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GLOSSARY

- sabba* • grandfather
- abba* • father
- imma* • mother
- savta* • grandfather
- habibi* • sweetheart (Egyptian, to a male)
- habibti* • sweetheart (Egyptian, to a female)
- neshika* • kisses
- khamsin* • sandstorm, sirocco
 - wazir* • vizier (ancient Semitic, reconstructed)
 - shiva* • first seven days of mourning
- shloshim* • last 21 days of a month of mourning

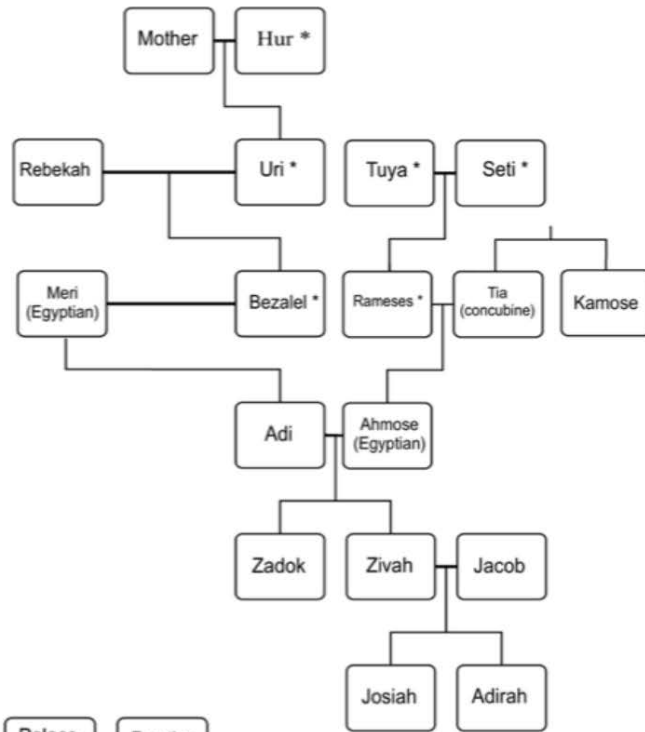
HEBREW MONTHS OF THE YEAR

- Shebat* • January-February
- Adar* • February-March
- Abib* • March-April
- Ziv* • April May
- Sivan* • May-June
- Tammuz* • June-July
- Av* • July-August
- Elul* • August-September

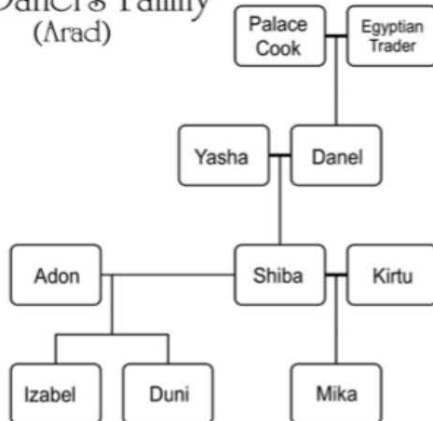


*map of the oasis of Kadesh-Barnea in the wilderness
and the city of Arad on the edge of Canaan*

Zadok's Family (Egypt/Israel)



Danel's Family (Arad)



*Characters marked with * are historical/Biblical. All others are from my imagination.*

*To my God, my refuge and my fortress,
in whom I trust.*

*To my mother, who will always be
my foundation and my encouragement.
I love you.*

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.*

~PSALM 90.1

CHAPTER 1



Oasis of Kadesh Barnea, Sinai Peninsula
Late 13th Century B.C.,
Late winter, 22nd day of Shevat

“*Y*OU WANT ME TO WHAT?” Zadok stared at the white-haired woman sitting beside him, her face as serene as if she had just asked him to pass her a cup of water.

“Marry her. I want you to marry Arisha.”

He’d seen the girl around Miriam’s tent. Not often. She tended to stay inside, away from the gazes of others. “Why me?” He wiped his sweaty hands on his tunic. Marriage was not a topic he enjoyed discussing. “I’m sure there are any number of young men who would be more than happy to take her as a wife. She’s very pretty.” Her wavy, light brown hair and sad eyes floated through his mind.

“She doesn’t need those others. She needs you.” Miriam’s wide grin plumped the apples of her cheeks, giving her an endearing child-like look despite her age.

“Needs me? What do you mean she needs me?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Are you going to repeat everything I say?”

Zadok jumped to his feet. “Are you going to tell me what you are talking about?”

“Sit down.” Miriam spoke without looking up or raising her voice.

Clenching his jaw, he pulled his cloak tighter against the cool morning breeze drifting through the long, orderly rows of canvas tents. “You know what happened the last time I wanted to marry someone.”

She flipped the manna cakes in the pan over the fire in front of her tent. Apparently satisfied they were nicely browned on both sides, she put two next to a handful of dates on a plate and handed it to Zadok. “Marah was a selfish, spoiled child, and her father was no better. They couldn’t see past tomorrow and had no faith in Yahweh’s provision.” She grinned. “But you will be perfect for Arisha.”

