

Noah's Wife

a novel by
T.K. Thorne

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For *Mother*

Who danced to the grocery store music
and taught me to test my wings.

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MAP

SKETCH

Noah's Wife

Prologue

5521 BCE

My name, Na'amah, means pleasant or beautiful. I am not always pleasant, but I am beautiful. Perhaps that is why I am trundled atop this beast like a roll of hides for market and surrounded by grim-faced men.

If my captors had bothered to ask me, I would have told them that their prize is of questionable value because my mind is damaged. But they did not, and I lie draped, belly down, across the back of an auroch, a large black ox with an eel stripe that runs down his spine and a stench worse than a rutting goat. My mouth is parched and swollen with dried blood, and every step the animal takes sends a jolt of pain into my chest. Snatches of ground appear between the cloven hooves—a succession of earth, grass, and rock obscured by the dark tangle of my hair—all I have to measure the growing distance from the life I have known.

Savta, my grandmother, believes a narrow birth passage pinched my head. A skilled midwife, she convinced the Elders that my disfigurement would right itself, and they allowed me to live. Tubal-Cain, my brother, would prefer it otherwise. He claims I tore our mother from inside and killed her. I did not intend to do such a thing, but if I did it, we are even, since she squeezed my head. Well, perhaps not even, as she is dead, and I am not.

The auroch stumbles and I grunt from the jerk. The tall man with fiery hair who leads the auroch looks back at me. My village sees many traders, so the strangeness of these men's dress and speech means they are from a distant land. Where are they taking me?

As much as I hate the days, I dread the nights. The tall

man pulls me off when it becomes too dark to travel, and I can barely stand. It is a chance for food and water, but I am fifteen summers, and I know the intent of men who steal a woman. So far, they have not tried, perhaps because I smell like the auroch, but when they do, I will fight. I am small, but my teeth are strong and my legs have climbed the hills since I was very young. *My hills. How I miss my hills.*

To distract me from the aches in my body and my heart, I will put together the words of my story. I remember everything. Memories appear as images in my mind. Each word-sound I hear has its own color and shape and fits together with the others in patterns that I can recall as easily as I can name every sheep on my hillside.

This story will be truth. I speak only truth, unwise as it may be, since lies distress me. And it will be for my own ears, as my words and manner seem odd to other people. I am more comfortable with animals, who do not expect me to be any way than the way I am.

I will start with the day three summers ago when Savta told me I had a secret.

Part I
Chapter One
5524 BCE

It was my twelfth summer, and Savta and I sought refuge from the sun in my father's house, which sat on the outer edge of the village, near Deer River. We tied the door skins aside for the breeze. The sounds I knew so well were a comforting presence around me—the brown patter of children's bare feet on ground worn free of grass, women's silvery chatter as they prepared food or sang to the Goddess, the *chip-chip* of stone knapping stone to shape it. I heard those things even through the plaster-mud walls. My hearing was very good.

Savta coaxed thread from the pile of soft, cleaned wool, while I gnawed my lower lip at my clumsy sewing, frustrated with the thin copper needle that seemed determined to prick my fingers. We had dug out cool places to sit in the floor of the house, and the smell of earth mingled with the sweet odor of cedar chips soaking in heated oil. The smell soothed me, and I let my mind float to my favorite place on the hills where I could see Deer River twisting like thread to the north, into the Black Lake. Behind me, clustered mountains rose into the sky, their slopes painted the eternal green of conifers, their tops capped white like old women. Below, grey-brown sheep speckled the grazing slopes.

From my perch, I could watch the Black Lake's moods. Winter winds stirred her surface with such violence that she swallowed any boatman foolish enough to try and fish. That was why her name was "Black," but in summer, she was smooth enough to catch the sun when he melted into her.

“What are you seeing?” Savta asked me. She knew that sometimes I saw images of what I was thinking, and then it took me longer to speak, because I had to translate what I saw into words. Often, this was good, because there were things in my mind that I should not reveal, even to Savta.

“My sheep,” I said, as though they belonged to me.

In the distance, a dog barked. The rusty sound identified her as Dawn, the aging bitch whose puppies had supplied our tribe with so many good shepherd dogs, she now wandered the village, fed anywhere she decided to linger. Dawn saved her voice for important announcements, usually a stranger’s arrival or perhaps returning hunters.

Annoyed at my needle’s obstinacy, I dropped the sewing into my lap. “Why do I have to learn spinning and cooking? I am too clumsy. I am much better at herding.”

“Beauty may tempt a man,” Savta said predictably, “but a full stomach and warm blankets keep him. Grown women do not watch sheep. When your blood flows, you must marry and start a family.”

This was not the first time I had heard these words. I pouted. “If my father and brother are typical of men, I prefer the sheep as company.”

Savta snorted.

“Besides, I practice with my sling almost every day, and Yanner says I have ears as good as the dogs, and he would take me hunting if Hunter Clan did not forbid it.”

Yanner was my only friend. We were born two days apart. On evening watches, we shared shepherd duties. Like me, he was beautiful, but his eyes were green as spring grass and his hair the color of honey held to the sun.

“I like Yanner,” I said. “Maybe I will marry him. He would let me watch sheep. His mother can make blankets and cook.” Before Savta could object, I added, “I will take

my turn in the wheat and barley fields too, of course.”

“It’s not for me to say who you will marry,” Savta said, but her mouth pinched in a funny way that always made me think she was trying not to smile. Savta rarely smiled. She said she had too much to do, caring for me, my brother, and father, but I think it was because she had lost all her children, my mother the last. I suddenly realized that she would have no other woman in the house when I married.

“Maybe I will not wed Yanner,” I said. “Maybe I will just stay with you.”

