end. They'd resorted to

"How does news like that find its way here?" Shebna grumbled.

"The Assyrians will make sure every man in Judah hears about it," Jonadab said. "It's part of their plan to demoralize their enemies so they'll give up. The Assyrians are masters at it. They'll keep some of their victims from Samaria alive until they reach the next city-then they'll impale the poor souls around the walls and leave them there to die. Do you have any idea how terrifying that is to the people watching from inside the walls?"

"Yes, and if they attack Judah next, those Israelite prisoners will remind us that Israel was always larger and stronger than our nation." Hezekiah passed his

hand over his face. "What else, Jonadab?"

"The Assyrians will deport the survivors as slaves. By the time they finish, not one Israeli will remain in that country. It will be as if they disappeared from the face of the earth."

Hezekiah felt a chill. That was what Isaiah had prophesied during the first year of Hezekiah's reign. He wondered if this, the seventh year of his reign, would be his last.

"Has anyone learned what Assyria's next move will be?" he asked.

"No, Your Majesty. No one seems to know."

Hezekiah drew a deep breath and grimly faced the two men. "Use the signal fires to keep me informed on the Assyrians' movements. I want to know as soon as they march. As I see it, we have two choices: submit and become a vassal nation to Assyria again, or call upon any allies we can find and get ready to fight back."

Shebna gnawed his fingernails. "Whatever you decide to do, you had better do it quickly. Once the Assyrians cross our borders, it will be too late for tribute."

"We shouldn't wait to start mobilizing our allies or our troops," Jonadab said.

"Are we prepared for a fight, General?"

"Not as ready as I'd like to be. We need more time to finish our fortifications and train our forces. But this is our land, Your Majesty. The men of Judah will fight with all their hearts to save it."

Shebna stared at the floor and shook his head. "Their love for the land will never be enough. We are a nation of farmers and craftsmen; the Assyrians are professional soldiers. Without allies we are doomed-outnumbered a hundred to one"

"Is slavery preferable to annihilation?" Hezekiah wondered aloud. "Would the men of Judah prefer to live, laboring in their fields for foreign masters for the

rest of their lives?"

"Given the choice, I think they would," Shebna said.

"No! Only the cowards would choose to surrender," Jonadab said. "We were outnumbered when we faced the Philistines, too. We should fight for what is rightfully ours."

Hezekiah looked at the two men for a long moment. "The decision isn't mine to make," he said at last. "It's God's. I'm not going to choose either alternative until I know what God's will is. Find Rabbi Isaiah. Ask him to seek the word of the Lord for me. Tell him I'll do whatever Yahweh says."

Shebna slumped in his seat and stared at the floor. Jonadab went rigid. "Shouldn't I mobilize my troops, just in case-?"

"Not until I talk to Isaiah. But in the meantime, we can pray. Tell the priests and Levites to organize a special sacrifice at the Temple. Then send for Eliakim. If we ever needed a secure water supply, the time is now"

When the blast of the shofar announced the service at the Temple, Eliakim was crouched deep inside the south tunnel, listening in vain for a sound from the other side. A messenger brought him the news and he dismissed all the workmen, then hurried home to change his clothes. Maacah met him at the door.

"What's going on, Eliakim? Why are the shofars blowing?"

"It's a special assembly at the Temple."

"Why would they call one now, in the middle of the day?"

Samaria must have fallen. There could be no other reason. Jerusha and Maacah would find out eventually, but Eliakim didn't want to be the one to tell them. He moved past Maacah.

"I don't know. I've been in the tunnel all morning. Excuse meI have to get ready."

Eliakim bathed in the mikveh, then changed into clean clothes. But as he hurried across the courtyard, he heard Jerusha's panicked voice coming through the open upstairs window.

"I'm packing some food and water and I'm getting out! I'm not staying in Jerusalem, Maacah. I'm not!"

"We can't leave-not after everything Uncle Hilkiah has done for us!" Maacah said. "Besides, where would we go?"

"We'll find Uncle Saul and live with him."

"But if Eliakim couldn't find him, how will we?"

"I don't know! I don't care! We've got to get out of here!"

"We're safer behind the city walls-"

"No, we're not! The Assyrians could easily topple these walls. I've watched them do it!"

Eliakim felt a knife twist in his stomach. He groaned and leaned against the wall of the house.

"Maacah, I've seen them attack walls much thicker than Jerusalem's. And I've witnessed the horrible things they do once those walls are breached. I pitied the people who were trapped inside, and I won't become one of them! I won't!"

Eliakim felt a hand on his shoulder. "Are you ready to go, son?" his father asked. Eliakim nodded. He didn't want to hear any more.

They joined the crowd that stood before the sanctuary, anxiously waiting to hear the king's announcement. When Hezekiah finally mounted the royal dais, the murmuring fell silent.

"Three days ago Samaria fell to the Assyrians." His strong voice carried no tremor of fear, and he stood with his shoulders straight, his head held high. "We need to remember our brethren and to pray for them. And we need to pray for ourselves, as well."

As Eliakim bowed down in the courtyard, one overwhelming thought filled his mind: His tunnel wasn't finished. Eight months had passed since he had first begun to dig, and according to his calculations it was almost complete. But almost wasn't good enough. His long months of digging would all go to waste. The Assyrians would win again.

In the Temple courtyard, the priests lifted their hands as they pleaded with God for help, but Eliakim was too panicked to pray. His mind raced in every direction at once, trying to figure out where he had gone wrong and how he could make the tunnels meet.

The priests killed the sacrifices, and Eliakim rose with the other men and crowded around the altar. But he didn't hear any of the priests' words as he frantically struggled to recall the latest measure ments of the tunnels and to calculate how many more cubits they had to dig. Once again he asked the question that had haunted him day and night: Why hadn't they heard the signals?

As the fire ascended heavenward, the Levites began their song of praise to Yahweh: "'I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble.'"

And before Eliakim realized it, the service was over. How could the lengthy sacrifice have passed so quickly without his hearing a word of it? As the men filed through the Temple gates to go home, panic gripped him. King Hezekiah was certain to ask for a report on the tunnel. Time had run out, and Eliakim had failed.

Forgetting his father, Eliakim elbowed through the slow-moving crowd, pushing people aside. Once outside the Temple gates, he ran through the streets to the foreman's tent at the south tunnel. He was the first one to return, and when he realized that the work had stopped for the sacrifice, he grabbed a hammer and chisel and scrambled down the shaft to start digging. Then he remembered that he had calculations to make before King Hezekiah sent for him, and he threw down the tools and raced back to the tent. Sweat dripped from his forehead and ran down his neck as he bent over his scrolls in the suffocating tent.

At last he heard the laborers returning and the clang of their tools as they went back to work. Minutes passed; then Eliakim finally heard footsteps

approaching. He mopped the sweat from his brow and looked up.

"A messenger has arrived from the palace, my lord. King Hezekiah wants to see you at once."

———————

"What do you mean, you can't find Isaiah?" Hezekiah stared at the messenger as if he had misunderstood.

"The rabbi's house is empty, Your Majesty. His neighbors say he left home about a week and a half ago."

"And no one knows where he went?" Shebna asked.

"No one, sir. But we'll continue searching for him."

Hezekiah groaned. He couldn't afford to wait for the prophet; he had to make a decision. He yearned to take action in this crisis, to issue commands instead of sitting around waiting for Isaiah. But he needed to hear from God first. He wondered if the prophet had fled because he knew that Judah was about to be invaded. All of a sudden God seemed very far away.

"You have to find Isaiah!" Hezekiah said, clenching his fists. "Someone must know where he is. Intensify the search. This is important; I need him."

While Hezekiah debated what to do next, his engineer arrived. Eliakim entered with his head bowed and his shoulders sagging. The proud confidence he had displayed when he first unveiled his plans for the tunnel had vanished. Hezekiah knew without asking that the tunnel wasn't finished. His anxiety deepened.

"I assume you've heard the news about Samaria," he told Eliakim. "I'd like a report on the tunnel."

Eliakim cleared his throat. "According to my calculations, the two tunnels are within a few cubits of breaking through."

Shebna leaned forward. "Have the workmen heard the signals from the other

side?"

"Uh, no ... we still haven't heard them, but-"

"Then this breakthrough you are talking about is only a theory."

"There's every indication that-"

Shebna's voice rose to a shout. "Can you guarantee that we will have a functioning water system within the next few days or not?"

"No. I can't."

Shebna slapped his thighs. "That is great! Not only will the Assyrians be able to use our water supply, maybe they can finish digging the tunnel for us. You have given them a convenient door into the city so they will not need their battering rams!"

"Let him finish, Shebna," Hezekiah said. "Eliakim, how much longer do you think it will take?"

He sighed and ran his fingers through his curly hair. "Your Majesty, we must be very close. I've been expecting a breakthrough for over a week. Just a few more days and-"

"And the Assyrians will be camped out there helping you dig!" Shebna finished. "Besides, how do you know that the two tunnels are even in alignment? How do you know that they will ever meet? Maybe they have passed by each other already!" Shebna gestured with his hands, sailing them by each other without touching.

"That's enough, Shebna," Hezekiah said.

"I am sorry, my lord." He sat back and crossed his legs. Eliakim stared at the floor.

"Eliakim, assuming that you break through in the next day or two," Hezekiah said, "how long until the tunnel is ready to use?"

"The new Pool of Siloam is ready now. We could probably start diverting the water from the old aqueduct right away."

"The problem is-we can't conceal the spring until the tunnel is finished, right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And if it isn't finished in the next two days," Hezekiah continued, "there won't be enough time to conceal it properly. Shebna's right. The Assyrians will be here to help us dig." He saw Eliakim close his eyes in defeat. "Now, we can spend the next two days digging and hope for a breakthrough, or we can spend that time erasing all traces of the half-finished project. Shebna, what do you say?"

"I am not a man who likes to gamble, Your Majesty. Forget the tunnel and prepare for a siege."

"Eliakim, what do you think?"

"The two tunnels should have met by now," he mumbled. "I don't know why they haven't. I ... I can't offer any advice."

Hezekiah felt torn. They would desperately need water if the Assyrians laid siege to the city, but did he dare take a chance that the enemy would find the unfinished tunnel? Again he wished Isaiah were here to tell him what Yahweh had to say. But Isaiah wasn't here. And Hezekiah had to make a decision.

"Go back and keep digging," Hezekiah said at last. "I'll let you know if I change my mind."

Shebna stormed back to his chambers, angry and frustrated. King Hezekiah was making a terrible mistake. It would take the workmen days to hide every trace of the unfinished tunnels, but instead of ordering them to begin immediately, Hezekiah had allowed them to continue their useless digging. What a tragic waste of valuable time! The tunnels would never meet. The king should have listened to Shebna's advice and reopened the water shaft. At least that

project would have been finished by now. It seemed to Shebna that the king was faltering in this crisis, unable or unwilling to make a decision. He was deeply disappointed in Hezekiah, and for the first time ever, Shebna wanted to distance himself from the king and be alone. But when he opened the door to his private chambers, Prince Gedaliah and the elders of Lachish were waiting for him.

"Give us an audience with the king," Gedaliah said abruptly.