“And why is that?”

“Arisha is from Arad. In Canaan.”

“In Canaan?” He pointed north. “That Canaan?”

Miriam raised a brow. “You know of another?”

He bristled. “And I am perfect because like her, I am not a true Israelite.”

Miriam’s eyes—the same piercing eyes she shared with her brother Moses—held his. “I watched your *sabba* lovingly build every piece of furniture in that Tabernacle.” Her bony fingers pointed to the structure hidden behind the animal hide curtain on the other side of the sandy walkway in front of them. “Your grandfather crafted the Ark of the Covenant, over which the very presence of Yahweh rests. And I watched *his* sabba Hur, along with my own brother Aaron, hold Moses’s arms up to heaven all day so we would not be slaughtered by the Amalekites. That man gave his life for Israel. You could not be more Israelite if you were Jacob himself.”

“But still, my mother is half Egyptian. And my father—”

Her gaze softened as she placed her hand on his cheek. “I know

your father. And I have known you since you were a tiny being in your mother's belly." She put one manna cake on a plate for herself. "I don't care about your blood. I chose you for your shepherd's heart. Arisha is ... she has been deeply wounded. I would like to give her more time, but I can't. She needs to marry. She needs the gentle nature Yahweh gave you, so her heart can fully mend."

He shook his head.

"I have talked to Yahweh about this."

He waited until a pair of priests passed by on the aisle between the first row of tents and the outer wall of the tabernacle. He didn't need anyone else hearing this bizarre conversation. "You've talked to Yahweh?" He finished his manna cake and picked up the second. "Have you talked to her? Wait—how do you talk to her? Does she speak Hebrew?"

"She doesn't need to. I can understand her quite well. Our languages are very similar. Not like Egyptian. And no, I haven't spoken to her because I wanted to speak to you first."

Zadok pondered her words as he savored the sweet manna. "I cannot marry someone I do not love."

"You will."

Zadok blinked. "I will what? Marry someone I don't love?" Could she possibly be ordering him to do that?

Miriam laughed. "No, no. You will love her."

"How can you say that?"

Miriam waved her hand. "I know these things. This isn't the first time I've done this. It's just the first time I've been so open about it. I usually just ... nudge people toward one another. And I'm always right." She set her plate down.

"Why be different this time?" He ripped a date in two and removed the seed, then handed her the meat.

"I don't have much time left." She bit off a small piece of the fruit.

He studied her face, but he couldn't tell for certain what that meant. Was she ... ?

“I’m failing. I can feel it. I want to know Arisha is in good hands before I go.”

“Does she know?” Why did he care? He barely knew her.

A smile slowly crept over Miriam’s face. “Why do you ask?”

“I-I just know how close to you she is. This will be hard for her.”

Her smile widened. “See? You care for her already. Besides, you should be married by now, as well, shouldn’t you? How old are you now?”

“I was born twenty-three summers ago. And most people seem to share the opinion of Marah’s father.” Zadok dropped the plate on the sand at his feet. “You may have been thinking about this for some time, but this is the first I’ve heard about it, and I need to think.” He slapped his hands against each other and stood. “I’ll let you know.”

As a Levite, Miriam lived on the inner row of tents around the Tabernacle. Preferring to avoid the busyness of the only entrance to the courtyard, she’d pitched her tent all the way at the north end of the row.

Zadok strolled south along the wide walkway, the Tabernacle on his right, and tents of the Levites on his left. Halfway down he reached Moses’s tent. Moses lived exactly east of the tabernacle, across from the wide opening. Aaron, as high priest, lived next to him.

Zadok cut between the two tents and stepped into Judah’s section. His tent was behind Aaron’s. Sabba Hur had lived there many years ago, when he and Aaron were Moses’s closest advisors. He’d shared that tent with Abba, and Kamose, the Egyptian captain of the guard who had escaped with the Israelites. Joshua’s tent was behind Moses’s so he could be close to the leader, though as an Ephraimite, his tent would normally have been exactly opposite Moses, on the west side of camp.

Zadok turned and strode south, continuing through the tents of Zebulun. As he walked, he tried to make sense of what he’d heard.

But he couldn’t.

Why would Miriam pick him? She knew he wasn’t suitable. She

knew his ... failings. It was an absurd request. He would just have to tell her *no*.

He walked beyond camp to the southern springs where the livestock were kept, and hopped over the rock wall. Now, where were his sheep?

There, near the smallest of the springs. His beautiful sheep. The only creatures he felt truly comfortable with. Sheep were so much simpler than people.

He scanned the group—all accounted for.

Well, actually, they weren't his. Most of them weren't, anyway. He was the shepherd for the priests. Three years ago, Aaron had come to him to ask him to take his small flock, the one he'd begun to build for his future, and turn it into a flock for the Tabernacle. Once they reached Canaan, the priests would need at least two lambs every day, more each Sabbath. Over one thousand lambs every year. Only the best lambs would do. Only the best shepherd.

"Zadok!" A young boy waved him over.

"Micah." Zadok ambled toward the boy and tousled his hair. "How are my sheep?"