Her mouth softened. “You are a special girl, Na’amah.” The phrase had sung in my ears so often, it calmed me, a counter to Tubal’s constant taunts.

I asked my ritual response. “How am I special, Savta?”

This time she surprised me with her answer. “In a secret way. When your blood flows, I’ll explain, but you must never speak of it.”

“Why?”

“Always with the ‘why?’ I remember when you were a tiny bit of nothing, you toddled out into a storm to see how the butterflies dodged the raindrops.” She sighed, a peculiar swishing sound, because one side of her mouth did not work right. “For once, listen. If anyone learns, you’ll be thrown in the pit.”

I took a quick breath. Two moon-cycles ago, the Elders had stripped Nigel, the potter, and cast him into the deep hole in the center of the village. For days, he called and cried, but no one could speak to him or give him food or water, because he had broken tribal law by making a clay Father God image wrong. Elder Kahor claimed it resulted in a sickness that made a bear attack his hunters.

My heart beat a faster tempo. “Why would knowing my secret make the Elders pit me?”

She lowered the weighted stick that twisted the thread between her fingers, and considered me, the left side of her mouth drooping lower than it usually did. That meant she was either very sad or thinking hard.

“What wrong have I done?” I asked.

Her stern eyes softened. “Nothing, child. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Then why?”

A great sigh. Savta sighed a lot, as if a pain in her needed escape. “Do you know the story of First-Woman?” she asked me.

“I know the pieces I have heard on washday.” On washday, the women gathered in the river to wash clothing and to gossip. I did not like washday. People avoided me because I said things they did not expect.

“Our ancestors, First Woman and First Man, lived in the Land of Eden,” Savta said, her voice taking on the soft singsong of a Teller, “where mist rose to water the land, and the earth was lush with trees and fruit. Mother Goddess spoke to First Woman in a secret language that First Man could not understand, telling her where to find nuts and seeds and all the Earth’s bounty.”

“Is that why men had to hunt animals?” I asked. “I never heard that part.”

“Of course you haven’t. You’ve only heard the man side of the story.”

I loved stories, though many of them were not truth. People pretended they were, so sometimes I did too, but I had never seen Mother Goddess or Father God. I did not understand why. Even the wind, which was hard to see, carried leaves in its arms and tickled my ears to proclaim itself. The moon never said, *I am a manifestation of Mother Goddess*. It just hovered in the night sky. I did not say these

things aloud, though it was difficult not to say what I was thinking. Speaking such thoughts would get me thrown into the pit. My mind might be damaged, but I was not stupid.

At that moment, I heard footsteps and raised my knuckle to my lips to warn Savta. My hearing was sharper than anyone I knew. Savta often said I heard too much. The footfalls belonged to Tubal. My older brother's left foot hesitated a bit, a heritage from a snake's bite when he was seven and stepped over a rotten log without looking at the other side. The deeper thud of his stride meant he carried something heavy.

We worked in silence until Tubal entered the hut with a dead fawn draped over his shoulder.

He dropped it in a bloody heap before me. "Clean this, Ugly One," he said with barely a glance at me, striding to the oak barrel to dip his bowl for a draught of beer.

The glazed eyes of the young creature stared at me. A spear wound opened her flesh behind the front shoulder. The smell of blood mixed with the scent of cedar chips. A piece of her ear was torn, an old injury. I wondered if she had already escaped one predator only to fall to another, and if her mother mourned her loss.

"Well done, grandson," Savta said, "but there's no need to bring a carcass into the house. Hang it in the tree, please."

He took another drink and stared at me with displeasure, his normal habit. "Don't let Ugly One wander off and leave you with the work of dressing it, Savta."

My back stiffened with anger. Tubal used to trick me into leaving my chores, telling me I was supposed to be doing something else. I believed him. I was too young to understand lies, but finally Savta explained, and Tubal could not fool me again. So, I was not confused when Tubal called

me “stupid” or “ugly.” I knew he said lies to hurt me.

I was not ugly. When Savta combed my hair, she said it shone like the Black Lake on a moon-full night. She rubbed olive oil into my skin to keep it soft, and Savta always told me that I was not stupid; I was special. I did not speak for the first two summers of my life, even though I understood what people were saying. The rainbow of colors that the sounds made in my mind distracted me. Perhaps that was why Tubal thought I was stupid. At two summers, I started speaking in whole thoughts, so he should have known better.

Now that I was older, I knew what a lie was, and I could tell one if I wanted to, but I did not understand the rules for lying. For example, if a person interrupted what I was doing and asked if she were interrupting, I was supposed to say “no,” even though she was. This rule, however, did not always apply. If I interrupted Savta, she told me so and scolded me. This was confusing, so things were simpler if I told truths. It was my habit, like walking the same path to the river to bathe. Changes made me uncomfortable.

I pressed my lips and pretended to study the tear I was mending. The needle's sharp prick brought a whimper to my lips and a bead of bright blood to my finger.

Shaking his head in a gesture that proclaimed my uselessness louder than any comment, Tubal grasped the fawn's legs, swung it over his shoulders, and strode out.

When he was out of hearing, I sucked my finger and returned to our conversation to take my mind from the needle's bite and Tubal's scorn.

“What happened next in the story?” I asked Savta.

She lifted the stick and set it spinning again with a deft twist.

“First Man was jealous,” she said. “He bade First Woman speak to the serpent guarding the Tree, so he could

overhear and learn the secret, thinking he could gain the ability to understand Mother Goddess' language."

"Oh." A strange thought that a man would be jealous of a woman. Women bear the pain of childbirth, the discomfort of moon times, and the feeding of babies who pull on their breasts. I did not look forward to any of those things.