Shebna folded his arms across his chest. "What for?"

"Surely you've heard the news, Shebna. Samaria has fallen, and we're probably going to be next" He slapped a document into Shebna's hands. "This petition asks the king to send tribute before we're wiped out like our brothers to the north."

"How did you get to Jerusalem so fast?"

"The news is all over Judah that Assyrian scouts were seen in our territory. We didn't wait for the ax to fall. We decided to come with our petition right away. We just happened to arrive in time to hear the news. Now, do we get our audience or not?"

"It would be a waste of time. Your petition will not matter one way or the other." Shebna handed it back to Gedaliah.

"Haven't you had enough of him yet?" Gedaliah shouted. "Can't you see that my brother isn't fit to rule?"

The elders' angry faces told Shebna that they agreed with the prince. And after Hezekiah's wavering indecision this morning, Shebna wondered if perhaps they were right. But if Gedaliah wanted to plot a rebellion, Shebna didn't want any witnesses to his part in the conspiracy.

"I will see that the king gets your petition. Now, if you have anything more to discuss with me, Gedaliah, you will have to do it privately."

"Oh, stop playing your stupid games. We all know you're as disgusted with Hezekiah as we are"

"You are mistaken."

"Oh, really? Then why have you been working until midnight every night on tax proposals and petitions for alliances?"

The knowledge that he was being watched made Shebna shudder. "I drew up those documents in case the king decides to use them. I have no intention of implementing them myself."

Gedaliah turned to the city elders. "You'd better leave and let me talk to him in private. He can be pretty stubborn." The men muttered their discontent as they filed from the room.

"Now then," Gedaliah said when they were alone. "Can we cut out all the loyalty garbage and talk seriously?"

"That depends. What exactly do you want from me?"

"I thought you were smart, Shebna. But if you want me to spell it out for you, I will." His voice rose to a shout, and Shebna backed away from him. "We're about to be invaded by the most powerful nation on earth-all because Hezekiah became a religious fanatic and stopped sending tribute! There's only one thing left for any king to do-either send the tribute with his humble apologies or find some very strong allies, fast!"

"That is what I have been advising-no, begging-him to do."

"But he isn't listening, is he? Even his military advisors are telling him to marshal the troops, but is he listening? I'm telling you, he's incompetent!"

"If you make that accusation again, I swear I will-"

"Then what is he waiting for? Does he want to be wiped out?"

Shebna hesitated, reluctant to disclose the reason for Hezekiah's inaction. Shebna knew that the king was a very competent ruler, even if he didn't always agree with his decisions. He could no longer bear to hear the prince's criticism.

"King Hezekiah consults his god in every decision he makes. He is waiting

for Isaiah to tell him what Yahweh wants him to do."

Even as he spoke the words, Shebna realized the foolishness of what Hezekiah was doing. There was no god to answer him or to come to his rescue. The king had no right to risk his nation's future on the basis of a myth.

Gedaliah spat out a string of angry curses. "Just who is running this nation-Hezekiah or Isaiah? And if you're supposed to be his chief advisor, why is he ignoring your advice and going to someone else?"

This time Gedaliah's words hit their mark. Hezekiah had been ignoring Shebna's advice for weeks, and no amount of pleading had changed his mind. Even this morning the king had asked for Shebna's advice on the tunnel, then promptly disregarded it. But Hezekiah wouldn't ignore Isaiah's advice. Shebna's anger and frustration fmally reached their limit.

"What do you propose, Gedaliah?"

"It isn't just my proposal. All the city elders agree-some of the army commanders, too. If King Hezekiah won't listen to reason, then we need a different king."

Shebna turned his back on Gedaliah and stared through the open window at Ahaz's clock tower. Disappointment and resentment consumed him, and for the first time in his life he couldn't seem to think clearly.

"Will there be an assassination?" he finally asked.

"I could never kill my own brother." Gedaliah's voice was as smooth as olive oil. Shebna knew he was lying.

"Who do these elders have in mind as their new king?" he asked bitterly.

"My first action as King of Judah would be to do exactly what you've advised, Shebna-send tribute to Assyria in order to avert this disaster that's hanging over us. Unlike my brother, I would take your advice very seriously. I'm asking you to serve as my palace administrator."

Shebna didn't reply. He hated Gedaliah. The prince was a powerhungry

traitor, but he was also right. The nation faced certain annihilation if Hezekiah refused to act. Shebna's friendship and loyalty to Hezekiah spanned more than twenty years. He greatly admired the king for his integrity and courage, qualities that Gedaliah certainly lacked. But the frustration of having his own advice ignored for the past several months had strained their relationship. The fact that Hezekiah turned to Isaiah in a crisis instead of him angered him the most.

Shebna understood the consequences of supporting Gedaliah if the takeover failed. But he also understood the consequences of remaining loyal to Hezekiah if the plot succeeded. It was simply a matter of betting on which brother would win-or deciding which brother he was willing to die for. He felt trapped.

"Are you with us or not?" Gedahah asked.

"When is this going to take place?"

"I'm not stupid enough to tell you everything until I know where you stand."

"I need time to decide." The only way for Shebna to escape this trap was to find Isaiah and hope that the prophet's advice would finally cause Hezekiah to take action.

"You're stalling!" Gedaliah said.

"No! You are asking me to put my life in jeopardy. I will give you my decision tomorrow. Not before."

"We can't wait that long."

"If you want my support, you will have to. Now get out!"



34

ELIAKIM LEFT THE PALACE and walked down the hill in a daze of guilt and failure. He had seen the anxiety and disappointment on King Hezekiah's face, and he knew he was to blame. He had been so sure he could do the impossible. Now he had failed. The king had told him to keep digging, but what was the use? Eliakim knew that his two tunnels were never going to meet.

As he walked through the Water Gate and down the steep ramp to the spring, he saw the beautiful Kidron Valley spread out before him. But instead of the green patchwork of gardens and olive groves, Eliakim saw thousands of Assyrian troops trampling the earth beneath their chariots, staining the brook red with blood. With a gnawing ache in the pit of his stomach, he made his way to the tunnel entrance and found his foreman.

"I need to measure the tunnel again," Eliakim told him. "We must have strayed off course somehow, and we need to get back on track"

Eliakim tried to sound confident, but anything he tried would be a stab in the dark. It seemed useless to continue digging, but he didn't know what else to do except obey the king's orders.

"Tell all the men to take a break," he said. "Send them out here so they'll be out of my way. I need space to measure properly."

"Even the laborer at the end, my lord?"

"Yes. And bring all the torches out to conserve air; it's getting stuffy in there. I'll need only one lamp."

The foreman shrugged. "Whatever you say. You're the boss."

Eliakim sat down to wait, wishing in vain that he wasn't the boss. When the workmen had all cleared out, Eliakim slowly crawled through the tunnel, re-measuring carefully, comparing the results with the figures in his diagrams. The twisting path of the fissure probably caused all his problems in this tunnel. And

the huge curve he had dug to avoid the kings' graves had thrown him off course in the other one. He wished for the hundredth time that he had dug the tunnel straight instead of following the fault line.

But as Eliakim crouched in the cramped, suffocating darkness, he knew that he wouldn't find a mistake in his calculations. His mistake had been pride-reckless overconfidence fueled by hatred. Arrogance had convinced him that he could tunnel from opposite ends and meet in the middle. Revenge had induced him to attempt this impossible feat. He had been a conceited fool.

With rising despair, Eliakim inched through the dark, stuffy tunnel, measuring carefully, pulling his lamp and his drawings along with him. When the ceiling lowered, he ducked his head and crawled on his hands and knees for the last few cubits until the tunnel ended abruptly in a wall of rock. He crouched in a space barely three feet high and as wide as his shoulders, surrounded on three sides by solid rock. Unyielding, impenetrable, immovable rock. He hadn't dug a tunnel after all, but a tomb-twin grave pits in which to bury the people of Jerusalem. He had failed.

"NO!" he shouted. The gloomy walls absorbed the sound of his voice as they closed in around him. "NO! NO! NO!" He pounded his fists against the silent, jagged wall until his flesh was bruised and raw.

"Where are you, you cursed tunnel?" he cried as he clawed at the stone, trying to dig it away with his hands. "Do you want them to win? Those heathens are going to win again! Where are you?" Jagged rock tore at Eliakim's skin until his hands bled, but he never noticed the pain as he beat against the wall again and again. At last he slumped to the ground, exhausted and defeated. His chest heaved from exertion, and he tasted the bitterness of failure. He was lying inside his own grave.

As Eliakim stared up at the ceiling, it seemed as though the black, uncaring walls were slowly closing in on him. The place where he lay seemed to gradually grow smaller and smaller. In just a few more minutes the walls would crush him to death.

His heart pounded savagely as his panic soared. His lungs strained for air. He couldn't catch his breath.

He had to get out! The walls were closing in! The tunnel was out of air!

He grabbed his oil lamp and snuffed out the flame. The moment he did, Eliakim realized his mistake. He cried out in horror as he was plunged into total, impenetrable darkness.

"Help me!"

The walls absorbed the sound of his screams. He tried to scramble to his feet, but cold, hard rock smashed into him on every side. He groped in the dark like a blind man, striking his head against the ceiling, feeling along the walls for the way out. He couldn't find it. He'd been buried alive.

"Oh, God-help me!"

Somehow Eliakim found the opening and clawed his way forward on his face. Dirt filled his mouth and throat as his lungs screamed for air. Then the tunnel widened, and he could stand. He pulled himself to his feet, but his trembling legs barely supported him. He gasped for each breath of air. The ceiling was pressing down on him, the walls were still closing in. At any moment he would be crushed to death beneath millions of tons of rock.

Eliakim began stumbling forward through the blackness, his arms outstretched. But the sharp twists and right-angle turns of the tunnel continually blocked his escape as he smashed into barriers of stone, again and again.

"Somebody help me!"

On and on in maddening blindness, searching for a way out, finding none. It wasn't a tunnel, but an endless maze, a hopeless labyrinth. He couldn't breathe. He was going to die. He had dug his own tomb.

"Oh, God!" he screamed. "NO!"

Suddenly Eliakim tripped and fell headfirst. Cold, black water slapped his face, then surrounded and engulfed him. The icy shock brought him to his senses. He struggled to his knees, coughing and choking for air. He knew where he was now-he had tripped over the dam that held back the spring water and he'd fallen headlong into the old Jebusite holding pool. He pulled himself out of the

water, leaned against the wall, and vomited. When his stomach finished heaving, Eliakim knelt beside the water for a long time, gulping air, waiting for his panic to subside. He made a shaky attempt to wash off the vomit and blood, then slowly rose, staggering into the blinding sunlight.

The foreman and work crew standing nearby suddenly fell silent as Eliakim emerged, dripping wet, from the tunnel. He saw them staring at him and realized that he hadn't marked where they should dig. He didn't even have his drawings with the measurements. He turned around and staggered back toward the tunnel, but when he recalled the suffocating panic that had engulfed him, he knew he could never crawl back inside. Eliakim turned back to the waiting men. Bile burned his throat, and his bloodied hands throbbed painfully. The men were watching him curiously, staring at him. He cleared his throat, not certain if he could speak, and thrust his hands behind his back to hide the blood that still oozed from his raw flesh.