"Everybody's here and happy. Reuben is finishing the milking, and Jonah says a couple of the ewes are looking very uncomfortable." Micah laughed.

"All right. I'll go check on them. Thank you." He clapped Micah on the shoulder and headed for the ewes he knew were nearing time to deliver. It was early in the season, but not unheard of.

Jonah knelt by one of the expectant sheep. Jonah was Zadok's most recent but his best hire yet. He was eighteen—the oldest—and big, strong, and willing to work at night with Reuben to guard the flock. Zadok paid the boys in milk, a commodity he had plenty of.

"How is she?"

"I think she might drop this lamb tonight." Jonah rubbed his hand down the ewe's back.

"All right. I'll stay with her. You watch the flock."

"Can I help?" Jonah's eyes pleaded.

“I need you to watch over the sheep, but there will be plenty more ewes waiting to deliver. If you can find someone else willing to work for me and to stand guard, you can help next time.”

Jonah’s shoulders drooped, but he nodded and loped off.

As the ewe wandered away from the flock to find a quiet place, Zadok followed from a distance. It was unlikely she’d need help, but he wanted to be close by, just in case.

At least she wouldn’t be asking him any uncomfortable questions about his life.



“**N**O, I WON’T! WHY CAN’T I just stay here with you?” Arisha grasped Miriam’s wrinkled hands and pulled them to her chest, fighting to control her voice. The tent she shared with the old woman closed in on her, shutting out everything but Miriam. Her blood pounded in her ears and her heart thumped against her chest. Her legs wobbled. How could Miriam do this to her? How could she throw her away like this?

“Arish—”

“Please, please let me stay here with you.” She grasped Miriam’s tunic.

Miriam withdrew her hands and placed them on Arisha’s wet face. “You are a woman, and it is well past time for you to marry and create a life of your own. You cannot live in mine any longer.”

“But I don’t want to. I don’t know how.” Arisha buried her face in Miriam’s shoulder and sobbed. “I’m afraid,” she whispered.

Miriam embraced her and rubbed circles on her back. “No, no, my child, you mustn’t be afraid. Yahweh has created marriage for us, and it is a good thing. It is not something to be feared.”

Arisha pulled back and narrowed her eyes. “But you never married.”

“I almost did.”

“What happened?”

Miriam gestured to a cushion.

Arisha released her and sank to the floor, immediately missing the comfort of the woman. She swiped the tears from her cheeks and tried to slow her breathing.

Miriam stepped outside the tent. While she was gone, Arisha studied the tent that had been her only real home—at least, the only one she could remember. Soft cushions stuffed with wool, covered in sheepskin, were scattered over the floor. Their extra tunics were neatly folded in the corner. Skins of water occupied another corner. Sleeping mats lay rolled up along the back wall.

She was safe here. How could she leave?

Miriam returned with two cups full of hot water, then sat across from Arisha. She reached into a bag and withdrew mint and sage leaves and dropped a few into each cup. “It was long, long ago, back in Egypt. His name was Eliab. We were two months from marrying, and he was killed in the brickfields.”

“Oh, Miriam!” Arisha's hand went to her mouth.

“Obviously I was devastated. I knew I would never love anyone else like I loved him. I thought ... I thought my life was over. I wouldn't come out of my house for a month.”

Miriam stirred the leaves in the cups. “Then a friend had a baby. Her *imma* had died when she was very young, and I had always helped my imma with Aaron and Moses. She begged me to come help her, so I spent several weeks with her. And then another friend needed me, and another ... and I realized I found it very fulfilling.”

Arisha shook her head. “But you never married.”

“Yahweh gave me something else. I could have sought marriage again; I *chose* not to. But it wasn't because I was afraid. I chose another way instead.” Miriam took her hand. “What would you be choosing?”

Arisha released a slow sigh. “Nothing, I suppose.”

“Exactly.” She fished the leaves from the tea, then offered a cup to Arisha. “I'm asking you to trust me, Arisha. I *know* this is the best life for you.”

Arisha's eyes filled with tears once again, but she blinked them back. "When do I have to do this?"

"Not until you are comfortable with him."

Arisha's eyes widened. "Truly?"

Miriam laughed. "Of course. I am not trying to get rid of you."

Arisha frowned. It certainly felt that way.

"You may not believe me, but I am doing what is best for you." She took a long sip of tea. "I'm happy living alone, helping other people. I am quite demanding, I love to be in control, and I hate taking orders. It would take a very special sort of man to live with me. I never found another one like Eliab." She shrugged. "But you, my sweet, would not be happy. We were not created to live alone."

"But I am not alone! We have each other. Why can't it stay that way?"

Miriam set her cup aside, then took Arisha's hand in both of hers. She waited until Arisha's gaze met her own. "I know you're afraid. But I have known this man since he was a baby. I know his father, and knew his grandfather and his great-uncle. He is an honorable, gentle man, and he will never abandon or mistreat you. You have trusted me so far. Trust me now."

