

BY THE WATERS OF KADESH



CAROLE TOWRISS

*For my God,
who lifted me out of the mud and mire
and set my feet on a rock.*

*I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I
trust.
Psalm 91.2*

CHAPTER 1



8TH DAY OF ZIV, SPRING, WILDERNESS OF ZIN

Tirzah slipped out of the tent, her bare feet sinking into the warm, coarse sand. She dragged the flaps down and tied them together to shut out the fading evening light, and tiptoed away. She cast a look at Gaddiel sitting on the other side of the campfire as she sank to the ground and reached for a cold manna cake from the stack on the plate. The sweet, honeyed taste filled her mouth as she bit into it.

She glanced past the rows of tents at the barren sand surrounding them as she chewed. Not a single sign of life broke through the gravelly sand; nothing could endure the blistering sun or evaporating winds of summer. Very little had survived the long, dry season of her life, either.

The setting summer sun cast long, twisted shadows of the flames onto her tent. The fire danced and skipped. When was the last time she had that much energy? She was tired ... so tired. She could barely hold her head up to take another bite. How did she get to this point? Why did Yahweh let things get this bad?

She shoved the rest of the cake in her mouth. At least she liked the

taste of manna, unlike most of those around her. One more and then a little goat's milk. Maybe she could get some sleep tonight. She closed her eyes and let her head fall onto her raised knees, her long hair tumbling about her shoulders.

A plaintive cry broke the stillness.

Naomi. Tears pooled in Tirzah's eyes. She delayed one more moment before putting her hand to the hot ground to push herself up.

Gaddiel glared at her, his dark eyes flashing from beneath bushy brows.

"I'm sorry. I'll quiet her."

Her brother-in-law rose and disappeared into his own tent, pitched next to hers.

She hustled into the tent. The child sat on her mat, eyes darting about, breathing raggedly, tears streaming down her face.

"Hush, *habibti*. Back to sleep."

"I'm scared." Naomi rubbed her fists into her eyes.

"I know. But it's all right. I'm here now. Back to sleep." Tirzah eased her back down and lay next to her. She pulled her close and rubbed circles on the little girl's tummy to comfort her until the child, not fully awake, rolled over and drifted off.

Her twin sister lay fast asleep on the other side of her, undisturbed by the noise and movement.

But Tirzah stared at the green stripe around the tent's roof for hours.

Again.



MORNING FORCED ITS WAY INTO THE TENT EARLY. TIRZAH PEEKED OUT and squinted as the sun bounced off the desert floor and into her eyes. A long-eared owl screeched as it returned to its nest after the night's hunt. She shaded her eyes and looked above her. The glowing cloud of Yahweh's presence hovered protectively over the camp, and the scent of burning wood and hot manna surrounded her. Sighing, she crawled out.

She gathered a few twigs of dry brush and started a small fire, just

enough to boil water. After quickly gathering the day's manna, she tossed it into the pot and stirred it into a thick dough. She deftly formed it into cakes and placed them on a pan.

Keren stumbled out of the tent.

Tirzah turned from the fire and stretched out her arms. "Up first as usual, I see." She pulled her daughter to her. The best part of her day. "Your sister still asleep?"

"Uh huh. Should I wake her up?" Keren ran her hands through her hair, leaving it sticking out in several places.

Tirzah chuckled and tried to smooth Keren's locks, but the long, brown waves refused to stay behind her ears. "Yes, please. We have to go soon." She flipped the cakes over.

"Again?" Keren scrunched up her face and threw her head back.

"Don't whine, *habibti*. It won't help. You know we have to follow the cloud." Tirzah jabbed a finger at the sky with one hand and shoed Keren into the tent with the other.

Keren disappeared inside and a few moments later reemerged with her sister.

Naomi draped herself around Tirzah. "Morning, *Imma*." She pulled back and kissed her mother.

"Good morning, *habibti*. Did you sleep well?" She already knew the answer to her question. Naomi had awakened crying twice more.

"No. Had bad dreams again."

Tirzah pushed Naomi's hair from her eyes. "I'm sorry. Have some manna. We have to walk soon." She gave each girl a cake, wrapping their little hands around them. "I made them big again so you only have to keep track of one. Hang on to them. Both hands."

