
THE BOOK OF REBEKAH

MAXWELL ZACHS

- رايه رايه وقت جنگه

- Oh mother, mother, it's time to fight!

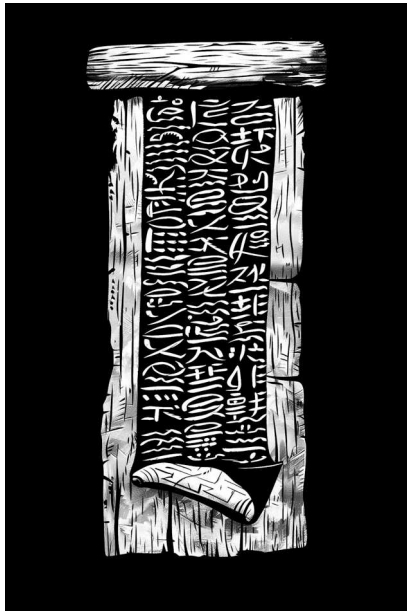
This book is dedicated to Nika Shakarami and all women in Iran who are fighting and dying for their freedom.

Nika was last seen on September 20, 2022, setting her hijab on fire as women around her chanted "death to dictators."

Nika was arrested, sexually abused and murdered.

She was only sixteen years old.

The Scroll Of Milcah.



"Batel. Batel, wake up," Rebekah gently shook the small, tired young woman awake, "The sun will be here any moment."

Batel sat up and groaned; milk stained the front of her dress, but thankfully, her baby had not yet begun to cry.

"You lit the fire?" she asked groggily.

"Yes," Rebekah grinned with a flash of white teeth against her dark brown lips, "As you can see from the flames."

Her bed companion couldn't help but laugh as she reached for her baby. When the shrill little creature opened its mouth to protest, she stoppered its mouth with her swollen nipple. Instantly the baby began to suckle and grunt in pleasure.

"If only everyone were so easy to please," Rebekah said, placing a treasured metal pot close to the flames so that their breakfast would be warm. The cave was not so cold but a princess and a new mother would have a fire if they wanted, and no man would tell them otherwise.

"Must you go back today?" Batel teased, stretching out her short, sturdy legs to warm her feet at the fire.

Rebekah, usually so quick to laugh and smile, frowned. She did not want to leave her place amongst her father's herders and return to the palace to be locked in for the Sabbath.

"I would rather stay here with you, Batel," Rebekah said, staring into the flames and listlessly stirring the lentils. At least Devorah, her nurse, would be there to make her welcome, she thought. Devorah would caress her and pour hot oil on her head as she eased the tangles from her hair.

"I would rather live in the palace and eat figs and drink wine and sleep in a real bed," Batel said.

"And give up your baby to a nurse? Have them lock you in at night? Wear a veil that covers every inch of your body, even your eyes? No, Batel, better to stay in your cave and freeze for your freedom," Rebekah said as they ate together from the same pot, enjoying the pale early morning light that entered through the cave's opening.

"I wasn't cold last night," Batel said, and Rebekah felt warmer just remembering the way they had shared their body heat, lying knitted together on the cave floor.

"Eat your breakfast before it gets cold," Rebekah said, trying not to laugh, "and tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, I will return with figs for you."

Batel smiled and ran her hand over Rebekah's wild curls, "And some honey for the baby?"

"And some honey for the baby," Rebekah agreed.

As if on cue, the month-old child spat her mother's nipple from her mouth and screamed.

"You see? She knows what she wants!" Batel laughed.

"Yes, little one, I will bring your honey," Rebekah said, caressing the baby's cheeks with her large, calloused fingers.

The sun was just breaking free of the hills when Rebekah finally stepped out of the cave where she so often spent the night. She was wearing a supple goatskin tunic that bared her muscled arms to the shoulder and her long, lean legs just above the knee. She carried a small pouch at her waist and carried a long thick walking staff. Aviel, Batel's husband, was there in the valley, and he had already separated her goats from the flocks he managed for her father.

"Good morning," Rebekah boomed cheerfully as she descended the steep hillside to meet him.

"Good morning, sister," he replied with a bow, "Would you like an escort back into town?"

Rebekah laughed. He asked her the same thing every time, and her answer was always the same, "No, Aviel, I have legs, hands, eyes, and a knife of my own. I am a hunter, just like you. What need have I of an escort?"

Aviel smiled benignly and said nothing. He was a quiet man of few words, but he was kind, an excellent shepherd and an expert hunter. Aviel had taught her everything she knew about hunting and caring for animals. These untouchable servants had

welcomed her gladly into their community and never treated her like a princess. They allowed her to run with them on the hunt and were happy to benefit from her speed and strength in pursuit of meat. In return, she brought them small, worthless items from home that they held in great esteem: an apple, a cup, a long piece of rope. They revered her, and she revered their way of life, out on the mountain day and night, under the sun, under the stars, roaming free. She wanted nothing more for her life than to disappear into the mountains with her goats, never to be seen again.