Arisha sniffled and managed a nod as Miriam exited the tent. After a few moments, Arisha left as well. She wandered north along the walkway. The sun hid behind the Tabernacle but hadn't quite set, leaving her in the shadows.

A pair of Laughing Doves flew over her head, their snickering call lightening her heart. They were the most beautiful of the desert birds. She picked up her pace and followed them.

North of camp, two enormous springs were joined to two on the east by a small river. Miriam said they supplied enough water for everyone even in the hottest summers, but she hadn't been here long enough to know. The river fed broom bushes and date palms stretching toward the sky, standing like watchful sentinels all along the east and north sides of camp. Low hills protected them on the south and west.

She reached the largest spring, the one directly north of camp.

A warm breeze blew in off the mountains far beyond the spring, tossing her hair over her shoulders. She gazed north, where the desert gave way to cliffs, then to the hills of Canaan. When she escaped months ago, she never would have imagined a place as lovely as this.

Women came and went, carrying skins full of clear water to their waiting families. Always the women, always alone. Miriam said marrying brought man and woman together, but from what she saw, women stayed with women and the men were still with the men.

Why should she marry anyone if she would still be alone?



ZADOK SWATTED AT THE WETNESS on his cheek and rolled his head away. Too early to wake up. Wet pressure jabbed him in his neck, and after a moment, his nose. He opened his eyes to a year-old lamb nuzzling his face.

He reached up to rub the animal's head. "What's the matter? Can't find your imma, *Neshika*?"

Zadok's gaze wandered skyward. Yahweh's protective cloud hovered, the fire of night giving way to the puffy white of day. The cloud was not only a reminder of His pronouncement that Israel wait here, outside Canaan for forty years, but protection from the sun and heat while living in the desert. Zadok breathed a quick prayer of thanks.

The yearling baaed at him, then nuzzled him again.

"Fine, I'll get up."

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, squinted against the sun at his flock lying around him. He stretched and groaned. How much sleep had he gotten? Not much. The first lambs of the season had been born. After the first ewe delivered, he discovered another in distress. Nearly ended up pulling the lamb out of its mother that time. And then of course he had to sit and watch as the mother licked the baby clean, and the lamb in turn began to suckle. There

wasn't a more satisfying experience in the world than seeing a newborn stand and begin to walk.

"Zadok?"

He twisted toward the voice. "Jonah? You're still here?" He stuck out a hand and Jonah pulled him up.

"You looked like you could use the sleep, so I stayed a while longer than usual. Reuben isn't here yet, but Micah is. Are you up now?"

Shivering in the cool morning air of early spring, Zadok brushed off his sheepskin cloak he'd used as a blanket and shrugged into it. "Yes. Thank you for staying. You can go now. Get some sleep yourself."

Jonah nodded, then picked up several skins of milk he had gathered and jogged toward camp.

Zadok picked up the lamb at his feet, checked its ears, eyes, looked in its mouth. "Doing well today, Shika. Now run off." He moved to another lamb and did the same.

A third cowered near its ewe trembling. He knelt beside the lamb, ran his hand along its back, down its flanks. What was the problem? Gently taking hold of the head, he pulled the nose toward him. There it was—a nasty scratch on her face. He reached for the horn in the bag tied to his belt. "Hold on, girl. Hold on." He removed the skin cover, then dipped two fingers into the ram's horn full of olive oil and rubbed the cool liquid into the wound. The lamb jerked her head at first, but calmed as the oil soothed the sting. "Better now?" He drew his fingers over the rest of her head, checking the rest of her skin just in case.

He strolled through his flock, inspecting the youngest and the oldest. All present and doing well. He glanced at the low wall they had built soon after Yahweh's decree. Huge rocks dragged and rolled from the rugged hills south of camp sectioned off an enormous area for the remaining sheep and goats they had then. Three semi-sweet springs fed by an underground river nurtured a pasture, full of grass and safe from predators.

The majority of the animals they had brought from Egypt had

been lost on the way to Mt Sinai. Expecting to be in Canaan in a matter of weeks, many had been slaughtered for food. Others had died for lack of water. The grassy area had been set up for those who wished to continue to keep their flocks, but most lost interest quickly. They kept a sheep or a goat or two, just for some milk, but no one wanted to start breeding animals here, thought it was too much trouble. They wanted to wait until they reached their new home.

Zadok wanted to have his flock ready when they got there. He loved the work, loved the animals. He had built up a small flock, and intended to have quite a good-sized one before they reached their permanent home in Canaan. Joshua had told him about the grassy hills in the south, perfect for raising sheep. Dotted with springs, there was enough water and food for any flock. It was all Zadok had dreamed of since the first time he held a newborn lamb.

And when Aaron asked him to give it up ...

But he could still work with the sheep, and he was doing what Yahweh wanted.

Now the lush pasture of Kadesh was basically his. The low hills that surrounded them on three sides and the noise of the people kept the sheep safe from most predators, but Zadok took no chances and kept at least two people with the flock at all times.

With the springs, the hills, and the date palms, the oasis had been a perfect place to wait out Yahweh's judgment of forty years.