"There's ... uh ... no need to change direction. Just ... uh ... just keep going straight until ... uh ... until we try the signals again."

The foreman took a tentative step toward him. "Are you all right, my lord?"

"Yes:' Eliakim replied too quickly. "I ... uh ... I fell." He edged away from them.

"But, sir, you're-"

"I'll be down at the other tunnel if you need me." Eliakim continued to back away. No one moved. Why were they staring at him?

"Quit standing around!" he shouted. "Get back to work!"

Eliakim fled down the valley, through the lower gate, and into the new section of the city where the empty Pool of Siloam marked the entrance to the other tunnel. But he stayed inside the foreman's tent all day and into the evening, eating nothing, barely speaking, totally incapacitated by his failure and guilt. It took a long time for his legs to stop shaking, and he refused to crawl inside either tunnel to listen for the signals.

"Your ears are just as good as mine!" he growled when the fore man

questioned him about it. He waited to return home until after the supper hour in order to avoid Jerusha. How could he face her knowing that the Assyrians were going to win? She was going to become their slave again. They all were.

When he finally trudged through the door, his father bustled around him, worrying over him, insisting that the servants fix him something to eat. Eliakim's stomach turned queasy at the thought.

"I don't want any food," he mumbled.

"What's all over your tunic? What did you do to your hands? Is that blood?" Hilkiah wanted to know.

"Yeah, I ... uh ... slipped and fell on some loose rocks." He no longer cared if he lied.

"Well, sit down. Let the servants rub some balm on your hands." Hilkiah tried to coax Eliakim to a couch, but he pushed him away. He couldn't stand his father hovering over him.

"Leave me alone. I don't need anything."

"Son-?"

"Just leave me alone!" A servant entered with a tray of food and held it out to Eliakim. "I said I don't want it!" he shouted, and he knocked it out of the servant's hands, sending the plates crashing to the floor, spilling food everywhere. Then Eliakim turned and fled to his room, slamming the door behind him.

To Hezekiah the long, dreary day filled with distressing news seemed as if it would never end. Samaria had fallen. The tunnel remained unfinished. No one knew for certain where the Assyrians would attack next. And the prophet Isaiah still hadn't been found. Hezekiah's troubles piled one upon another, threatening to topple over and crush him beneath their weight. He had gone to the top of the wall at sunset and stood with the watchmen, waiting for the signal fire. When the message finally came it told him nothing new. The Assyrians were still camped

at Samaria. They hadn't begun to march.

Tonight Hezekiah needed his wife more than ever before. She ran to his arms, but he lacked the strength to return her kisses.

"My lord, I've never seen you this discouraged. Is there anything I can do?" He didn't answer. He didn't know the answer. "Shall I sing for you?" she asked.

"Only if you know a funeral dirge."

Her lovely smile vanished.

"I'm sorry," he said, pulling her close. "But I can't help mourning for Israel. They were our brothers, and now they're gone."

Her hair brushed against his face with a lovely floral fragrance. He tried to determine what the scent was, but it eluded him.

"Have you ever been up north, to Israel?" he asked her.

"No ... What's it like?"

"I've only been there once, and that was a long time ago, when my father was still king. It was a beautiful land back then, much richer than ours and not nearly as rocky. They have a lake, shaped like your little harp, and it's full of good-tasting fish."

"Come. Sit down and tell me more, my love." She led him over to a couch near the window and sat down beside him with her head on his chest.

"Farther north is snow-covered Mount Hermon, and the air there is fragrant with the scent of cedar. The Jordan River is born on that mountain, and as it winds south toward our land it passes through rich, fertile farmland"

"You make it sound so beautiful," she murmured.

"Mmm ... it was." Thinking of Israel in the past tense seemed strange to Hezekiah, and profoundly sad. "Have you ever been down to the Jordan River, Hephzibah?"

"No, I've never traveled that far from Jerusalem."

"Then you have no idea what a beautiful land you live in?"

"Tell me about it."

"All right, but first I promise you that someday-in better times-we'll travel to all these places and see them together."

She held his hand to her cheek and kissed his fingers. "I would love that."

"First, we'll go down to Jericho. And I do mean down, because it rests in the deepest valley I've ever seen. It's an oasis, right in the middle of a barren desert. We'll sit on top of the city walls, and I'll read you the story of how Yahweh worked a miracle to help Joshua conquer Jericho.

"Then we'll go down even farther to the Dead Sea. It's as blue as the sky on a cloudless day, but its waters are bitter and dead. There's no life in it at all."

"Why not?"

"It was poisoned by God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. The Judean wilderness surrounds the Dead Sea, but even though it looks barren and lifeless, it has a beauty I can scarcely describe."

"How could something dead and barren seem beautiful?"

"I don't know," he shrugged, "but I think it's very beautiful. Maybe because it's part of God's creation or maybe because it belongs to me-I don't know. But I'll show it to you, and you can tell me what you think.

"Then we'll go through the Arabah and down to Elath on the Red Sea. Ships from all over the world sail there, bringing ivory and exotic spices from faraway places. We'll sit for a while beside the warm, clear water and watch the ships come and go." When Hezekiah closed his eyes he could almost hear the sound of the waves lapping gently against the shore.

"Then we'll go north again and visit the Negev, and I'll show you the rolling prairies where the grain ripples in the breeze like a golden sea.

He paused, and when he looked into Hephzibah's shining eyes, her long, dark lashes were moist. "You really love your nation, don't you," she said.

"With all my heart." He swallowed back the sadness he suddenly felt and stroked her soft cheek. "Last of all, before we return to the rock-strewn Judean hills, we'll go through the Shephelah, where there are sycamore groves and almond orchards, pomegranates and olives and grapes. We'll stand in the Valley of Elah together and look out over the plain where a small boy named David once challenged the giant who had paralyzed armies and kings.

"'You come against me with sword and spear ...'" Hezekiah quoted softly. "'But I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty.... And the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.'"

Shebna would say it was only a myth, the exaggerated exploits of a departed king. Hezekiah fell silent for a long time; then his arms tightened around Hephzibah.

"You are so precious to me, Hephzibah. I love you. No matter what happens, I want you to know that."

He wanted to tell her that he was sorry, that if his nation came to an end the way Israel had, the fault was his alone. But instead, he held her close and silently wondered what would happen to both of them.

After Hezekiah left, Hephzibah sat for a long time, weeping for all she might lose. She loved Hezekiah deeply, and she feared for his life more than she feared the horrors of siege warfare. If the nation fell to the Assyrians, his punishment would be the most severe. She would do anything, sacrifice everything, if it would allow him to continue as king of the nation he loved. But she was powerless to help him. Hephzibah thought she understood a little of the helplessness he felt.

Finally she knelt in front of the small, carved chest beside her bed and removed its contents, reverently lighting the lamps and incense burners and laying them before the smiling statue of Asherah. Then Hephzibah bowed with

her forehead pressed to the floor.

"Oh, Lady Asherah, please forgive my husband's unbelief," she prayed. "Please, save him from invasion and make his kingdom secure. May he live to reign a long time-"

Suddenly Hephzibah stopped. She had nothing to offer the goddess in return. She needed to make a sacrifice in order to guarantee that Asherah would answer her prayer. Only one sacrifice would be suitable, the highest gift of love and devotion.

Hephzibah ran to the adjoining mom, where her maid slept. "Get up, Merab. I need your help."

Merab gazed at her sleepily. "Now? In the middle of the night?"

"I need an unused urn. Find me one quickly."

Merab pulled on her outer robe and smoothed down her hair before hurrying off. She returned a while later with one of the king's storage jars, bearing his royal seal. "This is all I could find, my lady."

"It's perfect."

Hephzibah removed a lump of charred wood from the grate. Clutching the urn, she knelt before Asherah again. Her hands trem bled at the enormity of what she was about to do, the great risk she was taking.

"Oh, Lady Asherah, if only you would allow my husband to rule over his land, I pledge to you-I solemnly vow-that I will sacrifice the first child you give me, the firstborn of my womb."

She opened her eyes and drew the symbols in black on the urn that would hold her baby's remains: the symbol for Asherah, the symbol for sacred vow, the symbol for firstborn, the symbol for death. Then Hephzibah covered her face with sooty hands and wept.



35

HILKIAH'S DISTRESS DEEPENED as he watched his son disappear into his room. Eliakim hovered on the verge of collapse, and Hilkiah guessed that his hands, which trembled uncontrollably, were not bruised and bloody from a fall. The anxiety his tunnels produced, coupled with his grief over Jerusha, had finally brought Eliakim to the breaking point.

The household was settling down for the night, but Hilkiah knew he would never be able to sleep. Instead of going to his room, he walked through the darkened house and outside to the courtyard. It was a perfect night, quiet and clear, with a gentle breeze that cooled the air. Millions of stars sparkled in the cloudless sky. But instead of looking up, he sank down on the stone bench and buried his face in his hands.

"God of Abraham, what am I going to do? You see how my son suffers. You know how I suffer with him and how much it hurts me to see him like this. But how do I help him? If I could spare him this pain or take his pain on myself somehow, I would gladly do it. How I wish I suffered instead of my beloved son!"

Hilkiah wiped his tears with the back of his hand, then looked up into the sky again, gazing at the rippling white curtain of stars. Suddenly God drew near to Hilkiah. The breeze was His breath, the silence His voice, the stars the light of His wisdom. And as the Spirit of God soothed Hilkiah's grieving heart, He provided understanding, as well.

"God of Abraham ..." he whispered. "My son hasn't called on you, has he? He hasn't sought your wisdom and help." The stars twinkled in silent reply. "Yes, yes-that's it. Eliakim wanted to do everything himself so he would get all the glory. But now he needs your help, Lord, and he's too proud to ask"

Once again Hilkiah covered his face. "I'm sorry, Lord. I tried to raise him to have faith in you. I don't know where I went wrong.... Show me what to do, Lord."

His shoulders shook as he wept for Eliakim's pain and now for his own, at having failed God. He longed to go to his son, to beg him to turn to God and pray, but he knew that he couldn't. Eliakim was a grown man, and no matter how great Hilkiah's faith in God, no matter how much Hilkiah loved his son, Eliakim would have to stand face-to-face with God by himself.

Hilkiah was so deep in prayer he never noticed that Jerusha had joined him in the courtyard until he felt her comforting hand on his shoulder. He looked up.

"What's wrong, Uncle Hilkiah? Can I do anything to help you?"

"No, my child, no. I'm not weeping for myself, but for my son. You've seen how he is-how he looks. He's a broken man."

He wiped his eyes again and sighed deeply. "It's his tunnel, Jerusha. He's run out of time, and his tunnel isn't finished. He needs a miracle. He needs to pray."

Hilkiah closed his eyes, remembering the night he had argued with Eliakim over Jerimoth, remembering the bitterness in his son's voice: "Why did Mama die? Why didn't God answer our prayers?" "But Eliakim won't pray," Hilkiah said. "He doesn't believe that God answers prayer.

He looked up at Jerusha as she gently rubbed his shoulder, and suddenly he knew that she was God's answer. She was the only one who could help Eliakim.