"I will return soon," Rebekah said, whistling for her herd, "If I find you have been beating your wife, Aviel..." she made a fist and flexed her biceps at him.

Aviel's weathered, tanned face cracked into a wide, lopsided smile, "But if I do not beat her, my sister, she will grow to be just like you."

"God forbid," Rebekah replied, her deep laugh rolling and echoing off the hills, and prepared to depart.

"Sister?" Aviel said, suddenly shy, "Will you speak with your father on our behalf, as we discussed?"

Rebekah nodded, "As the deer is fast and the goat is nimble."

"As the poor man stores his gold in a thimble," Aviel replied, finishing the oath and staring embarrassedly at his feet.

Rebekah placed her hand on his shoulder and stepped closer to him, "There should be no shame between us, my brother. When my father, Bethuel, hears that you have not been paid, I know he will make things right," she said.

"Last time we went to town to try and speak with the chamberlain the field workers threw stones at us. What have we done to deserve such treatment?" Aviel asked.

"Do not fear. I will speak with my father today," Rebekah said, repeating her promise even though she had no idea how she would fulfil it.

The city of Haran was still sleeping when she slipped inside the high walls of her family's palatial compound. A servant had

laid out fresh hay in her stable, and the goats jostled and fought each other to be the first inside. Rebekah was in no such rush to enter her own house. She had that sinking feeling and dreaded the walls closing in on her the moment the key clicked in the lock.

She must seek an audience with her father, but how? Her mother controlled every door, every passageway, with keys hung from a silver chain around her waist. She would have to beg her mother for permission to speak to her own father. It enraged her, but how else would she speak with him about the plight of the herders?

Desperate to delay her entry, she looked up one last time at the sky, already boxed in by the hard lines of the roof, and made a decision. Hopping up lightly onto a water barrel, she hooked her armpits over the rim of the roof, and hauled herself up. Breathless and exhilarated she lay there, concealed by the slope of the roof and looked down into the courtyard. It was a view she had never seen before.

Eventually, two servants crossed the yard, and Rebekah got a thrill from catching snippets of their conversation and seeing without being seen. What else might she see, she wondered. As the sun inched higher in the sky, Rebekah climbed the mismatched roofs of her family home until she came to a stop above the room from which she had been barred entrance these last six months or more, her father's sick room. She had not intended to come here, but now she was; it seemed inevitable.

Her father, Bethuel, was the glue that held the world together, and he was very ill. Some people said he wouldn't last until the spring. Some people even whispered that he was already dead. Rebekah shuddered even to contemplate it because not only did she love her father dearly, he was the only thing standing between her and a life of abject misery in the suffocating prison that was the women's quarters. If her father died, who would keep her from being locked away like any other woman? It was a question that haunted her subconscious mind for years and one that fought

its way into her conscious thoughts with increasing frequency. If she could just see him and ask him what her future would hold, what future he had planned for her, he would explain things and make the world safe again.

Unconsciously, her fingers worked their way under the nearest roof tile, prising it from its place and placing it silently to the side. Careful not to slip or make a noise, Rebekah placed her ear to the woven reeds that comprised the inside of the roof and listened to the terrifying sound of her father crying out in his agonies.

"Wife!" Bethuel cried piteously.

"Yes, husband?"

It was her mother's voice, and it made the hairs on Rebekah's arms stand up. She scratched a tiny hole in the weave of the reeds and pressed her eye to it. She was looking down at her father writhing on his bed, almost frantic with the urgency of his pain.

"Turn them away. I can't do it. I can't do it," he said, sounding more like a child than a man. He leaned forward, tensing over his swollen belly, Rebekah saw that the back of his shirt was soaked with sweat. Pressing her nose against the hole in the roof, she inhaled deeply and then recoiled. Anyone who had been successful on the hunt would know the smell of death, but there was another smell, too, something sweeter.

"Here, take a little puff, just a little puff."

Rebekah put her eye back to the opening and saw her mother holding a pipe to her father's lips, followed by the sound of him sucking greedily. She knew that only a man who embraced the nearness of death would allow himself to fall victim to Opium and the knowledge weighed heavy on her soul.

"Not too much, my love," her mother said, gently plucking the pipe from his fingers and placing it on the bedside table where he could not reach it.

Her father's eyes followed the pipe greedily as he begged, "No, wife, please, please," unable even to lift his hands from the bed to plead for his pipe.

"You must be clear headed, my love," her distraught mother told him gently, "You cannot give them any reason to suspect that your judgement has been clouded."