She stood to strike the tent. First she tossed out the sleeping mats and their other meager possessions, then the willow poles. Sounds of collapsing tents, braying animals, and crying children filled the air.

Thank Yahweh for the army tents Moses had appropriated for them at their first campsite fourteen months ago the night of the escape. Succoth was a large training ground for the Egyptians, stocked with tents and other needed supplies. There were more than enough tents for the Israelites, and they were easy to put up and take down, which was especially nice when no one was around to help. When the

tent collapsed, she folded it neatly into a square and placed it into its pouch.

She loaded everything onto their donkey. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Benjamin. I couldn’t possibly carry everything. I can barely keep up as it is.” She stroked his neck and offered him water. When he finished drinking, she tied the bowl to the last pack.

The rest of her tribe had started without her, including Gaddiel. She breathed evenly, resisting the anger rising within her. It didn’t do any good. He demanded she cook for him three times a day, but never once had he lifted a finger to help her. When her husband was alive, he never had either. Since Gaddiel inherited all of Jediel’s property upon his death, she had to do his bidding just to be able to live in the tent and keep the donkey and one sheep. And he made it clear he thought he was generous with that.

Tirzah slipped the girls’ sandals on their tiny feet, then picked up Keren and set her on top of the gear she’d strapped to Benjamin. She placed Naomi in front of Keren and the packs. “Hold on tight, girls.” After checking the ropes attaching the sheep to Benjamin, she picked up his lead rope and began the long, hot walk.



KAMOSE BRUSHED THE DUST FROM HIS FACE, DUST KICKED UP BY hundreds of thousands of sandaled feet, hooves, and wooden wheels. He loosed the leather thong at the base of his neck and ran his hands through his thick hair; they came away covered in grime. Soldiers walked for hours without kicking up dust. Why couldn’t these people learn to pick up their feet?

His stomach growled and his legs ached. Eleven months in a lush valley at the foot of Mt. Sinai had made his warrior’s body soft, and now days of desert marching had taken their toll. He retied his hair and smiled as he recalled the place that had been his home for nearly a year.

Ahmosé tugged on his hand. “Uncle Kamose, will you carry me? I haven’t asked for two days. Just for a little while?”

He grinned at the boy. “How old are you now?”

“Nine. Just for a little while? Please?”

Kamose swung the child onto his shoulders and grabbed his dirty feet.

“Can’t we stop yet? It looks the same as where we camped last night.” Ahmose rested his chin on his uncle’s head.

“We stop where the cloud stops, you know that. Where’s your pack?”

“Bezalel traded some of the jewelry he made for a donkey. He put all the packs and tents on it so he can help Meri carry baby Adi. You can put yours on it, too, if you want.”

“Sounds like a good trade for him.”

More and more brush appeared under their feet, and soon tiny, yellow desert flowers sprang up here and there. Tall treetops appeared in the distance.

“I think we’re almost there, *habibi*. I see date palms, and it looks like the cloud has stopped.” He gazed up at the glowing, puffy gift of Yahweh, thankful for its protection from the blazing late summer sun. “We should check with Joshua.”

Up at the front of the group, Joshua’s lean form was a stark contrast to Moses’s shorter, stockier body. But even at eighty years old, Moses had no trouble keeping up with his young assistant.

Joshua dropped back from Moses and fell in step with Kamose. “Moses says we’ll camp at Kadesh Barnea tonight. It’s an abundant oasis with four springs. There will be plenty of water for everyone, and all the animals, too. From there we’ll enter Canaan.”

“I know it well. I headquartered there many times when I was in the army.”



KAMOSE AND BEZALEL TOSSED PACKS FROM THE DONKEY AS THEY WAITED for the Levites to mark off the outer court of the tabernacle. Several of the Levites laid down silver sockets in an enormous rectangle, and others followed, attaching the silver-plated acacia wood pillars. Behind them came still more Levites, connecting fabric to the tops of the pillars and stretching it out to the ground at an angle, forming a

wall around the moveable dwelling that housed the presence of Yahweh.

“Ever tire of watching them build it?” Kamose glanced at Bezalel as they stood on the edge of the activity.