"Because of love for First Man, First Woman did so," Savta continued without further prompting, her nimble fingers twisting the strand into a fine, even thread. "But when she spoke to the Serpent of Wisdom, First Man did not learn Mother Goddess' language." She paused. "What he learned was fear.

"So enraged was Father God that he cast them from the land and burned it, so they could not return. The earth in Eden is scorched and no man or beast can live on it."

"That was mean," I said.

Savta snorted. "The gods are the gods."

Her explanation was as difficult to understand as the gods themselves. I frowned, returning to the part that dealt with me. "So, if Father God and Mother Goddess meant for woman to have this secret, and I am a woman, why should I be pitted for it?"

"Oh child, you have much to learn. The man-story lays the blame of angering Father God on First Woman's back."

"But First Woman did it at First Man's bequest."

"That is our story, passed from First Woman to her daughters to her daughter's daughters. Man's story is that First Woman forced forbidden knowledge from the serpent and that angered Father God."

"How do we know which story is truth, man's story or woman's?" I asked.

Savta looked at me as if she wanted to open my head and pour sense into it. "You are chosen by Mother Goddess.

How could you have her gift if her story wasn't true?"

I did not understand why Savta thought Mother Goddess chose me. I had no idea what this secret gift was. I had no unique knowledge of foraging or planting. I was good at watching sheep.

Savta reached over and arranged the wool shawl I was mending. "You must decide yourself where the truth lies but, if you value life, you will keep the secret of Mother Goddess's gift and woman's story. Revealing either could mean death."

I also did not understand why truth should bring punishment, but it seemed linked to Father God's anger at First Man seeking women's secrets or First Woman's willingness to share them.

Savta recognized my frown of confusion and said, "You will understand better when you are older, but if people knew, especially the men, they would fear you."

"Because I would be powerful?" I asked, thinking it would not be a bad thing to have Father afraid of me for a change.

"Because they would fear you'd find the Serpent's Tree again and bring the gods' wrath upon us."

That was not likely. The Tree was somewhere very far to the south in Eden, and why would I go to a land that was a scorched, barren desert? I did not even like to wander far from our village, as I was used to what things looked like here.

"The rest I will tell you when your blood flows and not before," Savta said in dismissal, pulling the raw wool and twisting it with fingers that seem to know their task without guidance from her eyes or mind. I had to explain everything to my hands, and they still were clumsy.

Chapter Two

My blood would not flow for several more summers, so I had to wait for Savta's promise to tell me why I was special, but I did not care because I met Bennu, a most unusual friend. It was early spring after my thirteenth summer.

The morning of that Market Day, I watched the other children in the fields just beyond the village playing that they were hunting wild horses. I did not understand the way they played, because they kept changing the rules. I knew from experience that they did not want me to join them. It made me unhappy when I did not know how things were supposed to go, especially when they did something silly or impossible, like having a horse run in a different direction from the herd. I had watched horses many times, and they always ran together.

The fields were bright with sunlight and a clear sky. The horse herd consisted of children and the pigs that rooted in the stubble of the wheat fields, not yet burned for planting. The pigs did not cooperate. They did not understand what they were supposed to do either.

Everyone stopped at mid-day to eat and bring water to the houses around the village square, the responsibility of all the children not on shepherd duty. Yanner helped with my portion, since I was small, and he liked me to see how strong he was. In return, I shared my lunch—bread and mashed chickpeas moistened with olive oil, garlic, and honey—my favorite treat.

Later that day, Savta called me in. "Go to Market. I need a bundle of this." She held up a dried herb sprig. She did not put it in the basket, because she knew I would remember which one. "Your father and Tubal are not back

from the hunt, so bring home a fish for dinner and a jar of the yellow powder I use for healing salves.”

I smiled. Father hated fish, so it was a treat for Savta and me. I placed a pouch made of fig leaves for the fish and two clay jars for the powder and herbs in the market basket. I always paid careful attention to what herbs Savta used and in what amounts. Perhaps because at four summers of age, I came near death when Tubal coaxed me into eating a handful of dried mushrooms that Savta thought she had kept out of reach. I was terribly sick for many days and probably lived only because of Savta's skill, and the fact that she forced from Tubal what he had done.

Yanner joined me on the way to Market. In spite of the heat, he wore a deerskin over his linen under-tunic to show his sincerity at seeking adoption into Hunter Clan. Enticed by the weapons displays, he took my arm and started to drag me toward one. When I hung back, he stopped. “Na’amah, you have that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“The ox-stubborn one.”

“I do not want to look at weapons.”

“Come on, Na’amah, I need to see how other tribes shape their blades and whether they use antler bone or flint.

Yanner's father was a shepherd, but Yanner wanted nothing to do with guarding sheep. All the children took shifts watching the sheep, answering to the adult shepherds who made decisions about which rams to use for breeding and which to castrate. Yanner said my company on the hills was the only thing that kept him from dying of boredom.

“Fine,” I replied. “When you are an adult of Hunter Clan, come visit me in the hills. That is where I will be.”

“I've never heard of a grown woman becoming a shepherd.”

“Yes, you have. You just did,” I said. “You go look at weapons. I want to see what animals are here.”

Yanner threw up his arms in disgust. Those of Hunter Clan were scornful of the tending of the earth or even herding, though they did not mind eating goat meat or lamb or bread cakes, and they wore wool or linen beneath the animal skins that gave them status. They kept many of the old ways, except they worshiped only Father God. My own father was of Hunter Clan, as was my brother, which was a good thing, as it kept them away from the house for long periods. Father said it was important not to hunt big game near the settlement or we would not have the meat nearby in lean times.

“Fine,” Yanner said with a dark tone of voice that meant it was not fine. I was not confused because it was Yanner, and I had asked him enough times to understand it meant he was not happy, but accepted my decision.

We went our separate ways.