Her father slumped back against his sweat soaked pillows and wailed in self-pity. So heart wrenching and desperate a scene she had not expected to find and for a moment, Rebekah had to look away. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the cold tiles, letting the painful truth sink into her heart. Her father really was dying, and the future was waiting like a trap to catch her.

She returned to her spy hole just in time to watch the family elders, her uncles Chesed and Jidlaph, waddling and shuffling into the room.

"Brother!" Chesed said warmly, leaning over to kiss Bethuel on each of his sallow cheeks.

"Thank you for coming. I'm sorry to call you here, but..." Bethuel gestured to his swollen belly and the stick-thin legs that stuck out from underneath it.

"It's been too long since we last visited, and for that the apology should be ours," Jidlaph said, struggling to catch his breath and collapsing heavily into the chair at Bethuel's bedside.

Her mother retreated to the corner of the room, squatting down behind a low table and pulling her shawl up over her already veiled face. The men did not greet her or pay her any attention at all. They were waiting for Bethuel to speak. The seconds dragged on awkwardly, but her father seemed confused about what he should say or where he should start.

"Since you've invited us here on official business, perhaps you'd better start by telling us what it is?" Chesed prompted, holding up an ancient rolled parchment and adding, "And why you wanted me to bring this?"

"It's about the estate," Bethuel said, closing his eyes and taking a long deep breath, "I think the time has come to bestow my blessing."

From her rooftop position, Rebekah trembled. The blessing

meant only one thing: her father was preparing to die. Anxiously, she pressed her pale green eye to the hole once more.

"The blessing is yours to bestow, as is the prerogative of all men, sound of mind and conscience," Chesed said, intoning the old wisdom, "But what is this for Bethuel? Surely you know who your own children are?" he asked, holding up the scroll once more.

"Can you read it?" Bethuel replied, closing his eyes and groaning.

"More or less," Chesed said, "names are easy enough."

"Then look them up," Bethuel said through gritted teeth.

Chesed sighed dramatically and pointed at an oil lamp that Jidlaph dutifully held aloft so that he could read. He didn't open the whole parchment at once but rather a little at a time, creating a second roll with his left hand and rotating the parchment as he read, line by line, to preserve and protect the curve of the sheet.

"Ah, here it is, R-V-K-H," he read the vowelless letters aloud, "Rebekah... but there's been a mistake. The priest must've slipped when he applied his seal because..."

"What does it say?" Bethuel practically shouted, startling his brothers and making Rebekah gasp. She bit down hard on her tongue to silence herself.

"But this can't be right," Chesed said, sounding confused, "Bethuel, did you know about this mistake?"

"Read it!" Bethuel demanded, "Read it out loud. What does it say?"

Rebekah knew very well the power of reading and the power given to ideas when they were spoken aloud. She held her breath and strained her eyes to try and see the markings on the page. She had heard of the Scroll of Milcah, but she had never seen it until now.

"What does it say?" Jidlaph asked, peering uselessly at the lines and the squiggles.

Chesed hesitated, and Bethuel heaved his body up with great

effort, leaning forward and looking Chesed directly in the eye, "Read it!" he insisted, spittle flying from his lips.

"It says that Rebekah was born, and the sacrifice was given for the healthy delivery of a baby girl," Chesed said, pursing his lips as if to stop any more words from coming out.

"And?" Bethuel insisted as great rivers of foul-smelling sweat dripped from his face.

"It also says that Rebekah... is a boy, that the priest recorded here the healthy delivery of a male child for whom the due sacrifice was given."

Bethuel collapsed back onto his pillows, no longer able to support his weight on his arms, "It's the truth," he slurred.

Although she was completely alone on the roof of her father's room, Rebekah had the distinct feeling that she was being watched. Shame crawled all over her skin. How could they say such a thing about her? And, more importantly, could it be true? Was that the reason why she was so... different? She needed to know the meaning of this strange thing. Reluctantly, she turned her attention back to the conversation flowing below her.

Chesed stuttered, "It must be a mistake, the priest... Milcah was old. She probably didn't notice."

"Rebekah is a Tumtum," Bethuel told them, struggling for breath as his face turned a deep purple, "I want to know that you'll see my blessing is respected when I name Rebekah as my heir."

The roof, no, the whole world, seemed to move under her, and Rebekah gripped the tiles so tightly that little shards of terracotta worked their way under her fingernails. She had never heard the word Tumtum. She breathed slowly, trying to focus her attention and hear what was being said over the pounding of her heart in her ears.

"But brother, it is not our custom to bless our daughters before our sons. You must know that," Chesed protested, looking to

Jidlaph for support, but Jidlaph just stared back at him, wide-eyed.

"You said yourself, Rebekah is a boy," Bethuel argued stubbornly.

"I said no such thing!" Chesed shouted.

Jidlaph placed a clammy, restraining hand on his older brother's arm, leaned forward and said gently, "Brother, is it your wish to name Rebekah as your heir today, with us as your witnesses?"