Bezalel shifted five-month-old Adi higher on his chest, then shook his head. “No. I am still amazed I had anything to do with it at all. I think my grandfather was right, that Yahweh planned this to be my life from the start, and that’s why I spent so much of it enslaved as an artisan in the palace. I hated it, but I learned everything I needed to know.” He smiled. “And I found Meri. And Ahmose, and you.”

Moses’s tent was on the first row, facing the tabernacle with the rest of the Levites and priests. Leaving room for a walkway between Moses’s tent and the courtyard wall, Kamose pitched the tent he shared with Joshua and Ahmose with its back to Moses’s. Another row was setting up facing theirs with room for campfires in between. All around the tabernacle, in vast rectangles, the tribes set up their tents in neat rows. Judah was directly east, with Issachar and Zebulun on either side. Reuben, Simeon, and Gad were to the south. Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manassah camped to the west and Asher, Naphtali, and Dan settled north of the tabernacle.

Kamose snapped the willow poles into place and stretched the tent over them almost without thought. After doing it eleven days in a row, he could do it in his sleep.

He grabbed the corner of Bezalel’s tent and helped him finish. “Are we putting up a tent for your mother this time?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure if she’ll stay in it. She’s been spending so much time with the midwives. I think she likes it there, likes being needed. She’ll be around often enough, though. She can’t stay away from her granddaughter very long.” He laughed as he glanced at Meri, who sat nearby with baby Adi.

“Uncle Kamose!” Ahmose bounded up to him. His dark eyes sparkled, and some of his straight black hair had escaped its leather tie. “They said there’s a spring! Can we go see?” The child bounced on his heels.

Kamose chuckled. Where did the young get their energy? “Yes, we can go see. Where is your pack?”

Ahmore looked from side to side. “I don’t know. I put it down somewhere....”

Kamose folded his arms over his chest and waited. “When you find it and put it in the tent, we can go.”

“Yes, Uncle.” Ahmore scurried away and returned almost instantly. He threw his bag in the tent. “Now can we go?”

Kamose chuckled and tousled the boy’s hair. “Yes, habibi, we can go.” They walked north through the neat rows of tents springing up, then out of camp northeast, toward the sound of rushing water. The terrain around them grew greener the nearer they drew to the water.

A massive spring bubbled up through the desert floor. Date palms soared into the sky, bunches of round, brown fruit weighing down long branches toward the sand. Scruffy, gray-green broom bushes bordered the water on all sides. Brown babblers with curved bills and long tails bounced on tiny feet looking for insects, hopping around each other in an intricate dance. Petite scrub warblers hid in the brush, poking their streaked heads out for only a moment before pulling them back into the dull foliage.

Ahmore dropped to his knees at the edge of the spring and scooped handfuls of water into his mouth.

Bezalel grabbed him by the neck of his short tunic and pulled him back. “You’ll make yourself sick. Slow down.”

Kamose looked over his shoulder and pointed west. “There’s another spring further west, then two springs south of here, to the east of camp. And several more on the south side of camp that are smaller and not as sweet that will serve the animals. Joshua says we’ll be here only until we establish a camp inside Canaan.”

“It’s not as lush as Sinai, but it will be better than it has been the last two months.” Bezalel wandered off toward the eastern end of the large pool. As he passed a broom bush, a group of babblers escaped from the shrub, and Ahmore chased them into the shallow edge of the water, their chirps mingling with his laughter.

Kamose smiled at his carefree nephew, then raised his gaze and scanned the horizon to the north. On the edge of the foreboding desert, slopes turned into hills, and those turned into mountains.

Bezalel returned. “There’s a stream connecting this spring to the next one. It’s not huge, but it’s running water.”

“Depending on the time of year, there’s one running between all of them. This is a popular spot on several trade routes. It’s been fought over for generations.”

“Looks like the desert is coming to an end.” Bezalel pointed toward the north.

Kamose nodded. “Yes, they’ll have to choose wisely when they decide who will be first to go in.”

Disappointment pierced his heart like a dagger. One thing was certain. It wouldn’t be him.

10 ZIV

The shrill blast of the trumpet awakened Gaddiel after a restless night. He shook his head to dislodge the fog. His sister-in-law’s annoying little girl had cried most of the night. Even in his own tent he could hear her. Couldn’t they have called for a meeting some other morning?