That day, like all Market Days, people brought goods to sell in the village center, a large, square area. They traded with sheep, goats, raw copper, and turquoise. I fingered the three brightly marked cowrie shells in my pouch. The shells came from the south near the Middle Salt Sea and our tribe accepted them for trade. It took many shells to equal the value of a ewe.

I went first to the west end of the square, to Mother Goddess' temple, where her tapestry hung, and where a little stone image of her watched from the wall's alcove. With some reluctance, I placed one of the cowrie shells next to her. Savta said they went to the Goddess, but I believed Elder Mariah took them on the Goddess' behalf.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Yanner had managed to temper his enthusiasm for looking at weapons

long enough to leave an offering at Father God's temple, which presided on the square's east end, where the oil pot always burned.

The remaining sides of the central square housed workshops where artisans shaped pottery, stone, wood, or copper for tools or pots. They were all open so people could see the work and wares. Village houses, including my father's, formed the outer ring around the square. Beyond the houses, Deer River meandered along its course into the Black Lake.

I stopped to speak with Aunt Adah. She was my father's first wife, so she was not really my aunt, but a wife-sister to my dead mother. She did not live with us. Father had put her out before I was born. Aunt Adah always had a smile for me.

"Greetings, Na'amah," she said, looking up from punching the first indentions into a ball of clay. She swiped at a lock of escaped hair with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of wet clay on her cheek.

"Greetings, Aunt Adah." My eyes lifted briefly to her face for courtesy and then down to the pot, watching her deft fingers shape the clay with the same familiarity as Savta spun wool into thread.

"Before you leave," she said, "I want you to take something to Savta." She nodded at a cup with a funny face on it. "If that doesn't make her smile, nothing will."

The cup made me smile. "I will remember."

She gestured toward the square. "Go on then. Have fun."

I turned and stepped into the marvelous smell of roasting mutton seasoned with garlic and leeks that permeated the air, masking the subtle tang of animal urine, dyes, and human sweat. Food, jewelry, pottery, and wools,

both raw and dyed, lay on hides or woolen blankets throughout the center square. Strangers came on Market Day to buy the fine wools that were our tribe's pride.

The pit was covered and no one was in it screaming to get out, which made the day more pleasant. I could not ignore it, as others seemed to do. I also did not like the press and jostle of people or the loud market noises, which jumbled together in a confusion of images and colors, and I always made sure to stuff bits of sheep wool in my ears, which helped.

I did like the animals. Pheasants and ducks shifted and squawked in wooden cages. Boar-pigs grunted, rooting for grubs in their enclosures and, of course, sheep and goats were everywhere, both to sell and to trade. Only rams and ewes, of course. The whole tribe owned the wethers—rams that the shepherds deemed unsuitable for breeding and castrated. Anyone who needed meat could slaughter a wether, but taking someone's ram or ewe earned the thief a life shortened in the pit.

The most interesting animal at the market was a large, beautiful bird like none I had ever seen. It was white like a snowy egret, but with a sweep of feathers behind its head, and eyes as dark as mine. When its owner was not looking, I stepped close to its cage, which was in a choice position near the large, flat stone the Elders stood on to make pronouncements.

When it stretched its wings, I could see that the feathers of one were clipped. Below the crinkly skin of its toes, the long curving nails of one foot grasped a half-eaten fruit. The bird tilted its head and looked right back at me. I was uncomfortable looking at people's faces; it made me anxious. I used to look aside, but learned that looking down was better. Men saw it as a demure gesture and women as

submissive, and they treated me more as a normal person. Animals, however, keep their communication simple, so I did not mind looking directly at them.

After a moment, the bird dropped the food and sidled toward me on the cage floor, its talons splayed out for balance. I was not afraid, even though the large beak looked as if it could take a hunk of my flesh. Its mouth opened, exposing a thick tongue that looked like a person's. I leaned my face against the wooden bars.

With great care, the creature reached up and grasped an eyelash between its powerful upper and lower beak, gently scraping down the length of the lash. I do not know why I did not even flinch. Something about the way it moved told me it meant me no ill, but I jumped back at the owner's shout behind me.

"Idiot! That bird's got an ill temper. You want to lose those pretty long lashes?" He spoke awkwardly, as if his mouth and throat were not comfortable with the sounds of our language. He was a stranger, a foreigner.

"Is that bird for sale?" I asked, though I owned nothing to trade for it, and the two cowrie shells would hardly be enough for such a creature.

"You don't want that bird," another man commented before the stranger could answer. I did not need to look to recognize my cousin's voice, which undulated like green hills. Jabel owned sheep and cattle that grazed on the hill behind mine.

"Yes I do," I replied, wondering if Jabel would loan me a sheep to buy the bird. It was not likely.

"No, girl," Jabel said, as if he did not know me, "a white animal like that is ill luck. White is the death color."

I knew that, of course, but I did not like him saying it. "Everything dies. Why is that ill luck?"

Jabel shook his head and stroked his short black beard.

"Mind your own business!" the bird seller snapped at him. "This is a rare bird. It belonged to a chieftain of the River-People and came from a land more distant still, a dark place of jungles and people with skin the color of night. Very rare creature, this."

"Yes?" Jabel replied with an arched eyebrow. "Why didn't this chieftain keep it? Bet the bird bit him." He laughed.

At that moment, a large rat scuttled at our feet, burrowing under the stack of cages and followed by several dogs in pursuit. Catching the scent of their prey, the lead dog dug wildly at the ground before the cages. Others jumped around. Even old Dawn had joined the chase, her tail wagging with excitement. I did not think she could see what she was after, but she could still smell.

When the dogs' antics knocked over several cages, including the white bird's, the stranger added to the confusion by waving his arms and shouting. He kicked at the dogs, just missing Dawn. One of the clay jars under my arm slipped from my grip and fell, knocking loose the peg that secured the white bird's cage before shattering on the ground.