No, no, no, no, Rebekah pleaded silently.

Bethuel shook his head, exhaled noisily and let all the fight leave his sweat-soaked body, "Not yet," he said.

"Does that mean you are undecided about this important matter?" Chesed asked him, hopefully.

"I still have time," he replied shakily, "But I want to know if it is possible. Will you support my decision?"

"The Tumtum is one of God's greatest mysteries," Chesed replied, leaning back and assuming the expression of a great and wise sage.

Rebekah listened carefully. She knew Chesed was the most educated of all Milcah's sons and well-known for his pragmatic legal rulings in family and community affairs.

"Is it possible?," he mused, "Certainly, you have the right to give the blessing to whomever you choose, and you are correct; it does say that Rebekah is also a boy, but what is the value of a faded seal on a crumbling parchment in the face of what everyone knows to be true? Rebekah is your daughter, our niece. She's a sister and an aunt. She's a woman, that's how we know her."

"But she's also a boy," Bethuel insisted.

Chesed sighed, "The second question comes down to a single point: what is her true nature?" he countered, running his soft hands down the length of his long grey beard, "If she is female, then to give her the blessing would be an abomination in the eyes of God, not to mention that she would marry a man one day and

the family name, and your estate, would pass to strangers. It would be a tragic blow to our whole family and to your wife, Bethuel. Who would care for your wife?"

"God forbid your wife should pass into the hands of a stranger," Jidlaph said, shaking his head.

Her mother remained silent and unmoving in the corner.

Pressing on before he lost the string of his thoughts, Chesed continued, "If, however, Rebekah's true nature is actually that of a man, then it still remains to be seen if he would really be the better choice. A Tumtum cannot father children. After her death, the blessing and the estate would inevitably pass to Laban, anyway."

"Laban is my second child," Bethuel said, his face scrunched up into a mask of disappointment,

"Are you so set against naming Laban? He is your son, after all, and you have raised him with the expectation of being your heir," Chesed reminded him.

"I have always loved Rebekah above all others. From the moment she was born, I have been bound to her," Bethuel answered, his voice thick with emotion.

"Brother, that is the feeling that all righteous men have for their daughters, but do not confuse that with the importance of having a son," Chesed said.

Bethuel sighed, "Just like my beloved Rebekah, my mind is in two."

Jidlaph leaned forward again, the chair groaning under his weight, "Could you really do it? Would it even be fair to do it? To publicly name the child you raised as a daughter as your rightful son and heir? Because once it's done, it cannot be undone."

"If I am completely honest," Bethuel said sadly, "I don't know. I fear to mention what happened with Abra-""

"With that in mind," Chesed said, hastily interrupting him, "I should tell you that while you still live and are sound of mind, the blessing is yours to bestow and yours only. However, if you died

without naming your heir, then the decision would fall to me and to Jidlaph. Should that happen, then there is no doubt in my mind that we would name Laban."

Bethuel closed his eyes for a moment and blinked back tears, "Thank you, brother, for your honesty and for your wise counsel," Bethuel said, his voice suddenly so quiet Rebekah could barely hear it.

Chesed stood up then and said it was time they left Bethuel to get some rest and think over everything they had said, but when they reached the door, he turned back and said, "I hope it will not be too soon for you, Bethuel."

"God will surely grant me enough time to make the right decision," Bethuel replied as his fists began to compulsively clench the bedsheets.

"Then make it well," Jidlaph said, passing out of Rebekah's field of view. She heard the soft thud of the door closing behind them.

In a state of shock, Rebekah rolled over onto her back and watched grey clouds move over the vast expanse of the sky. What was this strange Tumtum thing? Though she had always behaved more like a boy, she had always thought herself to be a girl. Did she not squat to pass water like any other woman? Her head was spinning faster and faster, shuffling memories from her childhood that had seemed innocent until now.

Tumtum, she tried to say it, but her lips refused to make the sounds. The word felt too foreign, too raw, too dangerous. She pushed it away.

The men would soon realise that this business with the Scroll of Milcah was a big misunderstanding. She was not interested in the blessing for herself. That was a much more complicated thing than what she wanted for her life.

If they try to give me the blessing, I'll simply refuse to accept it, she thought. Smiling and breathing more easily now, she pressed her eye to the crack in the reeds and observed her mother

removing a cup from her father's mouth. Saliva ran down his chin, and her mother wiped it with a cloth before pulling the bedsheets over his chest and tucking him in tightly.

In a soft, gentle voice, her mother whispered, "Our brother is correct, dear husband. It is you who will bestow the blessing, but he is wrong about one thing. It is me who will decide who gets it. I will go now and inform our son that he will soon be taking up the role I raised him for, and as for the other one... That abomination you call daughter, I will decide about her too. Rest now, sweet prince."