One sounding of the trumpet. That meant only the tribal leaders were called to the meeting, not the entire assembly. Gaddiel sat up, stretched, then reached for the water skin. He took a long draw, tossed the nearly empty skin to a corner, then kicked aside the long-sleeved *thawb* he used for a light blanket, and crawled out.

Tirzah had already arisen and prepared manna. He grabbed a bowl and filled it with the warm meal. He stuffed it down, but the sweet flavor couldn’t improve his sour mood.

On the way to the gate of the tabernacle he caught up with Eliab.

“Good morning, Gaddiel.” Eliab’s strong, deep voice belied his age.

Gaddiel looked down at the man. “Good morning, Elder. Do you have any idea what the meeting is about?”

“We are on the edge of Canaan. I assume we will discuss plans for entering the land Yahweh has promised us.”

Couldn’t Eliab walk any faster? Old age and short legs—not a good combination. Gaddiel wanted to get to the gate and find out why they had been summoned.

Palti of Benjamin and Shammua of Reuben joined them. From all

directions, elders headed toward the tabernacle courtyard in the center of camp. Within moments, a crowd of seventy sat in front of the western gate. Moses and Aaron made seventy-two: six leaders from each tribe—a head elder and five others.

Gaddiel rubbed his beard as he surveyed the men. The head elders were generally at least as old as he was, except for Nahshon. When Nahshon's father, Amminidab, died, the eldership of Judah passed to him. Nahshon had proved to be a strong leader at the battle over the golden calf at Sinai, and even at the age of twenty-one, all of Judah was willing to follow him. Of course the fact that his half-sister had married Aaron didn't hurt. Gaddiel scoffed. In ten years Nahshon might be a good leader, but now?

The other leaders were a varied group, some younger, like Gaddiel, some older. Together they ruled their tribes, settled disputes, and offered wisdom. Gaddiel was an elder, but only because of his lineage. If he were going to make a name for himself, this would be the time to do it. He needed to stand out. He shoved his way to the front.

Moses stepped out from the courtyard. He faced his leaders and smiled. His weathered face evidenced the struggles of eighty years as both prince and shepherd. "Generations ago, Yahweh made promises to Abraham. He promised to bless him, to make him the father of a great nation, to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore. He said He would give him the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession.

"Fourteen months ago, Yahweh kept the promises He made to Abraham. He heard our cries and redeemed us from slavery at the hands of Egypt. He made us His people at Mt. Sinai. And now Canaan awaits us just over those hills." Moses lifted his right arm, pointing his staff north beyond the tents of Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. "It has been a long journey, but it is nearly over. Yahweh has given us this land. All we must do is go in and take it. I have told Joshua to ready an army—"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Gaddiel stood and addressed the crowd, waving his arms.

Moses raised a brow at the interruption, but Gaddiel pressed on.

"We can't just go in there with an army. We have no idea what awaits us. We could be slaughtered. I insist we send in spies first."

Sethur jumped up. “I agree. I’ll not let any Asherites attack without advance information.”

Joshua rose, spreading his hands wide. “But Yahweh has already given us the land. There is nothing to fear. It doesn’t matter what we find. Yahweh has promised us the victory. Remember what He has done for us already. Has He yet broken a promise?”

Murmurs of assent bubbled up around Gaddiel. “Joshua’s right. We must trust. Yahweh parted the *Yam Suph*, killed the Egyptian army. He’ll give us this land.”

Gaddiel was not going to let Joshua—another child, like Nahshon—take over. Joshua had taken all the glory so far—at the battles at Rephidim and Sinai, going up Mt. Sinai with Moses, insinuating his way into prominence like a Nile viper. Even his tent was next to Moses’s. Everyone in camp knew the name “Joshua,” and Gaddiel had had enough.

“No!” He pounded his fist into his open hand. “We’ve been through two battles already. We all know what it’s like to carry a weapon and use it on another man. We’ve all had blood on our swords, our hands, our clothes. If there is something we can do to minimize the fighting, the killing, the dying, why wouldn’t we do it? Yahweh gave us the power to think and to reason. Surely He does not expect us to run in blindly and risk our lives, risk leaving our women and children widowed and fatherless. No, we must send in spies.”

Eliab stood. “He makes sense. I stand with him. Zebulun will not attack without information from spies.”

Nahshon took a spot near Joshua. “Judah stands with Joshua. We obey Yahweh.”