"Jerusha," he breathed, "he won't listen to me-but he would listen to you."

"But I don't believe in prayer, either. God never answered any of my prayers.

"My sweet child. I think He has answered them, but you refuse to recognize it."

She looked startled, as if she had been slapped.

"Forgive me, Jerusha. I know that your ordeal must have been unbearable, but look around you! Are you still a slave? The Holy One has raised you from the dead! You're back from the grave in answer to your dear father's prayers. You have life again, and love, but you refuse to see it. In your mind and in your heart you're still the Assyrians' slave. You're hanging on to all your hatred instead of

letting it go, and that hatred is keeping you captive. But even worse, you're robbing God of the glory that is due Him."

"God could have saved me from being captured in the first place!" she said angrily. "But He didn't! Why did He allow me to suffer like that? It was so horrible!"

"Oh, my child. I can't even imagine how you've suffered. The world is an evil place because of man's choices, not God's. Yet I know that just as your father suffered and wept over you, and just as I weep and share in Eliakim's pain, our Heavenly Father felt all your sorrow and suffered your pain along with you"

"Then why did He allow it to happen?"

Hilkiah drew a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I asked `Why?' when Eliakim's mother and our two little sons died. And what was God's answer? `Look up!' There is a God of the heavens and the earth, my child. He orders all the stars in their courses and the moon as it waxes and wanes. He sends the rain and the sunshine and causes the earth to bloom. So if there is an order and a purpose in all that He has made, then surely we can trust Him to order our lives, toowithout needing to know why."

"But I can't forget what they've done to me-or what I chose to become."

"What they've done to you can never be changed. But now you face another choice, Jerusha. How will you live the rest of your life? You can let the past make you bitter and unforgiving and unloving. Or you can turn the pain into something beautiful by choosing to do so.

"I don't see how"

"My dear child, tonight you saw me weeping, and you had com passion on me. Why? Because you've wept many hours yourself. You know what it is to suffer. Because of what you've been through, you can reach out to others-but first you have to stop thinking of yourself. Did your father and mother die to save you so that you could be crippled with self-pity for the rest of your life?"

She didn't reply.

"Jerusha, Eliakim needs you-as a friend. I'm not asking you to be anything more. He doesn't trust God to answer his prayers, but he knows-he knows you're alive because of your father's prayers. If you want to help me, I beg you to go to him. You're a living testimony, Jerusha. He needs to be reminded of your father's great faith in God, reminded that God does indeed answer prayer. Please, Jerusha?"

She stared at the ground. She wouldn't look at him.

"I ... I can't," she finally said. Then she fled into the house.

Jerusha lay on her bed for a long time, clutching the remnants of her baby's blanket and listening to Maacah's steady breathing as she slept. She had seen how Eliakim suffered, how haggard and defeated he looked, and it broke her heart. She loved him. But he had avoided her ever since the night he'd proposed, and she was certain that he hated her. How could she go to him now?

"You're a living testimony that God answers prayer," Hilkiah had told her. Abba had believed in God and had prayed for her throughout her long ordeal.

"Oh, Abba!" she sobbed, remembering his smile, his strong, tanned arms, his warm green eyes. "My happy little bird," he used to call her. But that was before they took her song away, before she'd been forced to witness the brutal deaths of thousands of people. She shuddered, remembering the endless days of hard labor, the long nights of suffering. "Turn the pain into something beautiful."

But how?

As Jerusha buried her face in the blanket, she suddenly remembered how her beautiful, perfect baby had been created through rape and pain. Could Hilkiah be right? Was it possible to create beauty from suffering? She raised her head and gazed around the room as if seeing it for the first time. Hilkiah was wealthier than Abba had ever dreamed of being. His luxurious home lacked nothing, and he had opened it freely to her, never asking for anything in return-until tonight.

She thought about Hilkiah's stern words. Was she really as blind and

ungrateful and filled with self-pity as he'd said? Was there really a God after all-a God who could forgive what she had done, a God who may have allowed her to suffer so that He could use her as His instrument of compassion?

Suddenly she remembered her father's final prayer as he'd blessed her and kissed her good-bye, then sacrificed his life so that she could live: "You saved jerusha for a reason.... May she find that reason and be a living testimony to your goodness and grace."

Jerusha went to the window and looked up into the star-filled sky. "If you're really there, God ... please help me. I ... I don't know what to say to him!"

Eliakim sat in his room late that night, his tortured mind barely functioning. He had all of his drawings spread in front of him, and he worked through his calculations one more time. But once again, he reached the same conclusion he'd reached countless times before. The two tunnels were perfectly aligned. They should have broken through. He pounded his fists on the table, reopening the wounds on his raw, bruised hands. Why couldn't they hear the signals?

It was past midnight, and the dim light of the oil lamp strained his eyes. There was nothing more he could do. Eliakim snuffed out the lamp and climbed the staircase to the darkened rooftop. The night was bright with stars, but instead he gazed down at the buildings and houses below him. His father's house was built high on the city mound, just below the king's palace. From his roof there was a vertical drop of at least thirty feet.

Eliakim knew his tunnel would never be finished on time. There was no remedy for his failure. He didn't want to watch as thousands of soldiers surrounded Jerusalem, a city left without water because of him. He couldn't bear to hear the Assyrians beating against his walls until they finally broke through, until they defeated him once again. They had destroyed Jerusha, and soon they would destroy his nation. There was no reason for Eliakim to live.

He began to pry away one of the stones of the parapet that guarded the edge of the flat rooftop. For his father's sake, he would make his death look like an accident, as though the wall had collapsed and he had fallen. But Eliakim

couldn't get a firm grip with his sore hands. He kicked at the unyielding stones, then hurled his body against them, but they didn't budge. Like the wall at the end of his tunnel, the cold gray stone seemed to mock his efforts. He would have to climb over and jump. He raised one leg.

"Eliakim, don't!"

He spun around. Jerusha stood a few feet away from him. She looked so beautiful in the soft moonlight, with her long hair blowing in the breeze, that Eliakim felt the familiar, painful longing for her beneath his despair.

"Don't do it, Eliakim, please-"

"Don't do what?" She couldn't have guessed what was on his mind.

"You were going to jump."

"No, I wasn't. I . . ." He moaned and leaned against the wall. Why bother lying anymore?

"Is it because of your tunnel?"

He gave a short laugh. "My wonderful tunnel! A marvel of engineering! The two shafts should have met days ago, but it's useless. All I can do is grope around down there-digging and digging, night and day." He stopped, not trusting his voice.

"Then it's only a matter of time, isn't it? They have to meet up sooner or later."

"But we've run out of time-don't you understand? There is no more time! How long will it take the Assyrians to march here from Samaria? Tell me, Jerusha! You know the answer! Our time is up!" He turned away from her to look down once again at the thirty-foot drop that could end all his anguish in a moment.

"Surely the king doesn't blame you, does he?"

"He should. I told him I could do it. I promised him I could make it work. I

was so sure" He whirled around to face her again. "This was the only way I could fight them-don't you see? I'm not a soldier. I can't fight with swords and arrows. This was my way of getting revenge. But they're going to defeat me anyway. You know it as well as I do. They're going to tear down my walls, and they're going to win. And I don't want to live to see it."

She stared at him silently for a moment. "Why do you hate them so much, Eliakim?"

He waited a long time before answering. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. "Because of what they did to you. They crushed your heart and destroyed all your love-then they took away your hope. Nobody has the right to do that to another person. Without love there's nothing to live for except hatred."

Jerusha gave a startled cry. "Oh, Eliakim! I've done the same thing to you! I've destroyed your love and turned it into hatred! I'm no better than they are!" She began to cry.

"No, Jerusha, it's not your fault. You aren't to blame for what they did to you." He yearned to go to her, to take her in his arms and hold her close. He wanted to feel her hair against his cheek, to comfort her the way he had in the palace courtyard that first day-but he couldn't. He wished he had jumped before Jerusha came up onto the roof. Now she would blame herself for his death. But Eliakim knew it was his pride that was really to blame. He should have listened to Shebna and reopened the Jebusite shaft.

"It's not your fault," he said again. "I made the decision to dig the tunnel from both ends. I made all the plans and calculations. I wanted all the glory-to be the man who saved his city. But the failure is mine instead-mine alone. I can accept the blame, but I can't live with the failure-not when I have to watch all the people I love die because of me."

"Eliakim, please ..."

"Jerusha, go back to your room. I need to be alone. You're not responsible. Please believe that."

Neither of them moved. Jerusha looked at him for a long time, tears

streaming down her face. When she finally spoke again, her voice was barely a whisper.

"Eliakim, I know what it's like when all your hope is gone. I felt that way once. And I wanted to do the same as you-I wanted to die."

She looked so beautiful to him, and his love for her was so great that he had to look away from the anguish he saw on her face and heard in her words.

"I started to search for a way to end my life, too," she said, "but the day I decided to die was the day they set me free to track me down again. They gave me hope--a reason to want to live-but it was a mockery. How did I dare believe that I could escape from them?"

Eliakim felt ashamed. "You've been through more than I could even

"No. Let me finish. I've realized something tonight: I'm not a slave anymore. I'm free. And I live here in this beautiful home with a family who loves me. Why did I go free when so many thousands of others died or remained slaves? How did I ever make it home again? Escaping from the Assyrians is impossible, Eliakim. So how is it possible that I'm here?"

"Your strength and courage-" he began.

"No. I know that isn't true. I was a coward. I would have killed myself in another day. That's not courage. I'm here because my father prayed and God answered his prayers. There's no other explanation. Do you believe that, Eliakim?"

Eliakim remembered arguing with his father over the impossibility of her return. He knew that the only reason she escaped was because of a miracle of God. He could never deny it.

"What are you trying to say, Jerusha? What does that have to do with-" He stopped, unable to speak about his tunnel again.

"Have you prayed?" she asked. "Have you asked God for help?"

"No."

It was the simple, honest truth. There was nothing more he could say. He closed his eyes in shame. Yahweh was a living God to Hilkiah and Jerimoth, a God they could turn to for help. But in spite of the fact that Eliakim attended the sacrifices and festivals year after year and had never bowed his knee to a false idol, Yahweh remained a distant, unknown God to him. And it had never occurred to him to call on Yahweh for help. He had shut God out of his life, living his own way, on his own strength. And that was arrogant pride. He looked up at Jerusha again.

"No. I haven't prayed."

"I never would have dared to believe God for all this," she said, gesturing. "But I'm here. Ever since they took me captive, I've been bitter against God for allowing it to happen. And my bitterness made me blind to all that He's given back to me."

Eliakim remembered the deep bitterness he had felt when his mother died in spite of his fervent prayers. He had felt betrayed, and he had never asked God for anything else, carefully disguising his bitterness and unbelief behind a mask of religious ritual.

"Eliakim, I haven't prayed since they took my baby from me. But I want to pray now-with you, if you'll let me."

She stretched out her hand to him, but Eliakim couldn't take it. Instead, he covered his face in shame.

"0 God!" he cried out.

Then, overwhelmed by his sin and his pride and his unbelief, he fell to the floor on his face. And for the first time since he was a little child, Eliakim wept.