Released, the bird took to the air, but the clipped wing forced it to trace awkward circles over us.

"See what you've done!" the stranger accused, railing at Jabel and me.

It did not seem fair that he placed the blame on our backs. Neither of us had caused the rat to hide there or the dogs to chase it and knock over the cages, so I paid no attention to him. My gaze remained on the white bird, hoping it would make it to freedom, despite its wing. I would not like to live in a cage, and imagined it would not either.

To my surprise, it gave a screech of frustration, dove toward us and landed on my shoulder. Strong talons dug into my flesh, but I tried not to move, amazed at such an exotic creature so close. The bird's wide sweeping tail brushed my back, almost as long as my hair.

In the same moment, I realized another man was looking at me. I do not know why, because many people were watching, and I was stunned that the bird had settled on my shoulder, but I felt the man's gaze and turned.

Blue eyes above a large, hooked nose and full lips—I saw all of that, including the scar along the ridge of his jawbone; the wild bramble of hair and beard; the rough weave of the sleeveless linen tunic; the worn ox hide wrapping his feet and calves; and the polished stone pendant hanging on a cord from his neck. I saw many more details, but Savta said it was distracting to relate everything I noticed.

It was distracting to notice everything.

The blue-eyed man was Noah, the boat-maker. I knew him more from people's talk than anything else. He lived apart from the village. He approached without taking his gaze from me, or perhaps the bird on my shoulder held his attention. Closer, I saw the stone necklace was a piece of blue-green malachite, a charm that brought health to its wearer.

The seller grabbed my bird—that was how I thought of it, since it had chosen my shoulder of all the shoulders in the village center. It protested with a loud squawk and bit his hand as he stuffed it back into a cage, one even smaller than its original prison. I wrapped my arms around my elbows to deal with the rush of sorrow that filled me.

Swearing in a language I did not understand, the seller sucked on his wound and grabbed a strip of cloth to wrap his

hand. "Cursed bird. If it hadn't cost me so much, I'd give it away."

Noah now stood near. He towered above me, but I did not give up my position near the cage. The stink of his body was strong enough to rise above the general odor of animals and men. I decided he lived alone. A wife would have made him bathe in the river.

"Why do you wrinkle your little nose?" he boomed.

I winced at the volume of his voice, and realized he was addressing me. "Because you smell bad," I said, keeping my gaze on the bird, which was using its beak and talons to climb in endless circle over the ceiling and walls of its cramped cage.

There was a long moment of silence, and I sensed tension in Jabel and the bird seller, as though Noah might explode with anger. Finally, Noah broke the silence with a grunt and turned to the seller. "How much?"

The look in the seller's eyes changed at once, the tense pucker at their edges smoothing. He smiled. "Well, I can offer you a bargain, I can."

Conflicting emotions tumbled through me. What did the boat-maker want with this bird? Yet anything would be better than it staying with this man. Perhaps Noah would build it a big cage, and I could visit and bring it treats. Birds ate bugs, seeds, and fruit. I could do that...if he would let me. I looked up at him and found, to my surprise, his gaze was still on me, not the seller, or the bird. His eyes were a piercing blue, yet it was not an unkindly look. I dropped my gaze to his feet, noticing the hides, though worn, were finely stitched. He turned his attention to the seller, who had not stopped relating the bird's praises, claiming it could do about everything, including talk.

"I will buy it," the boat-maker said, cutting off the

monologue.

The seller nearly choked.

"At half the price you named," Noah continued. He placed in the man's hand a finely shaped obsidian spearhead that had cost the knapper a full day's work. "I'll bring you a she-goat tomorrow morning to add to this."

"But sir—" the man protested, "it has been an expense to bring the bird all this way, not to mention the exorbitant purchase price."

"Probably stole it," Jabel grumbled.

The seller flushed crimson. "Absolutely not, I—"

Noah shrugged and knelt on one knee to scratch behind Dawn's ears. "This is my final offer then. You can lug that cage and ill tempered bird around to other villages."

"Yes," Jabel drawled. "The people here, you will find, don't have resources to spend on a fancy bird that wouldn't make a meal in a pot."

The seller looked horrified, as did I. "Surely," he blurted, "you wouldn't consider cooking such a rare creature?"

"Wouldn't waste a stone on a white anything, if you asked me." Jabel gave Noah a wink that the seller couldn't see, but that made me lock my mouth. "Bad luck, such an animal."

"True," Noah said, rising to his feet and turning to leave. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"No!" the seller cried, grabbing Noah's hand. "Sold. The bird's yours and the cage with it."

I blinked, recognizing the familiar scenario of negotiation, but worried about the bird's future. Surely, Noah and Jabel had been jesting about the pot. I took people's statements plainly, though I understood the concept of joking. I did not like jokes. They were like lies. I laughed

when Savta tickled me or when I ran across the fields, because it was a joy to run or jump from a tree. I did not laugh when someone tripped another and he fell, as I had seen Tubal do to younger boys. I did not understand that kind of joke.

Chapter Three

Three days later, after a dinner of goat stew and dates, we heard a rap on our door. Father grumbled in irritation. “Probably Batan’s wife again wanting to borrow salt. Tell her to buy her own.”

Savta was mending a linen tunic and indicated with a wave that I was to go to the door. I pulled it open, my mouth gaping at the sight of Noah filling the passageway. A fine wool blanket dyed in yellows covered his broad shoulders and a bulge at his side.

“A warm night to you,” he said politely.