Moses raised his hand. “That’s enough. This will not be put to a vote. I must talk to Yahweh. Return to your tents until the trumpet sounds again.”

The elders dispersed.

Gaddiel winced. Perhaps he should have kept his mouth shut. He had taken a huge risk. But then again, without risk, nothing could be gained ... and the gain he sought was status.

No matter what it took.

CHAPTER 2



Kamose slid his dagger down the length of the willow branch a final time, removing the last of the twigs and knots, making it as smooth as possible. He ran his fingers down the branch, then took an end in each hand and flexed it. Satisfied, he tossed it in a pile with the rest of the replacement poles. Anything to keep busy.

Nahshon strode toward Kamose. “We need your help.”

Kamose sheathed his blade. “Why?”

Nahshon picked up one of the poles. “I’ve just come from the assembly. It has been suggested we send spies into Canaan before we send in men to take the land.”

Fists on his hips, Kamose studied his sandaled feet. It wasn’t a bad idea. He would have made the same decision himself had he planned this conquest as a commander in Egypt. The problem was, he hadn’t planned it. Yahweh had.

He returned his gaze to Nahshon, and saw the same dilemma in Nahshon’s eyes.

“What do Moses and Joshua say?”

“Moses is bewildered. Joshua is angry.”

Kamose smiled. Anger was exactly the reaction he expected from his young friend. “What do you need from me?”

“They want to talk to you.”

“What can I do?”

“They want a professional soldier’s perspective. And you’re the only one we’ve got.”

“Lead the way.” Kamose followed Nahshon back to Moses’s tent. “What do you think should be done?”

Nahshon shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m glad it’s not my decision.”

They reached Moses’s tent and Nahshon pulled back the tent flaps. Moses and Joshua sat waiting for them.

Kamose sat on a cushion facing them, next to Nahshon. “I thought Yahweh promised to deliver the land to you.”

Joshua scowled. “He did, but the people are uncomfortable going in without information.” He threw his hand in the air and blew out his frustration. “They will not trust Him.”

Kamose turned to Moses. “What do you think?”

The strain of his decision showed in Moses’s eyes, and he raked his hand through the white hair that barely touched his shoulders. “I didn’t expect this reaction. I know the people have complained constantly since we left Egypt. But I thought once we reached here, where we can see Canaan, where we are two days from entering the land, that they would go in and take it as Yahweh said. I did not expect this delay.” He rubbed his hand over his clean-shaven face.

Kamose chuckled to himself. Moses had to be the only Hebrew who shaved every day—a habit he still practiced from his life as an Egyptian prince.

Moses interrupted Kamose’s thoughts. “What is your advice, Kamose?”

“Spies are a common military tactic. I have often been part of a scouting mission. But I cannot make this decision.”

Joshua repeatedly flicked his thumb across the tip of his spear as he looked north toward the hills. “Do you think it would help?”

Kamose studied his friend for a moment before he spoke. “You may feel it is not necessary. But perhaps the people don’t have the faith you do. You can see a future that does not yet exist. Most men cannot.” He shrugged. “If you let them go and see the land first, maybe they will have the faith they’ll need when it comes time to attack.”

Moses sat silently for several moments. Then he stood, pulling himself up with the shepherd's staff he was never without. "We will send in spies. We must begin immediately. Kamose, I want you to train them."

Kamose nodded. "Who will go?"

"Joshua will be one of them. Any thoughts on the others?"

Kamose drew a deep breath. "I think you need to begin making distinctions among your elders between leaders and warriors. Joshua is a good choice. He is a fighter." He paused. "I would not send Nahshon."

"Agreed," Moses said.

Nahshon jumped up, eyes flashing. "Why not? I fought as well as any of you."

Moses crossed to him and put his hand on his shoulder. "You are a leader. Your people look to you for guidance. We need you here." He left the tent.

"It's not an insult, Nahshon." Kamose spoke quietly. "You are too important to risk."

Nahshon sat and huffed, resting his forearms on his knees.

Joshua leaned closer to Kamose. "I want you to tell us what we need to look for, how to get that information, and most importantly, how to survive."

Kamose nodded. "When do you want to start?"

"As soon as possible."

"Is there a way to meet the spies before training begins?"