36

HEZEKIAH AWOKE WHILE THE SKY was still dark. His sleep had been restless, and he felt as if he hadn't slept at all. Worry pushed down on him like the weighted beam of an olive press until his head ached from the strain. He would have to make a decision today, whether they found Isaiah or not. Sending tribute to Assyria seemed to be the only solution. He couldn't delay any longer.

Hezekiah rose and had just finished dressing by lamplight when he heard a knock on his door. It had to be bad news at this early hour. His servants were still asleep, so he opened the door himself. Immense relief flooded over him when he saw Isaiah.

"Rabbi, come in! I've been trying to find you since-"

"Yes, I've heard. I'm sorry you had to wait so long for me, Your Majesty. And I'm glad that your palace administrator was finally able to get in touch with me. Shebna tracked me down late last night and sent an urgent message that you needed to see me at once"

"Yes, Rabbi, I do. Has Yahweh revealed to you what's going to happen to our nation-to our people?"

The prophet's expression changed, as if he had glimpsed something wonderful and terrible, awesome and dreadful. "Yes," Isaiah said. "But who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? God has shown me things I'm not sure I fully understand yet. I've seen the promised seed of Abraham, the righteous Servant of Yahweh, a Light for the Gentiles and a stumbling block to our people-the Messiah, who will reign on the throne forever"

"Will God send the Messiah now-to deliver us from Assyria?"

The question seemed to annoy Isaiah. "You don't understand. He will be your offspring, but you and I won't see Him. And when He does come, many will hear Him but not understand."

"Rabbi, what about our present crisis? Have you heard that Samaria has fallen to the Assyrians, and that their soldiers have been seen in Judean territory?"

"No, I didn't know that." Nor did Isaiah seem to care. An aura of otherworldliness surrounded him, as if his vision of the future made him unconcerned with the present. Hezekiah was desperate to make him see the urgency of their current situation.

"I've been waiting to talk to you about what I should do. I've armed and fortified our nation, and we're ready to fight the Assyrians if that's God's will. Or maybe rebelling was a mistake. Should I appease them with tribute ... or seek alliances? I have to make a decision today, but I want it to be what Yahweh wants."

He waited anxiously for Isaiah to answer, but the prophet remained silent for several long minutes. When he finally spoke, he seemed deeply burdened and sorrowful. "Your Majesty, you've earned my deepest respect for seeking the will of the Lord, unlike your forefathers. May God grant you the grace to hear it and understand it."

Another change took place in Isaiah, and suddenly Hezekiah was afraid to hear what Yahweh had to say. Was it the fulfillment of Isaiah's earlier vision and the end of his nation? He had to know

"Tell me, Rabbi."

Isaiah's clear blue eyes held Hezekiah's. "You stockpiled your weapons, and when you saw that the City of David had many breaches in its defenses you tore down houses to strengthen the walls. You built a reservoir between the two walls and a tunnel for the water, but you didn't look to the One who made you ... the One who planned everything long ago."

Yahweh's rebuke felt like a sword thrust. "But, Rabbi-does Yahweh expect us to remain defenseless when our nation is threatened? Why was it so wrong to stockpile weapons and strengthen our defenses-or to try to safeguard our water supply?"

"Did you seek God's will before you did all these things?"

"No, but I saw the condition that my nation was in, and I knew these measures had to be taken. It was common sense."

"So you went ahead with your building projects and your plans, and now you're asking Yahweh to bless them? Now, when you're in trouble? You're not asking for God's will, King Hezekiah. You're asking Him to choose one of the plans you've already initiated."

"No ... but .. " Hezekiah groaned. "I see what you mean."

He had tried to trust in God yet control his own life at the same time, trying to reconcile the two sides of himself: his self-reliance and his faith in God. And he suddenly remembered that his grandfather had once warned him that he could never do both.

"Yahweh made this present crisis, Your Majesty. He planned it long ago for His own purposes. Your reforms eliminated idolatry from the land, but that's only half of it. Worship of Yahweh without heartfelt commitment only leads to empty ritual. The Lord says, `These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.'"

"So by trying to take the defense ofJudah into my own hands I'm working against Yahweh?"

"Yes-against His plan to chasten His people."

Hezekiah sighed. "So what should I do now?"

"Do you have enough faith to trust Yahweh completely and not rely on your own strength?"

Hezekiah had to be honest with himself and with God. "No, probably not. But I don't have much choice, do I? The Assyrian weapons are superior to ours, and even our new walls may not stand up to their battering rams. Our tunnel isn't finished, either. So my own strength is pitiful, in spite of all my efforts."

"The Lord is your strength, King Hezekiah. And Yahweh's word to you is to wait."

Hezekiah stared at him in disbelief. "Wait? And do nothing?"

"They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall soar on wings like eagles. They shall run, and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

"Then I'm not to take any action in this crisis?"

"This is what Yahweh says to me: 'As a lion growls, a great lion over his prey-and though a whole band of shepherds is called together against him, he is not frightened by their shouts or disturbed by their clamor-so the Lord Almighty will come down to do battle.... Like birds hovering overhead, the Lord Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will "pass over" it and will rescue it.... Assyria will fall by a sword that is not of man; a sword, not of mortals, will devour them.'"

Yahweh's word should have reassured Hezekiah, but it didn't. He paced anxiously in front of the prophet, wondering if he could obey God's word, wondering if he could sit passively through a crisis of this magnitude without taking action. He had no proof that Isaiah's words were true, no evidence he could see that told him he could trust God.

But when we only believe in things we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands, it is idolatry. Faith in God meant believing the unseen.

"God, give me the faith to believe... " he murmured. In the distance, the shofar summoned Hezekiah to the morning sacrifice. "Will you worship with me at the Temple, Rabbi?" he asked.

"Yes, of course, Your Majesty."

Now that he knew God's answer, Hezekiah would heed the word of the Lord. He wouldn't send tribute, he wouldn't marshal his troops, and he wouldn't seek allies. He would wait and do nothing.

But it would be the hardest thing he ever did in his life.

The sun glowed behind the clouds like the golden embers on the altar as Eliakim stumbled up the hill to the Temple with his father. When the shofar had sounded, it seemed to Eliakim as if God himself had summoned him to appear before Him. Eliakim filed through the narrow Temple gates, shoulder to shoulder with the other men, through the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women into the inner courtyard.

He approached the basin to wash himself, and never before had he felt so filthy. His sins burned a hole in his heart like the heat from a thousand suns: bitterness, unbelief, and-worst of all-pride. He had taken God off His rightful throne and replaced Him with the works of his own hands, making his own decisions, choosing his own paths. Eliakim allowed the water to wash over his hands for a long time, but they still felt unclean. His father had to pull Eliakim's hands from the water and coax him to move, but he still felt unworthy to approach God's altar.

The praises of the Levites crescendoed in the still morning air as the priests slew the sacrifices: "Praise the Lord, 0 my soul. All my inmost being, praise his holy name.'"

Eliakim had never heard such magnificent music. It answered a cry from deep within his soul. Yahweh reigned-majestic, awesome, worthy of praise! Eliakim wanted to fall on his face before God.

"Praise the Lord, 0 my soul, and forget not all his benefits-who forgives all your sins . . . and redeems your life from the pit.'"

Yahweh. The God of Abraham. The Holy One of Israel. His father had used those phrases all of Eliakim's life, but never before had he fully comprehended their truth. Who was worthy to approach Yahweh? How could a sinner like him even dare to stand in Yahweh's holy Temple, before His holy presence?

The priests in their pure white robes came forward, gently swaying in rhythm with the music. Eliakim smelled the sweet perfume of incense and heard the faint tinkle of bells on the hem of the high priest's garment. The high priest carried a golden bowl, filled with the blood of the sacrifice, the atoning blood. Through it Eliakim could be forgiven, all his sins paid for. He didn't wait for the other men, but threw himself before God, pleading for mercy and forgiveness as

the Levite choir sang.

"'The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.'"

All glory and honor belonged to God, not man, yet Eliakim had sought glory for his own works. Vengeance was God's to repay, yet Eliakim had sought revenge against the Assyrians. He deserved to die for his sin, and he waited, prostrate, for God's judgment to fall on him. He welcomed it, longed for it. But as the magnificent words of the psalm touched his soul, Eliakim's heart overflowed with love and praise for God.

"'For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.'"

In all the years he had come to the Temple, Eliakim could never remember a service like this one. But had he ever come with his heart surrendered to God before? He had believed that the services were meant to satisfy his needs, and when his first sacrifice had been disrupted long ago, Eliakim had been outraged because he felt cheated, not because God had been cheated. He wanted to stay prostrate with shame, but his father gently nudged him to his feet.

"`As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. . . . From everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him.'"

The priest laid the offering on the altar, and as the pillar of flame soared into the air, Yahweh suddenly revealed himself to Eliakim. He staggered backward, overwhelmed, as he felt the tender, all-powerful presence of God. Like a blind man recovering his sight, Eliakim recognized that Yahweh, Creator of the universe, was a Father--a gentle, loving Father. Like Hilkiah, Yahweh would lovingly welcome Eliakim back into His arms, forgiving him, even though he had grievously wounded Him. Like Jerimoth, Yahweh had patiently waited for His child all these years, longing for him to return. Yahweh was a Father who would lay down His own life for His children, even as Jerimoth had laid down

his life for his children.

God's presence had been with Eliakim all his life, just as surely as Hilkiah had been with him, but he had been blind to Him.

"Abba!" Eliakim cried as the tears flowed down his face. "Abba! Father God!"

The praise cry resounded, as if coming from heaven itself, and Eliakim lifted his hands high in surrender to God.

"`Praise the Lord, you his angels.... Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts.... Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion. Praise the Lord, 0 my soul.'"

When the morning sacrifice ended, Hezekiah waited in his private chambers for his advisors to assemble in the throne room. The long purple robe he had worn to the Temple felt hot and very heavy on his shoulders as it dragged across the floor behind him. At last Shebna came to summon him.

"They are ready for you in the throne room, Your Majesty." He looked as if he hadn't slept.

"Shebna, wait. I want to thank you for finding Rabbi Isaiah last night." Shebna nodded slightly. "Listen, I know I don't always take the time to tell you how grateful I am for all that you do, but I'm very grateful. You've been more than my right-hand man-you've been a true friend to me."

Shebna looked away as if unable to meet Hezekiah's gaze. "Then I trust Rabbi Isaiah has told you what you wanted to know?"

"Yes, and I want you to hear it first before I tell the others. I'm not going to send tribute ... or mobilize our troops and allies."

"What are you saying?"

"Isaiah told me to wait and to trust in God"

"No!" Shebna lunged at Hezekiah, losing control for the first time in all their years together. He clung to the front of Hezekiah's robes, shaking him, pleading desperately with him. "Do not be a fool, Hezekiah! Please! Send the tribute-I beg you! They will kill you! As a friend, I am telling you that your very life is at stake! Please!"

Shebna's sudden outburst shook Hezekiah deeply. "They will kill you!" He remembered Jerusha's vivid description of what the Assyrians would do to a conquered king, and he felt his knees go weak. But in the next moment he grew angry with Shebna for his lack of faith in God's word. He pried Shebna's hands off his robes.