I could not find the words to respond and settled for a nod, moving aside to allow him entry. He stepped in with a puff of cool, spring air that still bore the stench of smoke from the burned field stubble. That smell always meant several days of hard work in the fields, so a crop could be planted and take root before winds or rain stole away the rich soil and ash. It meant days away from my hills, and so the smell always made me downcast.

I stared at Noah stupidly before remembering that I held the door skins in my hand and dropped them.

My father rose at once. Savta started to put aside her yarn, but Noah put out a hand. “No, keep your seat. Don’t let my presence disturb your work.”

“Have you eaten?” she asked. “We have a full pot of stew.”

This was not true, but it did not confuse me, because I knew Savta was being courteous in implying we had plenty of food, so our guest would feel free to eat.

“My thanks, but my belly is full,” he said.

Her shoulders relaxed. “Very well, but at least something to drink? Barley beer?”

He nodded curtly. "That would be welcome." He moved from one large foot to another, as if not sure what to do with them. I noticed he smelled better.

"Na'amah," Savta said, startling me out of my trance.

I brought it to him in our best mug, the only one without chips. Savta made fine beer. "Good," he pronounced with a smack of tongue that put a satisfied smile on Savta's weathered face. The slight droop at one end of her mouth made her rare smiles a slanted line.

It was only after awkward talk of boat making and the status of game that Noah finally made his way to the topic he had come to discuss—me.

"Lamach, of the tribe of First Man," he said formally, looking only at my father, "I wish to make a request for your daughter, Na'amah."

My heart sank to my knees. I knew I would marry at some point, but not yet! I did not wish to be trapped, subject to the whims of an old man, for Noah was at least twenty-five summers or more. As a married woman, I would have to give up my job as herder to care for a household. I loved the hills, loved how the sun nested in my hair; the wind whispered secrets in my ears; and the night sky dazzled me with its spread of stars. I knew every one of the stars, their place in the sky for that season and moon phase, just as I knew all the sheep in my herd, their favorite grazing partners, and whether they preferred the center of the herd or the edges. I could tell at once if one was missing or hurt or if the herd was frightened or merely restless. How could being wife to a man compare with such things?

My father regarded Noah with a keen eye. "I see," he said and his lower jaw tightened, which meant he was not pleased. "I am Hunter Clan," he added, establishing that he had a high status. Hunters, at least in his mind, were the

favorites of Father God.

"I am a wood shaper and a boat-maker," Noah said, placing his calloused hands palm up on his knees. In his mouth, these words did not seem a humble comparison to a hunter, but a quiet declaration of who he was. "My father," he continued, "was a direct descendent of First Man through his son, Seth. We are of the same tribe and my ancestry is honorable."

Father's jaw stubbornly protruded farther, a hopeful sign for me. I wondered if he took offense at Noah's claim of honorable ancestry, as father's side of the family was descended from Cain. Cain's name linked us all to shame when he killed his own brother, Abel. I did not know Noah, but his rough-featured face seemed open, and it would not gain him to anger my father.

"Also," Noah added, as if he might have realized his blunder, "I am well able to care for a woman and children," meaning he had sheep and goats. I knew which ewes were his on the north hills. They were healthy with good coats.

"Boat-making is honorable work," Savta said quietly, her fingers back to her sewing.

My heart leapt. Savta's interference would only solidify my father's stance.

Noah spoke again. "I live apart from the village so I can be near a supply of wood, but my house is sturdy and well made. I know she is young for marriage. I only seek betrothal and will provide a share of my wheat and barley for your family as though you were my own father and grandmother." Before Father could draw a breath to reply, Noah added, "And with this understanding—that I will wait three summers for her and, if at that time, you or she does not wish the marriage to consummate, I will withdraw." He sat back, as if he had recited a long-practiced speech and had

no more words left.

Father's jaw twitched. It was an excellent offer, one in which he could profit without risk. Even I was mollified, as he offered an escape after three summers. Still, I was edgy. I did not like change. I knew where everything was in our hut. I knew the paths from here to the river, the pastures and the forest, and the way to the Black Lake. I did not want to be married and live in another place with a stranger.

After a few moments thought, father said. "It is a fair offer."

"A generous offer," Savta said, pulling a thread tight and biting it off with her front teeth. She was proud that she still had several teeth, despite her age.

"Quiet, woman," Father instructed gruffly.

"Then I have your blessing?" Noah asked, his body tense as an elk that has scented a wolf...or, I amended, a mate. I knew men married women to have their children. Savta rubbing oil into my skin was one thing—she was careful to move slowly and allow me to adjust to her touch—but the thought of Noah scraping his huge, rough hands over my body made me shiver. The older girls' stories often included graphic details, and I had heard the virgin cries of newlywed women. Also, I had no desire for smelly babies to clean and wash who would pull at my nipples.

Father rose and spit into his hand. Noah did the same and they clasped hands in an oath bond. My belly twisted in anxiety.

"I brought my betrothed gifts," Noah said.

Father nodded and Noah turned, looking at me for the first time. "Please accept my gifts, Na'amah." Before I could tell him I did not want anything from him, he produced a bone knife in a deerskin casing. I took it without a word. Then he raised the blanket from the object at his side. I felt

like an idiot for not realizing what it must be, but I drew a quick breath. The white bird! It picked up one foot and scratched its head with a claw, one eye on me.

“Mother Goddess,” Savta breathed.

Father glared at her. He did not like mention of the Goddess in his house, as he was Hunter Clan and followed only Father God. Savta sniffed and concentrated on her next stitch. She said Father God was useless without the Goddess. What purpose was the bee without nectar? Man had honored the Goddess from the time he realized woman held the power of creation in their bellies. Besides, did not all the animals belong to her? This rejection of the Goddess by Hunter Clan was nonsense and the reason game was scarce. She said these things to me when Father was not around.

Father coughed. “A strange betrothal gift. Not much meat to it.”