But it wasn't Canaan. Not the land they had left Egypt for. No one over twenty who escaped that day had been allowed to live to see it because of their unbelief when the scouts returned with their report. Zadok's parents were still alive, but all four of his grandparents had died. There were few left now.

His eyes darting back and forth, he scanned the hills, as he did several times every day, searching for anything that might harm his animals. He turned to see Moses coming toward him.

"Your flock is well cared for, Zadok." Moses smiled as he took stock of the sheep around him.

"Thank you. That means a lot coming from another shepherd."

“There are times I miss caring for one of Yahweh’s simplest creations.” Neshika loped near and nudged Moses’s leg. The old man bent to pick her up, his staff hooked on his arm.

Zadok marveled at his agility. Even at one hundred twenty years old, Moses moved with the ease of a man a fraction of his age.

As Moses held her and stroked her nose, she nuzzled his chest. He laughed. “She’s quite affectionate, isn’t she?”

Zadok smiled as he rubbed her ears. “That’s why I named her *kiss*.”

Moses gently set the lamb on the grass. He leaned on his staff and was quiet for several moments. “I hear Miriam asked you to do something.”

Zadok huffed, then leveled his gaze at Moses. “Do something? She asked me to marry someone I’ve never even met.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her I’d have to think about it.”

Moses shrugged. “Could be quite an adventure.”

A chill ran through Zadok. “I don’t *like* adventures. That’s why I’m a shepherd. I like peace, calm, predictability. It’s the same year after year, season to season. The rains come when they are supposed to. Lambs are born when they are ready. The sun rises every morning.”

“A life like that can be tedious, my son.”

Zadok crossed his arms and gazed at the far-off mountains. “Maybe. But it’s safe.”

“Safe from what?”

“Danger ... risk ...”

“Heartache?”

“Maybe.”

Moses studied Zadok and stroked his white beard. “Are you going to hide in the pasture your entire life?”

“Maybe.” Years of keeping his voice low around the sheep kept Zadok from raising it, but his chest tightened.

“Just because they didn’t understand you, doesn’t mean everyone won’t.”

“I won’t go through that again.”

Moses’s eyes were gentle. “Miriam wouldn’t let you.”

Zadok rubbed his thumbnail on his lower lip. “I just can’t,” he whispered.

Moses pursed his lips. “Have you considered that this is what Yahweh, and not just Miriam, wants from you?”

Zadok breathed a heavy sigh. “Why would you think that?”

“For one, Miriam rarely makes decisions involving others, especially to this extent, without hearing from Yahweh. Second, she has known you since you were born. Do you really think she would do something so serious, on her own, if she had any inkling it would hurt you? And third, in my experience Yahweh seems to take a particular delight in turning our world end over end when we are at our most content.”

Moses turned and left without waiting for a response.

Most content. Was Zadok content? He’d limited his world to a narrow, carefully controlled existence, designed to keep out pain and loss. It worked, as far as that went. He had been free of pain and loss since ...

But content?

Probably not.

CHAPTER 2



23rd day of Shevat

ARISHA RELAXED ON THE BANK of the spring and slipped off her sandals. She rolled her neck and sighed as she dug her feet and hands deep into the warm sand, the heat drawing the tension out of her body.

Winter dragged on. There wasn't as much rain here as there was in Arad, but there was a little. At least there would be an abundance of flowers popping up all over the oasis—something to be thankful for. A few anemones already bloomed, their deep blood red blaring against the sand.

She wrapped her arms around herself in the cooling evening. Miriam hadn't said anything today, or yesterday, but her silence on the matter was loud enough. She was waiting for Arisha's answer. Arisha observed the families as she wandered through camp on her way to the spring; she saw women and children with more women and children. The men were always off drilling for the oncoming wars with the Canaanites, or even when back in camp, they huddled in groups by themselves, away from the women.

A trilling nearby drew her attention. The same pair of Laughing

Doves gathered twigs and sticks and piled them haphazardly in a bare spot in a broom bush. The small nest looked like a stiff breeze could blow it away. Arisha chuckled dryly. Did they not care if their eggs were safe? Not care about their children? Like her mother.

She dropped her chin on her knees. Surely all parents couldn't be like hers. Miriam wasn't. Moses and Aaron weren't—she'd seen them with their children and grandchildren. There must be others—many others. Or Israel wouldn't survive.

She raised her head. The birds were still busily collecting sticks. She looked closer ... only one of the birds picked up the twigs. Which one? The more brightly colored one. She searched her mind. Someone once told her the female was always duller—of course. So the male gathered the sticks and ... brought them to the female? She weaved them in and out and crafted a nest, hopping and jumping to test its strength.

Arisha tilted her head. They worked together. Male and female together. She had never seen that before. Birds were not people, but still ...

Pink and purple shot through the sky as the sun crept lower. A shiver ran through her. Better get back to the tent before dark. She pushed herself up.

She ambled through the tents of Issachar on her way to the tent. Giggles caught her ear. A father tossed his squealing little girl in the air while the mother laughed. Strange, she'd never noticed anything like that before. Up ahead, a woman swept out a tent. That was more familiar. But then the father walked up with a child in each hand, and kissed the woman on the cheek before they all ducked inside. To her left, a family sat around the fire together.