Her father did not move or show any sign that he heard or understood, and it seemed cruel to Rebekah that her mother should talk to him as if he were a child and not the great man she knew him to be. So, when her mother left the room, locking the door behind her as she went, Rebekah followed.

The Promise



When Eliezer stepped out of his tent, stretching and yawning, his foot crunched down on something that had been left in his doorway. He knew what it was before he lifted his foot to look. It was a small clay bowl, no bigger than the palm of his hand. It was a love token, a gift to the gods that he might be delivered into the waiting arms of whoever had placed the bowl. It was the third one this month. He heard muffled giggling from somewhere nearby as he stooped to pick up the pieces of broken pottery. He didn't want his son to see.

"Aba?" Eli called from inside.

"I'm here, son," he replied, stuffing the pieces into his pocket and keeping his face completely blank.

"Breakfast," Eli said sleepily.

"Yes, Yes, I'll drop you off if you hurry up. I mustn't be late for my lord Abraham."

Eli appeared, rubbing his eyes and yawning, "They got you with the love bowl again, didn't they?"

Eliezer nodded; he'd learnt long ago not to lie to his son; the boy was an excellent interrogator.

"Malchi says that one of them will catch you eventually and that you should just choose the one with the best cooking and be done with it."

Eliezer laughed, "Never take marriage advice from a man that's never been married. Come on, let's get you some breakfast."

Eliezer dropped his son with Channah, the wide-hipped, ruddy-faced woman who ran the camp's cook tent. She was always there and always ready with a smile and a kind word.

"If you can't make yourself useful, then at least try not to get in the way," he told Eli, sitting him down by Channah's warm oven.

"Oh, hush!" Channah scolded, swatting at Eliezer with her massive doughy hand, "Eli is always welcome to sit with me."

Eli beamed as she passed him a steaming flatbread and a little jar of honey to dip it in. The truth was that Eli was incredibly

spoiled by the women of Abraham's camp on account of the fact that he was the last child to be born in it and the last child brought into the world by the great matriarch and midwife, Sarah. Since her tragic death seven years ago, no baby had been born in Abraham's camp, and many of its women had long since given up trying to conceive. They lived under a dark cloud of infertility, and Eli was the ray of sunshine.

"Thank you," Eliezer said solemnly to Channah, throwing the broken shards of the love bowl into her glowing fire, "Thank you for taking such good care of my son."

Channah raised her eyebrows when she saw the broken love bowl being blackened on the coals of her oven but said nothing. She knew how to mind her own business, and it was why she was one of the few women Eliezer could bear to be around. With a shy wave of thanks, Eliezer ducked out and walked the short distance to the large and luxurious tent of his Master, Abraham.

Few people were about so early in the morning, but a giggling and blushing serving girl informed him that the Lady Hagar was already in attendance and had been since first light. She ran away with her hand pressed to her mouth, no doubt eager to share the news of her early morning encounter with the camp's most eligible bachelor.

"My lord," Eliezer said, padding softly into the heavily carpeted, overheated room, "My lady Hagar."

"Here he is," Abraham said cheerfully.

He was having one of his good days then, Eliezer thought, looking him over carefully. While he still had the massive bulk of a man who had spent many years working hard outside in the fields and on the mountain with cattle, sheep, and goats, the strength and power had now left his body entirely. His skin was thin, and the veins underneath looked sluggish and vulnerable. His hands were no longer the rough hands of a shepherd. Surrounding him was an air of exhausted vagueness, and whilst he often surprised Eliezer with his sharp insights and cutting

humour, those moments seemed to be costing him more and more every time. Now he slept a great deal, his grey and weary face slack as his breath wheezed in and out.

"At your service, my lord," Eliezer said, standing straight up, arms tucked in tightly by his side, waiting to receive his master's instructions.

"My beautiful wife has just informed me that she will be leaving this afternoon for Egypt," Abraham said, taking Hagar's small brown hand in his own shaking fingers.

"You didn't forget that today is the day that I am leaving?" Hagar said to Eliezer sharply.

His relationship with Hagar was strained, but unlike other people in the camp, he had never mocked or insulted her in private, or in public. He made a point of leaving the room if ever he heard anyone doing so and that had softened her towards him over the years.

"No, my lady, I did not forget. Your sons must be so pleased that the bride hunt has begun," Eliezer said politely.

Hagar snorted, "I'm not so sure about that. They seem to have rather a low opinion of women and babies."

Abraham's massive doddering hand found its way to Hagar's bottom, which he patted reassuringly, "Don't worry about that. Once they're married, nature will take its course, and your grandchildren will multiply faster than even you can count."

Eliezer knew that Abraham had never forgotten the promise he'd received from his God, a covenant that his descendants would form the multitudes of great nations, and since his son, by his first wife Sarah, was in no hurry to procreate, it was clearly Hagar, the second wife, who was going to provide the most fruitful branch of his tree.