"No. I won't become an Assyrian vassal again. Our nation is in Yahweh's hands. Now pull yourself together, Shebna. I expect you to stand behind my decision. I need your support"

Shebna covered his face. "They will kill you," he moaned.

"Shebna, stop it! It's time to go."

More than anything else, Hezekiah wanted to get this meeting over with. He walked briskly down the hall to the throne room, with Shebna trailing miserably behind him, and sat down on his throne feeling tense and overwrought. He studied the anxious faces of his advisors for a moment. Like Shebna, most of them would probably never understand his decision. He wasn't certain he could explain it to them, but he had to try.

"Rabbi Isaiah has returned to Jerusalem," he began with more confidence than he felt. "I met with him earlier this morning, and as a result I've decided not to send tribute to Assyria."

General Jonadab stood. "I'll mobilize our forces, Your Majesty."

Hezekiah shook his head. "Our weapons will stay in the armory. We won't need them." A few of his army commanders muttered their objections, but Hezekiah ignored them. "Nor will we seek an alliance with a foreign power because-"

"That's insane!" Gedaliah leaped to his feet, cutting off Hezekiah's words. "Why do you even listen to a fanatic like Isaiah? You're going to destroy us all. We'll be annihilated, like Israel was!"

His brother's outburst unnerved Hezekiah. He paused as elders from various Judean cities rose to their feet and clustered around Gedaliah, shouting at Hezekiah and voicing their support for his brother. Hezekiah wasn't prepared for such a strong show of opposition, and it staggered him.

"Don't just sit there, Shebna-tell him!" Gedaliah shouted above the noise.

"Tell me what?" Hezekiah turned to Shebna, certain that he could count on his friend's support, even if he disagreed with the decision. But Shebna's face was ashen, and his hand trembled as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Tell me what?" Hezekiah repeated.

For a long moment Shebna was silent, but when he finally spoke, his answer startled Hezekiah. "Your Majesty, your brother is right. You must take some course of action. To sit and wait for the Assyrians is suicidal."

Hezekiah felt his anger rising dangerously. "This is my course of action! God promised to deliver us from the Assyrians, and I've chosen to wait and trust in that promise!"

"Let my troops march to defend our borders," Jonadab begged. "Remember how Yahweh helped us defeat the Philistines? They were stronger than us, too"

"No troops, Jonadab. Yahweh can deliver us without the sword of man. The Torah says-"

"Those are foolish tales!" Gedaliah shouted, his face flushed with rage. "You're governing a real nation, with real people!"

Shebna clutched Hezekiah's sleeve, pleading with him. "Surely you are not putting your trust in the mythical accounts of your ancestors."

"Those are bedtime stories for children!" Gedaliah shouted. "But this is not a

child's game!"

The throne room erupted into chaos as nearly all of Hezekiah's advisors shouted their objections at once. Their reaction shocked him. Everyone was joining the mutiny, even his close friends Shebna and Jonadab. Anger choked off Hezekiah's reply.

Shebna continued to plead with him in a low voice. "The opposition to your decision is overwhelming. Please, before they kill youI beg you to reconsider!"

Suddenly Hezekiah realized what Shebna's words had meant. They were going to kill him-not the Assyrians, but his own officials. If he didn't give in to them, he risked a revolution. But if he changed his mind now, he would forfeit his sovereignty forever-and God's sovereignty, as well.

"No! I will not reconsider!" he shouted. The hall gradually grew quiet as everyone stared at him. "Listen to me! When my father faced an invasion twenty years ago, Isaiah told him to wait and to trust God for deliverance. But Ahaz refused to listen. Instead of waiting for the crisis to pass, he sent tribute to Assyria and turned us all into slaves. Once again, God has told us to wait. I have sworn a covenant to the Lord, and I'm going to obey Him, no matter how dangerous it seems"

The discontented murmuring started up again as the angry men rallied around Gedaliah.

Shebna slowly shook his head. "There is no god to save us," Hezekiah heard him murmur, and those words made Hezekiah angrier than anything else did.

"Silence!" he shouted. Instantly the hall grew still. "Shebna, if you and these others say there is no God, then I ask you-what's the point of life? Why govern the nation at all or live our lives by any rules and laws? Why not live in anarchy? Why should we make rational decisions if life is chaotic and irrational, if there's no order to the universe?"

No one moved. No one spoke.

"Or ... if there is a God but He isn't strong enough to deliver us, then who can? Our meager military forces, Jonadab? Some neighboring nation? How can

the arm of man possibly succeed if God himself fails us?"

He slowly rose from his throne and stood to face them. "But ... if there is a God who keeps the heavens and the earth in order and lovingly rules over all His creation, if He truly has intervened in our nation's past to deliver us from slavery and place us in this land, then how can we do anything but trust and serve Him? How can we ever presume to know more than God knows? All our plans, all our schemes are worthless-foolishness-beside His wisdom and planning."

He stared for a moment at their silent, sullen faces. "Yahweh gave me His word to be still and to wait for His deliverance. I have chosen to obey that word, and I will not reconsider! Gedaliah, Shebna-any of the rest of you who can't support that decision-get out! I don't need you!"

He pointed toward the door, staring down at them boldly. A tense silence filled the hall. Anger and discontent showed on many faces, and he wondered if there would be an open rebellion, if any of them still supported him-if even Jonadab and Shebna would turn against him. Then he remembered that God had chosen him to rule, and a strange peace filled his heart. His life rested in God's hands. It was enough to know.

"I have nothing more to say. This meeting is over." He strode from the room.

Shebna didn't move from his seat as Hezekiah left but sat in stunned shock. The king he greatly admired and worked hard to please had just made a fatal mistake. His impassioned speech had convinced no one. It had only sealed his death warrant. Deep sorrow consumed Shebna, and he slumped forward in his seat with his face in his hands, oblivious to the grumbling and arguing of the other advisors as they filed out.

"Are you with us, Shebna?" He looked up at Gedaliah. "Yes or no? We need your answer now"

Shebna closed his eyes, wishing he could hide from the ugly reality of what he was doing. "When?" he whispered.

"Tonight. When he's asleep."

"Cowards! You would rather murder a man in his bed than fight him face-to-

face?"

"You'll leave in the morning with the delegation to deliver our tribute to Assyria," Gedaliah said. Shebna didn't reply.

Gedaliah's eyes traveled to the row of guards standing nearby. "By the way, don't try to double-cross us. You're being watched"



37

THE MORNING SACRIFICE LEFT Eliakim exhausted and broken. He wondered how he would make it through the day. He sat in the foreman's tent near the empty Pool of Siloam and stared into space. He no longer consulted his drawings and calculations. They couldn't tell him anything new. All he could do was wait-wait and hope that God would forgive him and answer his prayers.

Outside the tent door he heard one of the workmen grumbling about digging all the way to Sheol. Then the foreman appeared at the door of the tent.

"We're ready for the signals, my lord."

"Thanks. I'll be there in a minute." Eliakim looked down at the diagrams on the table in front of him and closed his eyes. The warmth of God's presence filled his soul.

"Lord God-Father-guide us through the darkness," he prayed. "Not for my sake, but for your glory."

Eliakim rose to follow his foreman-then froze. The mere thought of crawling inside the suffocating tunnel again made him feel sick. He couldn't do it. Someone else would have to listen for the signals. Eliakim could never go back inside. He emerged from the tent to tell the foreman to go ahead without him and was startled to see King Hezekiah standing outside.

"Your Majesty!"

"I decided to come see what you've accomplished, Eliakim. Then we can decide together how to proceed." His voice was kind, not accusing, but he looked as though the burden of his reign weighed heavily on him. "Is this a good time to show me?"

Yesterday the king's unexpected arrival would have thrown Eliakim into a panic, but today he felt strangely numb.

"Certainly, Your Majesty, but the work has stopped so we can try the signals again."

"Then I'd like to go inside and listen with you."

Eliakim's heart galloped with fear. He couldn't go inside. But how could he explain that to the king? "You're welcome to listen, Your Majesty, but it's very cramped down at the end. Maybe we should wait out here and let the foreman-"

"I don't mind tight spaces." Hezekiah removed his outer robe and handed it to his servant. "Lead the way, Eliakim."

"You'll need a lamp."

Eliakim's hands shook as he picked up one of the lamps and lit it for the king. He lit another for himself, grabbed a hammer to signal with, then plunged into the darkness. His heart pounded uncontrollably as soon as he entered the shaft. After a few yards, Eliakim knew he couldn't go on. He had to get out. He turned around but Hezekiah was following right behind him. The shaft was too narrow, the king too tall and broad-shouldered for Eliakim to squeeze past him. Unless Eliakim knocked him down and trampled over him, he couldn't get out.

"What's wrong, Eliakim?"

"Uh ... nothing."

Eliakim turned around and continued walking, embarrassed to confess his fear. Waves of terror overwhelmed him as he forced himself to creep deeper and deeper into the winding labyrinth. He felt the weight of the mountain above his head, pressing down on him, closing in on him again. He was gasping for air and perspiring so heavily that the oil lamp threatened to slip from his sweating palms. Still, he plunged on, with the king following closely.

When the ceiling lowered for the final few yards, Eliakim hesitated again. He would have to drop to his hands and knees and crawl, and he knew he couldn't do it. He couldn't go into that coffinlike shaft-but he couldn't get out, either. He felt trapped. He gritted his teeth to keep from crying out and told himself over and over that the rock walls were not closing in on him. Then he crouched down and crawled the last few yards. By the time he reached the wall at the end of the

tunnel, Eliakim felt dizzy and nauseated.

"I see what you mean about cramped quarters." Hezekiah's deep voice boomed like thunder. Eliakim's breath was coming in rapid gasps, but if the king noticed, he didn't say anything.

"What happens next?" Hezekiah asked.

Eliakim struggled through waves of terror to remember. "Uh ... the shofar will sound, and ... uh ... they'll signal ten times in the other tunnel, and ... we'll listen."

Eliakim hands trembled so badly as he set his oil lamp on the floor that he nearly dropped it. He wanted desperately to run out, but he forced himself to stay. Finally they heard the sound of the shofar. Eliakim squeezed to one side as far as he could and pressed his ear against the wall to listen. He wanted to get it over with and get out. Hezekiah crowded beside him, and they lay side by side, holding their breath, listening. But the only thing Eliakim heard was the sound of his own heart, hammering in his ears. Nothing else. The silent wall of stone refused to reveal the other tunnel's secret.

Minutes passed as every muscle and fiber in his body tensed with the strain of listening. The signaling must be finished by now. He had heard nothing. Then in the distance the shofar announced that it had ended.

Hezekiah sat up beside him. "Could you hear anything, Eliakim?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Me neither. Now what?"

"They'll sound the shofar again and it'll be our turn to signal."

Eliakim had to grip the hammer with two hands to control it, pounding the rhythm on the wall in front of him with jerky motions. He repeated the signal ten times, then crawled out to the higher part of the tunnel to wait with the king. His ears rang and his arms ached from the exertion. Sweat poured from his brow, but Eliakim's breathing was almost normal again, and except for his lingering nausea, the anxiety attack had nearly subsided. Before long he heard footsteps

coming toward them.