“He’s not for the pot,” Noah said quickly. “He’s a companion.”

“How do you know the bird is a male?” I asked, my fears forgotten for the moment.

“His name is Bennu. The seller claims it is a name for a sky god in bird form. He wasn’t clear, but he said Bennu comes from a land far to the south and needs to be protected from cold weather.”

I crossed the room and squatted before the cage, not believing my fortune. Bennu was mine and not even Father could protest a betrothal gift.

“Does he make you happy, Na’amah?” Noah asked softly.

I glanced up at him, unable to alter my beaming smile, despite my fears. He seemed to drink my smile like a thirsty man drinks water. Then he said, “He likes to be up high, so I brought a little something I made.” He hesitated. “If I may?”

This time he directed his question at Savta, which was appropriate. Women had status over home matters.

Savta nodded, her eyes bright, as though, after such a long life full of knowing what the next day and even the next moment would bring, she welcomed surprises.

Noah left and returned with a wooden structure as tall as my chest though half as wide. It had two sections with doors. Fitted tightly through a hole in its top was a forked branch. Noah had obviously made this for Bennu. He opened the bird's cage door and presented his second and third fingers pressed together as a perch. I watched carefully.

Bennu tilted his head and studied the fingers for a moment before wrapping one talon around them, followed by the other. Noah pressed his thumb against them as he drew his hand through the cage door. Bennu fluttered his wings, but did not try to fly, perhaps realizing his talons were anchored.

Gently, Noah presented him to the branch, releasing his thumb. Bennu bent forward and touched the smoothed wood with his beak. Satisfied, he stepped onto it, turned himself around to face us, fluffed his feathers, and dropped a little turd.

Savta grunted. "It will be your task, Na'amah to keep it clean. One of those in my soup and that thing is out of this house, betrothal or no."

"Yes, Savta," I breathed, afraid now that Father would speak up and negate the whole arrangement.

At that moment, my brother, Tubal, entered, reeking of stale beer. "What's this?" he cried, eying Bennu.

"He is mine," I said, moving between him and Bennu.

Tubal raised a hand to strike me for my insolence, but the hand froze in mid-air as Noah stepped into his view. Noah was a large man. He moved with calm deliberateness

between Tubal and me. "I'll not have my betrothed struck by any man save her father." This was right according to Hunter Clan law, not because Lamech was my father, but because he was head of my clan and house. By Hunter Clan law, he would always own my allegiance, even if I married. Savta said it was not like that in some of the other tribes who gave the most honor to Mother Goddess. Then the husband came to the wife's tribe and followed their ways. I wished we were of those tribes.

Tubal's cheek twitched in surprise and agitation, and he blinked reddened eyes. He had the same dark hair and eyes as I, but a sour disposition. "Betrothed?" he said.

"Yes," Noah replied. "By oath agreement."

After a stunned moment, Tubal laughed loudly, but his hand dropped. "You're a fool, boat-maker. Her face has turned your head backwards. Don't you know she's an injured little runt? We should have put her outside when she was born." He swayed a bit.

My toes curled in anxiety. Would Noah snatch away his gift at this news?

Noah looked at my father, who tried to meet his eyes, but found something of interest in the deerskin warming his feet.

"Have you something to say, hunter?" Noah asked. Tension had returned to his shoulders.

My father cleared his throat. "I thought you knew of her deformity," he said. "Or I would never have agreed."

"What deformity is that?" Noah asked calmly.

"She's different, is all. Says strange things sometimes."

"Ha!" Tubal interrupted. "Different? Yes, my friend, she is different, indeed. Her mind is injured, squeezed at birth. She came out looking like a smashed gourd."

Noah frowned. "Her head looks fine to me. Is she

crazed? I've seen no sign of that either."

"She's not crazed," Savta snapped. "Just different, as my son-in-law says. She will make a fine wife."

She did not mention my clumsiness with spinning or cooking, probably intending to increase her efforts to teach me. I sighed quietly.

Noah turned to me. I held my breath, knowing I should keep my eyes down under his scrutiny, but I could not keep them from darting to Bennu, who sat on his branch and regarded us all in silence.

"I will keep your counsel, Tubal-Cain," Noah said finally, "yet I stand by my oath, which has been given." Bitterness stained his voice. He plainly regretted his hasty bargain. I should have been happy as I watched him leave. I had my white bird, and Noah no longer wanted me, but for some reason, tears leapt to my eyes, though I refused to shed them before Tubal.

Chapter Four

I did not see Noah again for half a moon-cycle. Bennu was the sweetest of creatures. Each morning I cleaned his stand and fed him a nut or greenery from the garden or even a piece of fish. To my delight, he shelled the nuts himself and ate anything I ate, except he did not like garlic. He sat on my shoulder when I spun wool into thread, trying to copy Savta's even work. It took a while before he learned not to try to climb the distaff that held the skein. Sometimes he got bored and would work his way beneath my hair, scratching my neck with his claws or reach into my ears and clean the fine, almost invisible hairs. If he were really out of sorts, he would try to climb on top of my head, which I discouraged because it hurt, and I was afraid he would drop a turd on me to let me know it was time to go out and see the world.

At first, I tied a braided piece of yarn to his foot, afraid he would fly away, but he did not try, he only flapped them for exercise. I suppose he knew he would crash or perhaps his previous owner had trained him. He liked treats and I could not get away with eating anything without sharing a piece with him. Sometimes I hid a berry or a nut under a pile of leaves or a stone. He got very clever at uncovering the treat.

After a hand of days, I removed the yarn and took him with me to the hills. Wildflowers covered the fields like colored dyes swirled together. The sheep, who were more sensitive than the goats, acted silly for a few moments at the sight of Bennu on my shoulder, then settled down. I moved carefully under his weight, because my shoulders were full of sores where his talons had drawn blood, gripping me for balance.