Joshua shrugged. "Sure. But why?"

"Men act differently in the field, around other men. This will allow me to get to know them a bit before training starts. I can meet with each one tomorrow, and the next day is the Sabbath. We can start the next day. We'll meet north of camp."

Joshua chuckled. "This is exactly why we need you."



GADDIEL PACED IN FRONT OF HIS TENT. IT COULD GO EITHER WAY. IF Moses agreed to send spies, Gaddiel would look brilliant. It was, after

all, his idea. But if not, he would appear a menace.

His thoughts were interrupted by the call of the trumpet. Judgment time. He headed toward the center of camp, willing himself to take measured steps.

He reached the entrance to the courtyard. Moses was not waiting. The time stretched out. Where was Moses? He called them here; he must have a decision. Sweat beaded on Gaddiel's brow. He clenched and unclenched his jaw, resisted pacing. His shoulders began to ache.

Finally, Moses emerged from the inner court. "I have spoken to Yahweh. I have considered the matter. I have sought advice." He paused—for far too long—and looked at the group assembled before him. "We will send scouts ahead."

Gaddiel bit his lip to keep from smiling too broadly. Tension flowed from his body.

"Each tribe will choose one scout, a leader. You will receive more instructions later."

One scout? The strain returned, wrapping itself around his body like a snake. Gaddiel cracked the knuckles of his right hand with his thumb.

Outside the tabernacle gate the seventy split into their tribes.

Gaddiel turned to Eliab, Jacob, and the others. "I should go from Zebulun."

Jacob snorted, fists on his hips. "Why you? Why not me?"

Gaddiel glared at him. "You have a young wife and a new baby. What would Miriam say if you went home and told her you were going to spy out a land full of unknown dangers, and would be gone for who knows how long?"

Jacob folded his arms over his chest, lips pressed into a thin line.

One down. Four to go.

Eleazar shook his head. "I don't want to go. My leg will not allow me to climb those cliffs."

Matthias agreed. "Nor I. I also have a new baby."

Two more out of contention. Eliab couldn't possibly want to go. Gaddiel tried to keep his face blank as he looked to his leader.

Eliab eyed Gaddiel. "It does not have to be one of us."

What? Gaddiel raised his hands. “Who else would it be? He said a leader! We are the leaders.”

“There are others. It’s a big tribe.”

“No!” Gaddiel’s voice rose in pitch with every word. “It should be me!”

“I worry you want it too much. Why is it so important to you? We only want to gather information.”

Gaddiel took a steady breath. He was going to lose this if he wasn’t careful. *Keep calm, keep this focused on the mission, on the land.* “I just want to make sure we get all the facts we need. This is our only chance. We need to do it properly.”

Eliab stared at him for what felt like hours.

The screech of a hawk overhead echoed in Gaddiel’s ears as he awaited the answer that would define his future.

“All right. You may go. If Moses approves.” Eliab stepped closer. “Be sure that is your only goal.”

Gaddiel put his arm around Eliab’s shoulders as they made their way toward Moses. “Of course, Elder. What else would I want? I seek only the good of Israel.”



THE MORNING SUN BURNED OFF THE NIGHT’S CHILL AS TIRZAH PULLED the pot of cooled manna off the dying fire and set it in the sand. She grabbed a spoon and ladled the mixture into three bowls.

After banking the fire, she turned to kneel in front of the girls, placing her hands on their shoulders. “I’m going to check on Benjamin, so I want you to stay here and eat your manna. Don’t move, understand?”

“Can’t we come, too?” Keren stuck her bottom lip out.

“No. It’s a long walk, and I can’t carry you both.”

“Please, Imma? Please?” Four big brown eyes pleaded with her. Eyes she couldn’t refuse.

She smiled. “All right. Eat your manna first. But I will not carry you.” She scrubbed the pot with sand while they ate. Then she

reached into the tent to put it away, grabbed their sandals, then laced them on her daughters.

The trio set off south through the tents of Zebulon toward the smaller springs that fed the animals. She felt eyes on her, heard whispers. She kept her gaze straight ahead.

They reached the flocks of sheep and goats, donkeys, even a few camels, and scanned the area for her beloved Benjamin.

“There he is!” Keren clapped her hands. “Over there.” The little girl pointed toward an older donkey, watching them, his long ears pricked up at the child’s voice.