"Your Majesty-my lord," the foreman said, "I'm sorry, but the men on the other side couldn't hear your signal."

"And we didn't hear theirs, either," Eliakim said.

Bitter disappointment overwhelmed him. He had been so sure that God would answer his prayers. Now he didn't know what to do. Should the men keep digging anyway? Should he measure everything again? What did it matter if the Assyrians were marching toward them? Eliakim's hopelessness edged toward despair. He wanted to get out of this claustrophobic tunnel before it closed in on him again. He picked up his lamp.

"Would you like to go down to the other tunnel now, Your Majesty?"

In the flickering lamplight, Eliakim saw Hezekiah's expression change. The king froze, staring intently at him.

"Say that again, Eliakim!"

"Uh ... do you want to go down to-?"

"Down!" Hezekiah cried. "You said doom to the other tunnel!"

Eliakini had no idea what the king was talking about. "Yes, Your Majesty, I-"

Hezekiah grabbed him by the shoulders. His fingers dug painfully into Eliakim's arms. "Eliakim, listen! Is it possible that this tunnel is higher in elevation than the other one-that the reason they haven't met is because the other one is underneath us somewhere? Down there?" He pointed to the floor.

"Yes," Eliakim murmured. "Yes-of course! That's it!"

It was so simple. Eliakim had been too distraught to think of it, but traveling between the two tunnels day after day he had intuitively felt that the valley tunnel was lower.

"That has to be the answer, Your Majesty!" Eliakim turned to his foreman.

"Tell them to repeat the signaling process again. But this time, tell them to hammer on the ceiling! Hurry!"

Eliakim dropped to his hands and knees and crawled to the end of the tunnel again with the king following behind. He set his lamp on the floor and crouched beside Hezekiah to wait. He imagined the messenger running through the streets to the lower gate, then down the Kidron Valley to the spring. The men would go back inside the other tunnel. They would probably think that Eliakim was crazy, but they would pound on the ceiling this time.

The shofar sounded, and Eliakim and Hezekiah pressed their ears to the floor of the tunnel to listen. God of Abraham, please ...

Then dimly, faintly, Eliakim heard a sound. He held his breath. Almost imperceptibly at first, he heard a distant ringing. Clang-clang. Then again, clang-clang. He moved his ear to another spot and heard the rhythmical tapping more clearly now. Eight times, nine times, ten times. Then silence. He raised his head from the floor and looked at the king, almost afraid that he had imagined it.

"Did you hear it, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, Eliakim! Praise God!"

Hezekiah grabbed him in a bear hug and slapped his back. Then the king hurried down the tunnel ahead of Eliakim, shouting the good news. Outside, the shofar began to blow, and a cheer went up from the workers that could probably be heard throughout the city.

But Eliakim sat slumped inside the tunnel, weeping and praising God.

Jerusha sat on Hilkiah's rooftop that same morning and watched the sunrise as if seeing it for the first time. Eliakim's humility and brokenness the night before had moved her deeply, and she was aware that she also had much to confess before God.

After Hilkiah and Eliakim left for work, Jerusha descended the outside stairs from the rooftop and walked slowly through the streets, up the hill to the

Temple. She had never been there before, and she felt like a stranger as she wandered past the people who were milling around in the Court of the Gentiles. A Levite stood in a corner of the courtyard teaching his students. Men passed through the gates with their offerings, and she envisioned her father coming with a lamb from his flock to pray for her.

She slipped through one of the gates that led into the Women's Court and found it deserted. She crossed to the low wall that separated the women's from the men's courtyard. Beyond that wall the morning sacrifice lay on the huge altar, its aroma slowly drifting toward heaven. The smell of the roasting meat reminded Jerusha of weddings and festivals when her family and their neighbors would roast a whole calf or lamb.

Jerusha gazed at the lamb lying on the altar, and it seemed too small to cover her sins. She sank to her knees and closed her eyes, silently confessing her guilt, her hatred and bitterness, her harlotry and unbelief. One by one she offered up her sins to God, and like the day Maacah chopped off her hair, she felt lighter, freer, as the weight of them fell away.

"Do you wish to make an offering?"

Jerusha opened her eyes and looked up. A tall, white-robed priest stood on the other side of the wall. She hastily swiped at her tears.

"What did you say?"

"I asked if you'd like to make an offering." His face, creased with fine wrinkles, looked kind.

"Yes-yes, I've sinned. How ... what should I do?"

"You'll need to bring a goat or a lamb for a sin offering."

"But I don't have anything. I ... I have no money."

"The poor may bring a dove or a pigeon."

She shook her head. "I can't ... I don't even have ..

"If you're very poor, you may bring a tenth of an ephah of fine flour."

Jerusha knew that Hilkiah would gladly give her money for an offering, yet she didn't want to ask him. An offering that didn't cost her anything wasn't a true sacrifice at all. God had given everything to Jerusha. What could she possibly sacrifice to Him in return?

The priest smiled. "I'll come back later, when you decide."

As Jerusha watched him walk away, her eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry, God. But this is the only thing I really own." She reached into the fold of her dress and pulled out the torn fragment of blanket that had once swaddled her baby. It was her only link to her daughterand to her past. Tears rolled down Jerusha's face as she held it out to God.

"It's all I have, Lord. But I'll offer it to you. Please accept my sacrifice. Please forgive me and make me whole again." She held the blanket to her face and wiped her tears with it, smelling its woolly fragrance for the last time. Then Jerusha folded it up and tenderly stuffed it between the stones of the Temple wall.

When she returned home, Jerusha sat in the garden courtyard for a long time, listening to the sound of the birds, feeling the gentle breeze caress her face, savoring the sticky fragrance of Hilkiah's fig tree. She remembered the feeling of being reborn after the Assyrians had set her free, but this was a thousand times better. This time she was really free. God had forgiven her, and now she could begin to forgive herself.

Suddenly Jerusha heard a door slam. She jumped up, and a moment later Eliakim burst into the courtyard. His clothes were dusty, his face streaked and smudged with dirt, but his smile was radiant. He swept her off her feet and into his arms.

"Jerusha! God answered our prayers! They're going to meet! The two tunnels are going to meet!"

Jerusha began to laugh and cry at the same time. "Oh, thank God!"

"We finally heard the signals through the rock! One tunnel is higher than the

other, but they're going to meet! It will only take another day or so." He danced in circles with her, clutching her so tightly she could scarcely breathe. "God answered our prayers, Jerusha!"

"I'm so happy for you, Eliakim! I'm so happy!"

Suddenly Eliakim stiffened and practically dropped Jerusha to the ground, shrinking away from her in horror. "Oh, Jerusha, I'm sorry! I didn't realize what I was doing! I'm sorry!"

She looked at his tired, dirt-streaked face and saw the fear and guilt in his eyes. "It's okay, Eliakim." She reached for his hand and held it between both of hers. He was trembling.

"Jerusha, you were wrong," he said quietly. "It isn't you who's unworthy-it's me. I'm a sinner. I put pride and ambition and revenge before the God of the universe. I'm not worthy of you."

She held his rough, bruised hand to her cheek, letting her tears flow over it. Eliakim gazed at her tenderly, and his eyes filled with tears.

"You're not a harlot, Jerusha. And you never chose to be one. You chose to live. There isn't a person in the world who wouldn't have done the same thing, including your cousins. But they never had a choice. If you had died, Jerusha . . ." He swallowed hard as a tear slipped down his face. "If you had died, I never would have seen the power of God. But you're God's gift to me, to show me that He has the power to answer prayer. That's why you lived. It was God's choice, Jerusha. Not yours."

His warm brown eyes searched hers for a moment; then he took her face in his hands and kissed her. The touch of his lips on hers was the most beautiful feeling she had ever known. How she loved Eliakim, this gentle man who had tunneled through a mountain of solid rock for her.

Finally Eliakim drew back. "I love you, Jerusha. I can't imagine living the rest of my life without you. Please marry me."

His arms encircled her, pulling her close. As she rested her cheek against his dusty chest, Jerusha couldn't imagine living without him, either.

"I love you, Eliakim," she whispered. "And yes-I will marry you.



38

THE DAY SEEMED ENDLESS to Hezekiah as he tried to govern his nation as if a crisis didn't exist. Shebna's seat beside his throne stood empty, and the dozens of noblemen who usually hovered around the throne room had all disappeared, leaving the palace courtyards strangely silent. Hezekiah had never felt so utterly alone and abandoned in his life.

After the evening sacrifice, he ordered his supper served in his private chambers. He ate alone, toying with his food, wishing Isaiah had told him how long he would have to wait. When a servant announced that Shebna wanted to see him, Hezekiah felt a range of emotions from relief to rage. "Send him in," he said.

Shebna approached Hezekiah haltingly, unable to meet his gaze, then bowed low. "I have come to resign," he said quietly. "As you know, I do not support your decision or your faith in Yahweh. I am sorry."

Hezekiah bit his lip, fighting back his anger at Shebna for not supporting him at the meeting, for deserting him now. His closest friend had let him down, and he wanted to lash out at him.

"Why, Shebna? Why are you abandoning me now, when I need you the most?"

Shebna didn't look up. His voice was a low mumble. "Because I think you are wrong. I think you are making a disastrous mistake. And my position should be filled by someone who agrees with your deciSion.

"Who?" Hezekiah asked bitterly. "Is there anyone left who does agree with me?"

"Rabbi Isaiah does."

"Well, he's the only one, then. And he doesn't want the job. I asked him seven years ago, remember?" He pushed his plate aside.

Shebna cleared his throat, then spoke haltingly, as if forcing out the words against his will. "Eliakim shares your faith. Now that his tunnel is a success, I am sure he would be pleased to have my job."

Hezekiah had seen the enormous stress the tunnel had placed on Eliakim and the heavy toll it had taken on his health. Eliakim needed a long rest before he would be ready for the pressures of Shebna's job. Hezekiah couldn't deny the resentment he felt toward Shebna, but he needed him. There was no one else.

"I can't stop you from resigning if that's what you want to do, but I won't accept your resignation tonight. I'll give you three days to reconsider. Maybe by that time .. " He paused, admitting only to himself the tremendous fear he felt. "Maybe by that time, this crisis will have passed."

Shebna didn't reply. He continued to stare miserably at the floor. In spite of his anger, Hezekiah wanted to do something to heal the breach between them. There was no one he trusted as much as Shebna, except Hephzibah. Hezekiah pushed his chair back and stood up. He saw the first few stars shining in the sky through the open window.

"I'm going up to the north wall to watch for the signal fires. Come with me, Shebna."

Hezekiah saw sorrow in Shebna's eyes. "Very well, Your Majesty."

Neither of them spoke as they left the palace and walked up the hill to the Temple Mount. Below them, the city seemed unusually quiet and still. Instead of entering the Temple enclosure, they climbed the steep steps to the top of the city wall and followed it along the eastern side of the Temple grounds. They turned at the northeast corner of the wall and continued until they came to the watchtower that Eliakim had constructed. The sheer drop to the Kidron Valley was dizzying, but from the top of it, they would have an unobstructed view of the signal fire on the next watchtower to the north. Three young Judean soldiers, posted at the watch, halted their lively banter and bowed nervously as Hezekiah and Shebna approached.