She stopped. Could it be that until now, she had seen only what she was used to seeing? Expected to see?

*T*he next morning, Arisha quietly slipped out of their tent and gathered manna for Miriam as she had every day since she'd arrived. She returned and stirred life into the fire.

Miriam was usually up by now, but she'd been tired lately. Perhaps she was still sleeping.

Arisha picked up the pottery vessel Miriam said she'd carried from Egypt and turned it over in her hands. Not a single crack. The pot looked like it had been made last year, not almost forty years ago.

The fire flared and she poured a small amount of water in the pot and placed it on a pair of stable sticks over the fire. She opened the jar of manna and dumped two portions into a bowl, then sat back and waited for the water to boil. Down the row of tents, other women and girls did the same. Children ran in and out of tents, their laughter filling the air. Eagle owls screeched as they swooped overhead, returning to their nests after a night of hunting. Ominous Nubian Vultures circled low, searching for those unlucky enough to die before the sun climbed out of bed.

The bubbling water called her attention back from the azure sky above her. She poured the water into the bowl and stirred the manna into a hot cereal, then divided it into two bowls. She reached for a skin and two cups, and poured two goat's milk. Miriam still hadn't appeared.

Stuffing down growing apprehension, Arisha rose and peered into the tent. Miriam still slept, her unmoving form facing the back. Arisha bit her lip, waited to see if Miriam's chest rose and fell as she breathed. At last, shallow movement. Should she wake her, or let her sleep? She returned to the fire and took her bowl in hand. She scooped a handful in her mouth, barely noticing the burning sensation on her tongue. A few more bites. Worry took over again and she stepped back inside.

"Miriam?" She knelt and touched the woman's shoulder. No response. She gently shook her. "Miriam?" A groan, slow movement. Arisha released a breath.

Miriam rolled onto her back. She blinked several times, then fixed her gaze on Arisha. She smiled slowly. "Arisha, what's wrong?"

"You just slept so late. I was worried."

“I did?”

“I’ve made the morning meal. Most have already eaten.”

Miriam’s eyes grew wide. “Oh, my. I’m sorry, child. I’ll rise right away.”

“I’m not trying to hurry you. If you are not well, rest. I only wanted to be sure you are well.” Arisha searched her face for any sign that Miriam was ill—or worse.

“I’ll be out in a moment.” She patted on Arisha’s cheek. “Don’t fret.”

Arisha placed her hand over Miriam’s. Miriam could tell her not to worry, but that wouldn’t stop her. Arisha could see what was happening. Miriam was nearly one hundred thirty years old. She was becoming slower and slower every day. And it had all happened so quickly. Even last month she was quick, active and strong. But now, day by day she seemed to grow weaker.

Miriam’s mind was as alert as ever. Was her failing health behind this sudden marriage plot? Was she afraid to leave Arisha alone if she ...?

No, Arisha refused to think about that as she sat by the fire, waiting. She set the full bowl and cup next to her.

Miriam appeared in the tent’s doorway. She smiled broadly, the same smile she always had for Arisha, but her hand gripped the pole to hold her up.

Arisha’s heart sank to her stomach, and the little manna in it threatened to come up. Apparently, she was going to have to think about it, whether she wanted to or not.



THE CRACKLING FIRE MIMICKED THE tension in Zadok’s heart. Trapped between his sister and her husband, he wished he’d stayed and eaten with the other shepherds instead of coming home like Imma had begged him to. He took a deep breath and braced for another verbal onslaught.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to at least talk to her.” His sister’s dark eyes narrowed.

“Zivah—”

“Just talk to her.”

“I don’t even know her.”

“Maybe that’s because you’ve been hiding from everyone.”

“I am not hiding. I’m taking care of the sheep, as Aaron asked me to do.” Twice now in three days someone had accused him of hiding.

She waved her hand in his face. “Excuses, excuses. You’re just afraid it will happen again.”

The words stung. He wouldn’t let her see it. “Maybe I’m just happy with the way things are.”

She jabbed her finger in his chest. “You want to be alone for the rest of your life? Surround yourself with your sheep?”

“Sheep aren’t so bad.”

“Well, you can’t talk to sheep, and they don’t keep you warm at night. And to whom will you leave them when you die?”

“Zivah, what a morbid thought!” Jacob threw a dark glance at her.

She ignored her husband. “He needs to think about these things instead of continually pretending nothing is wrong.”

The tent flap opened and his mother exited the tent. “Zivah, leave your brother alone.”

Thank Yahweh Imma came out when she did. No telling how much longer Zivah would have gone on. She meant well, but ...

“But Imma, I’m trying—”

“I know what you’re trying. But stop.”

Zivah huffed.

“Why don’t you go back to your own tent for a while and let me talk to your brother alone, hmm? Come back later for the evening meal.”

Zivah rolled her eyes, but rose and left. Jacob winked at Zadok before following her.