"They'll be your grandchildren too, Abraham, don't forget that," Hagar scolded him.

"I won't forget it, but I have the feeling I won't be here to see

them arrive in the world," Abraham said with a tired sigh. Hagar gave him a reassuring squeeze but didn't deny it.

Rallying his strength Abraham said, "There is something I must do before it is too late." He struggled to sit up in his big, soft bed, not so easy for someone so old and so heavy, and coughed. Eliezer heard the rattle deep in his chest, "We have very important business to attend to, Eliezer."

"That is my cue to leave. You know how business bores me," Hagar said, hopping lightly off the giant bed where Abraham lay permanently stranded, the bed in which they had conceived many sons.

Abraham chuckled indulgently, and even Eliezer struggled to restrain his smile. Hagar was the most astute businessperson he'd ever met. The small but indomitable Egyptian woman had built an empire with only her son Ishmel to help her. Now, as Abraham's death loomed, she was making plans to strengthen her position with wives and grandchildren to fill the palace she had built herself in town. She kissed Abraham on the cheek and swished from the room, her step as light and agile as a young girl's.

Abraham watched her leave with a longing sigh, waiting a few moments to let the distance between them grow and then looked cunningly at Eliezer, with surprisingly bright and cunning eyes. Beckoning him to his side, he whispered, "Come closer to me, Eliezer, draw up a chair and put your hand here under my thigh so that I know you're near me and listening closely."

Eliezer did as commanded, and a strong sense of anticipation filled him. It had been a long time since Abraham had given him instructions of any kind, trusting him to know what needed to be done about the place. He slipped his hand carefully under Abraham's long thigh, just above the knee, and with surprising strength, Abraham reached out and grasped his arm, looking him intensely in the eye, "It is time to find a bride for Isaac. Loathe as he is to accept anything from me, Sarah would have wanted me to see him settled."

"God willing, my lord, you still have plenty of time," Eliezer said with genuine distress at the thought of his master's death.

"I suppose his condition is much the same?" Abraham asked.

"Yes, my lord, I'm afraid Isaac's condition is very much the same. His health continues to be a burden to him and..." Eliezer hesitated. This was a touchy subject, and he did not want to enrage the old man in his weakened state, but Abraham finished the sentence for him.

"... and he will not speak my name without first cursing me," Abraham said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"That's not exactly how I would've worded it, my lord, but that's about the long and the short of it, yes."

Eliezer always answered Abraham honestly. It was part of the sacred bond between a great Lord and his chamberlain that there were never any secrets between them.

Abraham squeezed his arm and looked away, blinking back tears, "Can a broken vessel ever be fixed? It would take a lifetime to put all the pieces back together..."

Eliezer looked down out of respect while Abraham wiped his eyes and then said, "Could my lady Hagar not bring a bride for Isaac from Egypt?"

Abraham nearly spat; he sat up so fast, "By God, Eliezer, what a thing to say!" he cried in outrage. Then he fell back on his pile of cushions laughing, fat tears rolling down his withered cheeks, "Can you imagine the wedding night?" Abraham guffawed.

Eliezer laughed too, poor Isaac. He could hardly imagine him with any woman, let alone a woman who bathed in milk and liked to paint her breasts gold.

He attempted to take his hand from under Abraham's thigh to fetch the old man a cloth to wipe his tears, but fast as a snake bite, Abraham's hand shot out and clamped down on Eliezer's wrist, keeping his hand in place, "Do not leave yet, Eliezer, not until I have given you your mission. Perhaps the last mission I will give you. I pray to God you will not fail me in this last request."

The conversation became serious, and Eliezer held himself straight in readiness to accept Abraham's command, "My lord, tell me your wishes that I can make them so."

"You will be the one to find Isaac a wife, not Hagar, not me. Eliezer, it will be you who brings us a new queen."

Eliezer's stomach dropped. The very thought of brides and weddings made him feel sick. Since the death of his wife, he had avoided women altogether, and yet he could not refuse his master's request. He bowed and said, "Yes, my lord."

Abraham held Eliezer in his powerful gaze and delivered his command, "Go north to Haran and seek out my family. Though it has been many years since I saw them last, they will not turn you away. Pick a strong, courageous girl from amongst their daughters, and she will be a blessing in Isaac's life just like Sarah was in mine."

Abraham closed his eyes for a moment, and Eliezer knew he was thinking of Sarah, that silent and forbearing soul who had followed Abraham across untold deserts and mountains without a single complaint. Sarah, who had watched Abraham lead her only child up into the mountains to sacrifice him for the Glory of God with a long and very sharp knife concealed in his bedroll. She had allowed Abraham to take her boy, watching silently as they walked into the distance. Once they were out of sight, she had laid down and never gotten up again. When Abraham returned with Isaac by his side very much alive it was too late. Sarah was already gone. Her heart was beating, and she breathed, but she was gone. Even Isaac's throat-tearing screams couldn't bring her back from the place she had gone to.