"Has there been a signal yet?" Hezekiah asked.

"No, Your Majesty. It's still too light."

"Good. We'll wait for it."

Although the stars hung brightly above the Mount of Olives to the east, Hezekiah could still see the faint glow of the sun behind the mountains to the west.

"According to the message we received last night, the Assyrians still haven't broken camp," he told Shebna. "But I expect that the first few divisions will begin marching any day now."

He leaned against the wall, resting his arms on the top of the parapet, and gazed out at the dark silhouette of the mountains to the north. A hushed expectancy fell over the waiting men, a feeling of suspense that was familiar to Hezekiah. He remembered standing on the platform before Molech, waiting, with Isaiah's promise of salvation as his only hope. He had waited, interminably, for the hand to grab him and hurl him to his death. But the hand of Yahweh had rescued him instead.

Now he stood facing another enemy, and once again Isaiah's promise from God was the only hope he had. He listened to the night sounds in the valley below him, rigid with suspense, as the sunlight gradually faded into darkness.

Suddenly one of the soldiers leaped to attention. "There it is, Your Majesty!" He pointed to a blinking light on the horizon. Hezekiah's heart felt like a cold stone in his chest. He didn't know how to read the signals. He could only wait tensely for one of the soldiers to decipher them.

"The first Assyrian divisions have broken camp. They have begun to march...."

"Which direction?" Hezekiah whispered.

He waited-an eternity-but the distant mountaintop remained dark. Then the tantalizing light flickered once again.

"Northeast!" the soldier cried. "They're marching northeast! Back to Nineveh!"

A cheer went up from the soldiers beside him, but Hezekiah closed his eyes and leaned against the wall, numb with relief. "When you pass through the fire, you won't be burned. The flames will not hurt you. For Yahweh is your God. The Holy One of Israel is your Savior."

The soldiers were rejoicing, embracing one another and clapping each other on the back. Shebna looked unnaturally pale, as if he might faint.

Hezekiah's eyes bored into his. "Another coincidence, Shebna?"

"Perhaps not:' he whispered.

Shebna found Gedaliah and the elders of Lachish in the palace, planning the government they would soon form. As Shebna burst into the room, the door slammed backward against the wall, nearly rocking it from its stone sockets. The startled men stared at him fearfully. Before he could speak, the shofars began to blast from the Temple walls.

"That is the sound of your defeat, Gedaliah. There will be no Assyrian invasion, just as your brother's God has promised."

Gedaliah stared at him, too stunned to speak. The triumphant cry of the shofars sounded on and on in the background.

"Your horse is being saddled. Take your men and get out. Go back to Lachish now-tonight! Or I swear by Hezekiah's God I will kill you myself!"

Hezekiah stayed on the wall alone after all the others had left, gazing out from the watchtower toward the darkened hills. Only forty miles to the north the land of Israel lay destroyed, and except for the grace of God, the land of Judah would have met the same fate.

As the Temple shofars blew, announcing the joyful news, Hezekiah watched the city come to life as the people flooded from their homes into the streets to celebrate. In a few minutes he would go down as their king and lead them in

worship. But first he knelt beneath the starry sky and bowed with his forehead to the ground before his Heavenly King.

"We have heard with our ears, 0 God-our fathers have told us what you did in their days, long ago. You drove out the nations with your hand and planted our fathers here. You crushed the peoples and made our fathers flourish. It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them.

"You are my King and my God, who decrees all our victories. Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes. I don't trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but you give us victory over our enemies, You put our adversaries to shame. In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.

"Hear 0 Israel, Yahweh is our God. Yahweh alone."



Epilogue

JERUSHA SAT IN THE FLOWER-DRAPED chair in Hilkiah's garden with a carpet of flower petals beneath her feet. She heard the joyful music of the groom's procession and recognized the song-the same one she'd sung on the morning of her cousin's wedding so long ago. Maacah stood beside her, and as the sound of the music drew closer, she bent to hug Jerusha tightly.

"You look so beautiful! I wish Mama and Abba could see you. They'd be so proud and so happy that you're marrying Eliakim."

Suddenly the music stopped. Eliakim stood in the doorway of the courtyard. His curly black hair was tousled as usual, but he looked like a prince in his wedding robes. When he saw Jerusha, a boyish smile lit up his handsome face, and she wanted to run into his arms. Beside him, General Jonadab wore the uniform of the King's Royal Army. Dozens of Hilkiah's relatives and guests crowded into the courtyard behind them.

Eliakim's eyes never left hers as he took her hand and squeezed it gently. Jerusha rose to her feet to stand beside him, silently thanking God for all He had done for her-for the miracle of her restored life. For forgiveness. And for the greatest miracle of all: Eliakim's love.

She saw tears of joy in Hilkiah's eyes as he took Jerimoth's place, as father of the bride. How Jerusha loved the dear little merchant! Hilkiah laid his hand on her head as Abba once had, and she remembered her father's words: "Someday God will turn these tears into joy-,,

Hilkiah's hand rested on her head for the blessing, but as he spoke the words, Jerusha heard Abba's voice: "May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May He make you as Sarah and Rebecca. May He favor you and grant you His peace. Amen."

Behold the tunnel. Now this is the story of the tunnel; while the workmen were still lifting up the pick, each towards his neighbor and while there was yet three cubits to excavate, a voice was heard of a man calling his fellow, since there was a split in the rock on the right hand and on the left. And on the day of the excavation the workmen struck, each towards his neighbor, pick against pick, and the water flowed from the spring to the pool for twelve hundred cubits, and a hundred cubits was the height of the rock above the heads of the workmen.

OLDEST HEBREW INSCRIPTION EVER DISCOVERED, CARVED IN THE SILOAM TUNNEL, JERUSALEM, 8TH CENTURY BC.

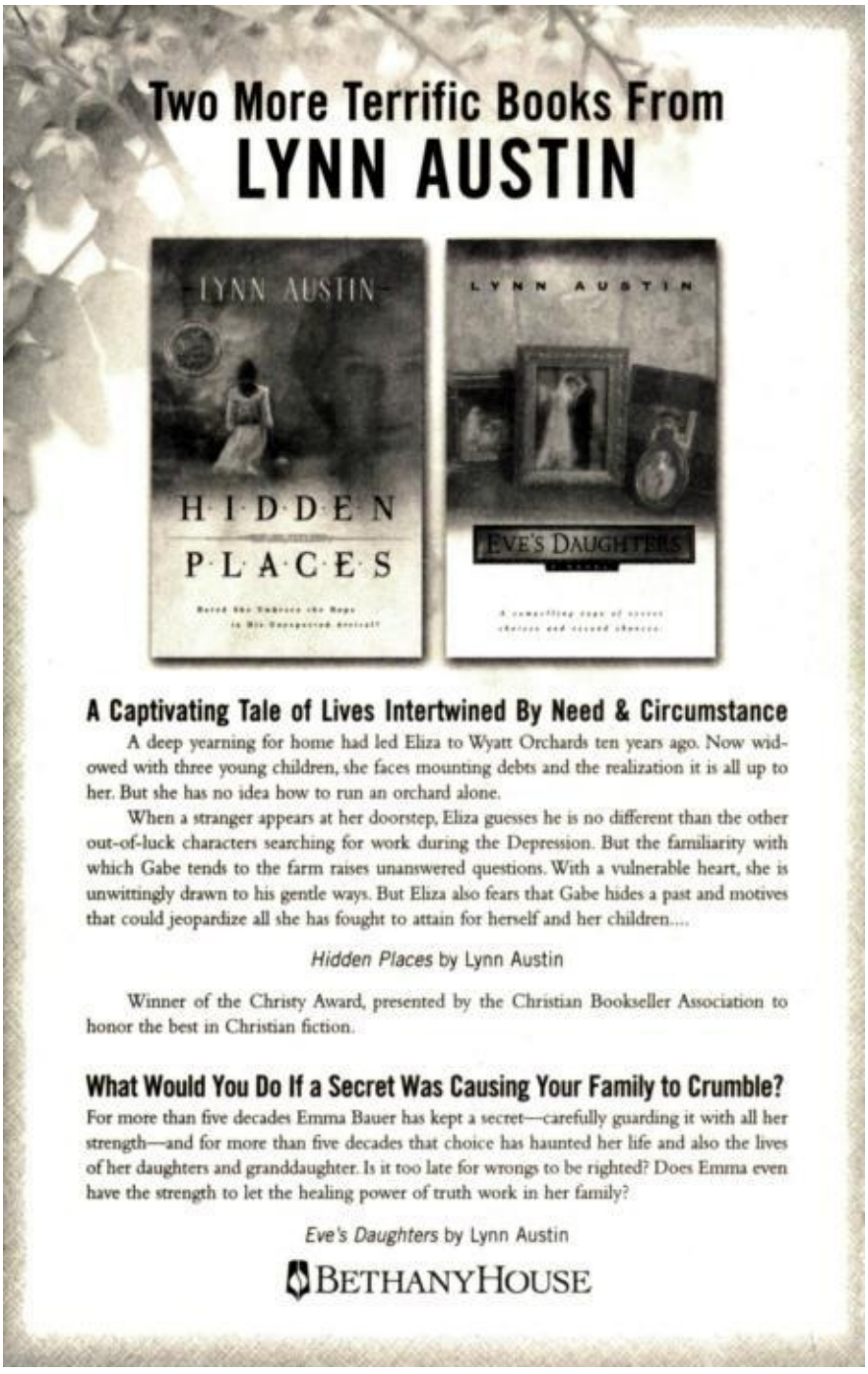
CHRONICLES OF THE KINGS-Book 3

The Strength of His Hand

The Strength of His Hand tells of King Hezekiah's later reign and the climax of events surrounding the Assyrian invasion. God has brought him great wealth and power; but after many years, Hezekiah still has no heir. His wife, in desperation, makes another vow to Asherah, the fertility goddess, betraying all that Hezekiah believes in and works for.

As his international stature increases, Hezekiah is tempted to side with Egypt and Babylon in a military alliance against Assyria-an alliance that the prophet

Isaiah warns him not to join. As the Assyrians march westward with a lust for vengeance and conquest, Hezekiah will discover whether or not his faith in God will sustain him against an overwhelming enemy.



HE HAS BEEN CHALLENGED
ON EVERY SIDE—CAN HIS NEWLY
DISCOVERED FAITH
HELP HIM PRESERVE A NATION?

As King Hezekiah embraces God's Law, he leads his country into renewed prosperity. But following the will of Yahweh is a perplexing process, requiring unpopular choices—for both his personal life and political career. Now his archenemy's demands for tribute are forcing Hezekiah into a precarious situation.

Jerusha, a young Jewish woman far from home, has seen firsthand what the dreaded invaders are capable of doing. As the powerful Assyrian army sweeps through the northern provinces, leaving little but devastation in its wake, Jerusha longs to escape. Her desperate will to live could become a link to Jerusalem's survival.

With Assyria on the march, moving closer to the heart of Judah, Hezekiah's decision to follow the everlasting One is about to face the ultimate test.

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