Imma sat next to Zadok. “So, *habibi*, what are you thinking?”

“Before my dear sister started attacking me, I was actually considering it.”

“Considering what? The marriage?”

“No, just meeting her.” He stared at the fire. “Have you met her? Zivah seems to think I haven’t because I’ve been hiding.”

“I’ve seen her with Miriam a few times. I’ve never talked to her. She doesn’t come with Miriam when she comes to visit Moses, or Joshua.” Her brow wrinkled. “Which she hasn’t done in a while.” She popped a date in her mouth. “What changed your mind?”

“Moses. He came out to visit me by the flock a couple days ago.”

She laughed. “Ah, Moses. He’s good at that. A question here, a comment there, and soon your entire way of thinking has been turned upside down. I heard many stories like that from Abba.”

“Upside down is right.” He kissed Imma on the cheek and rose. “I suppose I should go tell Miriam. I don’t know if I’ll be back soon or if she’ll have me stay a while.”

A few moments later, he strolled up to Miriam’s fire.

Miriam stood to meet him. “Zadok. I’ve been expecting you.”

Expecting him? A typical Miriam thing to say. He hadn’t decided himself until a few moments ago. “I’ll meet her. That’s all I agree to for now.”

“Excellent. Stay for dinner. I’ll invite Moses and Aaron, and Joshua—”

“And I can talk to her?”

“No ... she’ll be in the tent. But she can watch you, and get to know you a little.”

“Watch me?”

Miriam winced. “She hasn’t agreed to meet you yet.”

Zadok threw his hands up. “What? You mean you went through all that with me and she hasn’t even agreed yet? Maybe we should just forget it then.”

Miriam grabbed his sleeve. “Zadok, wait.”

He halted. Waited a moment.

“Her mother sold her to a family as a servant when she was about five or six years old.”

Zadok felt like he'd been head butted by a ram. "Sold her?" How could any parent do that?

"Then they sold her to another family several years later. After that, she did something—she's still not sure what—and she was left at the door of the temple."

"Temple? What temple?"

"The temple of Asherah. She was raised along with the other daughters of the temple as a *qadesh*."

"Which is ...?"

"A woman consecrated to the temple."

He winced, closed his eyes. "Doing what?"

"For several years, she recorded offerings, cleaned the temple, served the priestesses ..."

"Then ...?"

"She learned that every woman of age is expected to attend the annual fertility rites each autumn."

Zadok thought a moment. Then it hit him. "You mean as ... as one of the *participants*?"

"Yes."

His stomach roiled. He almost didn't want to ask the next question. "And then what?"

"She escaped. And I found her."

He pinched his brows together. "Found her?"

Miriam looked over his shoulder. "In the broom bushes. She had learned to gather manna as soon as it appeared before anyone else came out, then she just hid out all day at the north spring. That lasted for a week or so. She's been with me since."

He sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly, trying to understand everything she had just said.

"There's more to the story, I'm sure. I don't know how she got here alone, or out of the city. But that's all she's told me so far, all she will say."

"But how can I marry someone who does not worship Yahweh? It is forbidden."

Miriam smiled. "Ah, but she does."

“How can that possibly be?”

“A man there taught her about Yahweh. He worked in the palace, which was next to the temple and somehow he found her. I don’t know how he knew the things he knew, but he told her many of the stories of our people. She knows about Egypt, the escape, Joseph, Moses.” She raised a brow. “Still, she has no sense of family, of marriage. Of real love. She knows little of our laws. She doesn’t trust anyone but me, and that’s only after many months with me.”

“Then how do I get her to trust me? If she ever agrees to meet me?”

“You’ll have to earn her trust. Be very gentle. Go slowly.” Miriam laid her hand on his arm. “Show her that you are truly interested in her. Listen when she talks, never be in a hurry around her, look at her, ask questions, answer hers, never be dismissive. I think you can figure it out. For now, just sit and talk to everyone else. And smile.”



*A*RISHA PEERED THROUGH THE NARROW slit between the tent flaps at the man Miriam spoke to. He was older than she expected. Or maybe he just looked older. Why wasn’t he married? He was tall and his shoulders were broad. He slipped off his cloak and handed it to Miriam. The huge muscles on his upper arms showed under his short-sleeved tunic as he moved and sank to the ground. If he ever got angry ...

Miriam strategically placed him so Arisha could see his features, but so he wasn’t on the far side of the fire. He had a kind face.

Aaron passed the plate of manna cakes to Zadok. “Still getting harassed by the others for not taking part in the training exercises?”

“Yes. Marah’s father has a great deal of influence.”

Moses touched Zadok’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about what Marah’s father says. Those who love you know the truth. And soon enough, so will everyone else.”

Zadok remained silent.

Joshua took the manna. "I've seen him fight. He'll be ready when we need him. And you mustn't forget it was his uncle Kamose who trained me in the first place."

"Great-uncle," corrected Zadok.

Moses nodded. "That's true, but the best of soldiers lose their edge without practice."

"He cannot be a warrior and shepherd at the same time. I need his full concentration if we are to have a flock ready by the time we enter Canaan." Aaron's glance shifted from Joshua to Moses and back.