Sarah died, and Isaac never spoke a single word to his father ever again. It was the beginning of the great rift that forever split Abraham's family into two parts. Eliezer also closed his eyes for a moment, overwhelmed by the visceral memory of Isaac's piteous screaming, and when he opened them again, Abraham was patiently waiting.

"Will you go?" he asked.

Nodding his assurance, Eliezer replied, "I will go."

"Thank you, Eliezer."

"But I must ask you, my lord. Shouldn't I take Isaac with me? You know how he is. Wouldn't it be better if he chose for himself?"

"Isaac must never leave these lands, Eliezer. They have been given to him by God. Besides, no woman of good birth would take him if she saw him," Abraham chuckled, shaking his head in amused disbelief, "No, no, you must go alone and fetch the bride for Isaac. She'll have to be a courageous type to go with you, and that's a good thing. She'll need all the courage she has to survive Isaac."

"And if I find such a girl, but she refuses to come?" Eliezer asked, his mind spinning with possibilities.

"Then you'll be free of your promise to me, and you and Eli will spend the rest of your lives wearing dresses and making flower garlands with Isaac. We both know I'm not long for this world, and you belong to this family as long as you belong to this earth. When I die, you will serve Isaac as you have served me, and when you die, Eli will take your place."

"Yes, my lord," Eliezer said, bowing his head.

Abraham patted Eliezer in a grandfatherly way and counselled him, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. God's angels have gone ahead of you to find the woman, and if they aren't help enough, then you'll have my gold." His eyes glittered mischievously. Abraham had worked hard for many years to acquire many lands and great wealth, but for all that, he lived rather frugally. Every now and then, however, he took great delight in spending huge sums on other people. Hagar had understood this from the beginning and built her empire by cleverly investing Abraham's gifts.

"All of it, my lord?" Eliezer was more than a little bit surprised.

"Yes, and the jewels."

"All of the jewels, my lord?"

"Yes, Eliezer, all of the gold, all of the jewels, all of the rugs, the silks and the perfumed oils. It will be the greatest bride price ever paid, greater even than the price I paid for my dear sister," he said, trailing off as he relived the bitter memories of the past.

Eliezer laughed in relief, "Perhaps finding Isaac's bride won't be so difficult after all," Eliezer said, running his hand through his dark curly hair. His mind was starting to spin with everything he had to do to organise the trip. He was thrilled by the idea of getting away from the stifling pressure of camp gossip and love bowls but the organising of it would be a nightmare task.

"Perhaps you will bring back a wife of your own," Abraham chuckled, leaving the past behind by focusing on the future, "It is about time you were married."

Eliezer's throat went dry, and he coughed, almost choking, "Apologies, my lord," he said, attempting to massage his throat back to life.

"Don't panic, that wasn't a command," Abraham said, wheezing with amusement and then rolling over onto his elbow so that he could look directly into Eliezer's eyes as he choked, "But it is not good for a man to be alone," he said with grandfatherly affection.

"Thank you, my lord," Eliezer gasped as air returned to his lungs.

"And never forget," Abraham said, leaning back on his pillows with a satisfied sigh, "that marriages are made by God's hands, not our own."

Creature Of Her Own Kind



As she scrambled across the rooftops like a thief, Rebekah couldn't believe she had never been up here before. She could see the whole city spread out before her in miniature, and unlike her father's well-made bedchamber, she found many convenient holes in the tiles through which she could track her mother's progress through the house.

Rebekah watched from above as her mother entered the lavish internal courtyard at the centre of their palatial home and called out, "Laban! Are you here?"

"Here, mother!" came her brother's reply.

Rebekah narrowed in on the sound of his voice, scanning the opulent garden until she found him lounging on a marble bench. He looked every bit the prince, lying there by the fountain as if the entire world existed only to give him pleasure and praise.

"Laban, you must listen to me!" her mother pounced on him, grabbing him by the neck of his silk robes and dragging him upright. The delicate fabric tore under the force of her clawing nails, and his wine glass dropped to the floor.

"Mother, you're scaring me!" Laban cried, and Rebekah took great pleasure in his childish protest. He'd always been such a baby.

"Good," their mother said, letting go of her son and sinking down onto the bench next to him, "because Aba is dying."

"Right now?" Laban asked as if the whole thing would be a terrible inconvenience.

Her mother shook her head, "No, not right now, but soon," she said, her eyes drifting to a far-off place before snapping back onto her son, "That is why we must act fast to protect your inheritance!"