Keren started to run but stopped short and looked over her shoulder. “I can’t run, can I?”

Tirzah shook her head. “You might scare the sheep. Walk.”

The girls approached the animal, Tirzah behind them. She let them greet the donkey first, but they grew bored quickly and sat to play in the sand. The docile flock ignored them.

Tirzah stroked the donkey’s nose. “At least Gaddiel let me keep you. Otherwise, I think we’d still be stuck at Mt. Sinai.” She combed her fingers through his mane, straightening the short hair. She drew her hand down his shoulders, his ribs poking up under her palm. “Soon, Benjamin, soon. We’re almost there. All the grass you can eat. And you will never carry anything, ever again.”

Benjamin nuzzled her, his warm nose digging into her cheek.

She grasped his mane and led him to the water, pushing her way through other animals and taking him closer to the edge, nearer the softest, greenest grass. Fat, spotted sandgrouse scattered when his feet touched the water. “You need to be more forceful, Benjamin, or you will die of thirst.” She leaned toward him to whisper into his long ears. “You won’t do that, will you? I guess I’ll have to come here every day to make sure you get some water and grass. Until we get to Canaan, anyway.”

She waited long enough to make sure he drank his fill and ate some soft grass, and then turned back to the girls, who had dumped sand on each other’s head, and now sat giggling. It would take forever to get it out. She groaned. Then she took a deep breath, grasped their hands, and headed for her tent.

After combing out the sand, making three trips to get water, washing tunics, sweeping out the tents—hers and Gaddiel’s—cooking the midday meal, and cleaning up, Tirzah propped Naomi on her hip and grasped Keren’s hand as she headed east, looking for the meandering river she’d heard connected all the springs. Lined on both sides with date palms, grass, and soft sand, there were a number of places perfect to rest in the shade and escape the worst of the day’s heat. The river was scant enough the girls could wade in it without danger. On the other side of the water, the remains of a rock fall in the distant past were apparent in the felled trees and large rocks lodged up against them.

She dragged and shoved some crumbling fallen logs into a large, misshapen half-circle bounded by the water so the girls could run without getting out—she had no more energy to chase them today. They had napped after the meal, but she had too much to do. She leaned against a log and closed her eyes.

Squeals of laughter jolted her awake. A boy, about eight or nine years old, she supposed, chased butterflies with her girls.

They ran toward her, pointing at tiny flying creatures. “Imma! Look!” Naomi didn’t pay attention to where she was going, tripped over a fallen limb, and went flying.

The boy dashed to Naomi’s side before Tirzah reached her. “Are you all right?” He searched her knees for an injury. She touched a spot on one knee, and he placed a gentle kiss on it. She raised both arms to him, and he picked her up and carried her off to her sister.

Tirzah stood there, mouth open, as a little boy cared for her children. Who was he?

“Mose! ’Mose, come here!” Keren waved him over to another log. They peered inside a hole, and Keren poked it with a stick.

“Ahmose!”

The unfamiliar voice startled her. Tirzah turned to see a dark-haired young woman with a baby in her arms.

“I’m so sorry if he is bothering you. He makes friends with everyone he sees. And he loves little children.” The visitor shifted the baby to her other arm.

Tirzah returned to her spot by the log. “Actually, he’s been a bless-

ing, to tell the truth. I must have fallen asleep. I have no idea how long he's been playing with them."

"I'm glad, then. I'm Meri. May I join you?" She stepped over the log and sat down.

Tirzah studied the girl as she settled herself and the baby. Her slightly darker skin and sharper features revealed she was Egyptian, but she dressed like an Israelite. She spoke decent Hebrew but had a thick accent. "I'm Tirzah. These are my twins, Naomi and Keren. They seem quite taken with ..." She gestured toward the boy.

"That's Ahmose. He's sort of my husband's brother."

"Sort of?"

Meri giggled, her dark eyes shining. "My husband, Bezalel, lived in the palace. Ahmose was a slave there and was often beaten. One day he was beaten so badly Bezalel took him home. Now he lives with us, and with Rebekah—Bezalel's imma, and with his Uncle Kamose, too."

"Bezalel, he's Israelite?"

"Yes, he is. He was a slave in the palace as well."