Joshua raised his hands. "I'm not arguing. So, Zadok, how is the flock? Ready for lambing to begin?"

"I already had the first two. Both at night, of course."

"Can't have you getting too much rest."

Zadok laughed.

Arisha studied him as he sat before the fire in front of her tent. His low, soft voice soothed her, and his easy laugh delighted her. What would it be like if he were sitting at their fire, their tent?

She could only begin to wonder.



ZADOK RAN HIS FINGERS ALONG the tent ropes, checked the knots to make sure they were good and tight.

Jacob hovered. "You've eaten the evening meal with her and Miriam every night for a week."

"Yes, I have." He wasn't going to give him any more information than that.

"So are you going to ask for her?"

"It's not that simple, Jacob."

"Why not? You want her; Miriam wants you to have her."

Zadok swallowed and counted to five. "Who says I want her? Besides, I have to earn her trust first."

"Her trust? Why does she need to trust you? What's not to trust about you?"

And that is why Miriam came to me, and not to one of the hundreds of thousands of other young men in Israel.

Arisha needed someone who saw more than a pretty girl who would make a good wife, who would give him many strong sons, and be easy to live with.

Zadok rounded the corner of the tent. "Leave it alone, Jacob."

"Fine. Then why are you here instead of with her, anyway? Tired of her already?" Jacob laughed.

Zadok turned from the tent to face his brother-in-law. "She said I should spend the Sabbath with my family."

Zivah peeked her head around the tent. "She said what?"

Zadok folded his arms across his chest. "She wanted me to spend the Sabbath with you." Though the wisdom of that idea was now lost on him.

Zivah's face brightened. "I like her." She jerked her head toward the front. "Food's ready."

Zadok took his place next to his mother, who put her arm around him and dropped a kiss on his cheek. "Hello, Imma."

On his other side sat his niece and nephew, Josiah and Adira. With Jacob's dark curly hair and Zivah's olive skin, the children were beautiful. Adira would have men standing in line asking to marry her. Thank Yahweh that wouldn't be for many, many years.

Plates of manna and cups of milk made their way around the circle. Zivah helped her daughters balance their bowls on their laps.

"When do you bring her here, habibi?" Imma turned her pointed gaze on him.

"Sometime when Jacob is not around."

Jacob jerked his head up from his food. "What? That's not fair!"

Zivah touched Jacob's shoulder. "You can be somewhat ... abrasive, husband. A bit much to take for someone new."

He bumped her shoulder with his. "You don't seem to have any problem with me."

Zadok laughed. "Because she's just like you."

Zivah glared at him. "Very funny."

“In fact, maybe you shouldn’t be here, either.”

She tossed a manna cake at Zadok’s head, but he stuck out his hand and caught it.

“Nice catch.” Jacob nodded approval.

“Imma, I’m done. Can we go now?” Adira, the youngest, looked at her mother with wide, pleading eyes. “I want to go play in the water.”

“Is Josiah finished?”

“Almost.” The child spoke through a mouthful of manna.

Adira stood and wrapped her arms around Zivah, placing a slobbery kiss on her mouth. Zivah giggled and used her sleeve to dry her face.

Zadok concentrated on his food. He’d avoided marriage—and relationships in general—for so long. After spending a week with Arisha, was he ready to admit he missed it? Longed for it?

“I think I’ll take the girls to the river, then.” Zivah collected the plates and rose.

“Leave the plates, Zivah. I’ll get them. Take Jacob with you.”

Zivah glanced from Imma to Zadok to Jacob and back to Imma, who raised her brows. His imma wanted to talk to him. Again. How old was he?

Imma waited until they were out of sight, then handed him a bowl of dates. “So, habibi. Now you’ve met her, spent time with her. Tell me about Arisha.”

Before he could answer her, his abba strode up to the fire pit. “I’m sorry I am so late. I was helping a young family expand their tent. A baby is coming soon.” He reached for Zadok. “My son, welcome home. It’s been a long while since you’ve eaten with us.”

Zadok rose and embraced his father. “Good evening, Abba.” He sat and waited as Imma served his father the remaining manna cakes.

“Thank you, Adi.”

She turned her flashing brown eyes on him. “Now. Arisha?”

What to say first? His mind suddenly went mushy. Abba’s laughter penetrated the haze.

“Ahmose! Hush!” His mother glared at Abba, who continued to chuckle.

“Well, she’s beautiful. She’s very quiet—doesn’t talk much. She’s been talking more lately, the more time I spend with her.”

“Are you ready to try this again?”

The old pain threatened to overtake him. He shuddered and shoved it deep in his mind. “I don’t know. Miriam says Yahweh told her to do this. Wants me to do this.”

“But you are still wary?”

He nodded.

Abba set his plate aside and leaned near. “Arisha knows who and what you are already. There will be no sudden changes, no surprises.”

Did she know? Everything? He needed to make sure Arisha knew right now what she’d be getting into if she married him.

Which was still a big “if.”

Because he’d never let anyone do that to him again.