Rebekah could see the pulse fluttering in her brother's long, elegant throat as the colour drained from his face, "What about my inheritance?" he asked, not even trying to hide the desperate fear in his voice, "Is that why my uncles were here?"

Her mother nodded, "Your father had an important question to ask the elders about his heir," she said.

Laban's index finger tapped out a strange rhythm on his knee, and Rebekah noticed his toes curled into a tight ball as if they were gripping the floor, "Me?" he asked, hopefully.

Ima shook her head sorrowfully, "Rebekah."

"Wait... What?" Laban choked, eyes bulging, "Isn't that... Impossible?" Laban asked frantically.

Their mother leaned back and sighed, "It's a long story," she said, taking a deep, steadying breath.

"Oh, just what I wanted, a bedtime story," Laban replied sarcastically.

Their mother looked at him bitterly and said, "If you're going to be like that..."

"Oh, no, now that you've scared me half to death, you have my complete attention," he said, trying to regain his composure, "From your lips to my ears."

Rebekah watched the two of them together like venomous snakes in a basket, and the sight of them made her feel sick. She had always been excluded by them and had long suspected they colluded against her when it came to her father and the distribution of his gifts. She hadn't cared, had let them snatch up all the treasures and trinkets in exchange for the only thing she had ever wanted from them: to be left alone. Even now, she had to fight the urge to run away back to her cave, back to Batel and Aviel, but what good would that do? Things were changing, and they were all in great danger.

Their mother leaned forward and stroked Laban's cheek, saying, "As you know, your father was Milcah's youngest son. By the time we were married, he was already an uncle many times over. Someone was always screaming and sweating in the red tent, bringing more children for Milcah to add to her scroll. Some of those children were older than I was on the day I married. Your father was already a grown man, tired of being overlooked and

eager to start a family of his own. He worked hard, and he was ambitious. Every day, he went out to work before dawn and returned after dark, exhausted and hungry. He wanted to make his fortune and prove that despite being the last of Milcah's children, he was not the least. Through his hard work, our wealth increased. We moved into our own house so that he could be closer to the fields, and we set about trying to make babies of our own. For seven long years, your father stayed loyal to me even though I failed, time and time again, to conceive a child. He planted many seeds but nothing grew inside of me. Your father never gave up hope, and he treated me well. He was always bringing me gifts and urging me to 'eat this. It will be good for you,' he'd say. I would have done anything to repay him for his love and kindness, but I could not give him the one thing that he wanted."

"I had no idea about any of this, Ima. How strange that you've never told this story before," Laban said, looking at his mother with renewed interest.

"People don't tend to tell stories about their failures," she replied with a deep frown.

Laban smiled and said, "You must have been so relieved when..." but the look on her face stopped him from going on. It was a mask of rage and grief.

"Then one day, I vomited all over the carpet," she said, grimacing, "It was a very expensive carpet, a gift from your father. I was horrified. His response was to whoop and laugh and swell up with joy. He had never been happier in his life, and I felt disgusting. Day after day, I lay in bed, puking and sweating and panting like a dog. My hair started to fall out. My skin turned sour. It was like a sickness was growing inside of me, getting bigger and bigger. I felt no joy, only fear."

Rebekah was surprised to hear her mother speak so freely. With her, she was cold and clipped, but with Laban, it was almost like they were friends. It was fascinating, too, to get this glimpse

of the world before she was born. She had the feeling her mother was pulling back the curtain on a forbidden room that she had not even known was there.

Laban refilled his wine, "You had a hard pregnancy then? Just like my wife," he said with grim regret, "but what does this have to do with my inheritance?"

"There was a sickness inside me!" she hissed. Laban went pale, and his hand shook slightly as he raised the glass to his lips. He drank deeply, his throat convulsing spasmodically as he gulped it down.

Taking the empty vessel from him before he could fill it again, Ima folded her bejewelled hands in her lap and continued her story, "I was exhausted and emaciated. The baby had taken all the goodness and strength from my body, and by the time it was ready to come out, I had nothing left. Only fear and a certainty that the baby would be a monster. When the pains started Bethuel had to leave me screaming on the floor and run for Milcah, who was so old and frail he had to carry her back in his arms. I was bleeding, huge waves of blood that soaked into the floor, but Milcah, weak in the legs, was strong in the hands. She was the one who brought the baby into the world, not me. The last thing I remember was your father crying as he carried a silent, bloody bundle from the room.

'If you live, you can try again,' Milcah said as I faded away.

It took many months for me to regain my health, to replace all the strength and blood that the baby had taken from me, but under Milcah's careful supervision, eventually, I began to recover. Until one day, venturing from my bedchamber, I heard a baby's cry. I knew immediately that it was my baby and the dread returned.

The next time Milcah visited, she knew that something in me had changed because she didn't fuss or ask questions about my health. She just sat on the edge of my bed, with her palms resting on her old knobby knees and waited.