"And you, how did you meet your husband?"

"I ... worked in the palace, too. I escaped and we married in Elim. This is Adi, our daughter."

"She's beautiful." Tirzah touched the baby's face. "Lovely name."

"Bezalel chose it. I'm still learning Hebrew, if you can't tell." She giggled again. "He's an artisan. So a name that meant jewel seemed appropriate."

Tirzah thought back to Mt. Sinai for a moment. "Bezalel—he's the one who built the tabernacle?"

"The furnishings. Oholiab made the tent and all the cloth articles. And they both had hundreds of helpers. I helped with the anointing oil. I learned to make perfume in the har—, in the palace." Meri spread a lambskin on the grass between them and laid the baby down.

Adi cooed, then sucked on her fist.

Tirzah yawned, covering her mouth with her hand. "Pardon me."

"Don't worry. I know the feeling."

"I don't sleep well at night, I'm afraid. Naomi wakes up a lot."

Meri glanced at the twins. "Really? She seems old enough to sleep all night. How old are they?"

“They were born three summers ago. She should sleep. But ever since we left Sinai, she seems to be plagued by bad dreams. She had them occasionally before that, but now it’s almost every night.” Tirzah studied her hands, playing with her fingernails.

“Can’t your husband help?”

“He died at Sinai.”

Meri’s hand flew to her mouth as a soft gasp escaped.

“Imma! Bug!” The girls ran toward Tirzah with Ahmose close behind.

The boy held his hands cupped tightly together. When he caught up with them, he peeled them open. Inside were several round red bugs with black dots. He held one hand flat, and the creatures crawled on his palm.

The girls squealed with delight, fists waving. Petals from Keren’s handful of wildflowers flew everywhere.

“Meri, look.” He moved one hand toward her while he pointed with the other.

Meri poked at the insects. “They’re beautiful, Ahmose. Who are you playing with?”

“Oh, this one’s Naomi, and that one is Keren.” Keren had already raced off again.

Meri touched Tirzah’s shoulder. “This is their mother, Tirzah.”

Ahmose dipped his head. He smiled and looked at her from beneath long lashes. “Is it all right if I play with them?”

“Of course. It helped me, actually. I didn’t realize I had drifted off to sleep. You may play with them anytime you wish.”

“I can?” His eyes widened.

Tirzah chuckled. “Yes. After the midday meal they usually sleep a while, but after that, like today, they’d love to play with you, I’m sure.”

Ahmose grinned and ran off after Keren, Naomi scampering after them.

“He’s really good with them, isn’t he?”

Meri giggled. She seemed to giggle a lot. “Yes, he’s very attentive. We can hardly keep him away from Adi. He just adores her. He has many other friends he plays with, but he seems to have a soft spot for younger children.”

“So he grew up in the palace?”

“Until about two years ago. How he managed to keep such a cheery attitude, with everything that happened to him, I will never know.”

“He’s a sweetheart. And if he wants to play with the girls, he is always welcome. I’m exhausted all the time. I can’t keep up with two of them, let alone getting water, cooking, washing clothes, gathering manna.... When Naomi wakes up all night, I never get any sleep.” She frowned. “I’m sorry, I’m not usually a complainer. I’m just tired.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can barely deal with one little one. I can’t imagine two of them, with no one to help.” Meri looked up from her baby, a huge smile on her perfect face, framed by perfect, long dark hair.

Because your life has probably always been easy. Tirzah glanced to the west at the sinking sun. “It’s nice of you to say so, anyway. I had better go back and prepare the evening meal.” She stood and beckoned to the twins.

“I hope to see you again. I’d love to have someone to talk to. A lot of people don’t like to talk to me.”

Tirzah considered the girl. “Why not?”

Meri shrugged and made a face. “I’m Egyptian.”

“Well, a lot of people don’t like to talk to me, either. We’d make a good pair.”

“Why wouldn’t they talk to you?” Meri gathered Adi into her arms.

“I’m a widow.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“Yes, but the fact I’m still unmarried is.” Was it wise to mention this to her, this girl she might never see again, who couldn’t possibly understand? It would bring up more questions than answers.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“If we see each other again, I’ll explain. For now, I have to go.”

Tirzah settled Naomi on her hip, grabbed Keren’s hand, and set off for her tent without looking back.