The other children wanted to pet him and hold him,

which I would not allow, afraid they would frighten him. They were unpredictable.

The days were touched with a spring nip and the new grass was thick, so the herds moved slowly, giving me and the dogs little to do. My position was to the east of the herd, where I could catch any wanderers, but more importantly, keep an eye on the forest for predators. The dogs were usually the first to give sign of something wrong, so when Brown Dog froze, alerting toward the trees, I sat up. Sometimes it was nothing more than a fox or rabbit, but this time a large object moved in the trees' shadow.

At first, I thought it might be one of the adult shepherds who traveled from herd to herd to make decisions, such as which rams to mark for breeding. I glanced again at Brown Dog. He would know the shepherds, and he continued to alert to the creature. Too big for a fox or wolf, I first feared a leopard, then as I got a better look, a bear. To my surprise, Bennu shifted on my shoulder and gave a cry that sounded almost like a word. I gave him a quick glance, not believing I had heard right, but Grey Dog joined Brown Dog in a defensive posture, so I stood and loosened my sling.

I was not as good with the weapon as Yanner, who could hit a moving beast with uncanny accuracy, but I had earned my right to guard the herd's east flank. Even I could hit a bear. The question was, would it be enough to dissuade a full-grown bear from its intended prey? Bears were also unpredictable.

Though the beast was still too distant to see clearly, appearing about the size of the little reed boats that floated along the river, I placed a stone in my sling and began a slow swing over my head, hoping the movement would frighten it. Instead, it moved closer. Bennu stayed on my shoulder, as I had taught him. If he took wing while I whirled the sling, he

would most likely die. With my free hand, I snatched the ram's horn from its place on my hip. As I took a deep breath to blow for help, the creature stepped from the forest shadows, and I saw it was not a bear, but a large man.

Noah.

It must be. No one else in the village was that size. I cast the stone at a sharp angle into the ground nearby. It hit with a *thud*.

Noah climbed the hillside as though he were a bear, sometimes dropping to his hands to clamber up a steeper grade.

When he reached me, sweat flattened the wiry hair over his forehead and he breathed a little deeply, but not heavily like a man unaccustomed to work. For the first time, I wondered what a boat-maker did, how he shaped the wood to his design, what kind of strength or skill was required. I realized I knew nothing of this man who was still, in a formal sense, my betrothed. Not that he would want anything to do with me now that he knew of my deformity. That he had not known it was curious, but probably due to his isolation from the village.

"Greetings," Noah said between breaths.

I flinched at the loudness of his voice. That was another thing I love about my hills—the quiet.

"Greetings." I returned. "Have you come for a ram or a goat? The goats are further up." I pointed over my left shoulder to the rocky crags above us.

He said nothing for a breath, then laughed. "Neither."

"Then what?" I asked.

"To speak to you." His words had the texture of wood in my mind, wood stripped of bark. In one way, they were simple, but in another, they had worn grooves and whirls.

I stared at him, despite the discomfort it brought me.

He stared back. I dropped my gaze. "Do you want Bennu back?" My stomach twisted with the question. Bennu was more than a pet bird. He looked at me with his opaque eyes as if he saw me, right down to the heart of me. It was my right to keep him. He was a bride gift, even if the husband no longer wanted the bride.

Noah towered over me like a bear over a fawn. A child and a man alone on a hill. If he wanted Bennu, there was nothing I could do to stop him. I decided I would fight for him anyway. Perhaps I could bite Noah's hand when it reached for Bennu and run. Bennu would fly away and follow me.

To my surprise, Noah settled with a grunt on the ground beside me. "My legs are no longer like the memory of my legs," he said.

I scrunched my forehead, hearing his words, but not understanding them.

He saw my expression and smiled. "In my mind, I am young. I once raced up these hills as I imagine you do, laughing and catching my breath for only a moment and then running again. I forgot how steep they are."

"Did you watch the herds then?"

"Oh yes, until I was thirteen summers. My uncle also taught me to work with wood. My father was a fisherman, so when his boat sank, my uncle and I made one. It's been my trade ever since."

"I know how to spin and bake bread," I said and then blushed, lest he think I was trying to win him back. I did not want to be married, I reminded myself, and amended, "But not well."

He plucked a blade of grass and twisted it in rough fingers. His hand alone could encircle half my waist. I looked away, focusing on the herd below me.

"Bennu looks good," Noah said. "His feathers have put on a shine since you've had him. How does it go with him?"

I moved my head subtly closer to my right shoulder, seeking the softness of Bennu's feathers on my cheek, the warmth of his body. Sometimes, when I did this, he would peck in mock anger at me, but now he snuggled closer, sensing my need for his touch. Despite the sores on my shoulder, I would miss the weight of him there, his gentle caresses, his knowing eyes.

"I am pleased for you to keep him," Noah said, "no matter what happens between you and me."

I looked sharply at him, unable to keep from blinking my surprise. The blink released a tear. He intercepted it with a calloused finger as it slid down my face, but said nothing for a long while.

Finally, I managed, "Thank you."

We both watched the herd in silence for a while. Crows cawed to each other, staking their territory. Wind bowed grass and autumn flowers. A dog moved from his position down the hill, giving a shake. I did not look directly at Noah, but I saw a lot from the corners of my eyes. He smiled, his gaze still on the grazing animals. "My first wife liked to talk. She hated the fact that the air was empty, and she kept it filled with words."

"She is dead?"

"Yes, she died in childbirth."

Like my mother, I thought.

"The child was stillborn," he added. "It was our first, a boy. My son."

I heard the old sorrow that roughened his voice like a lightning wound charred deep into a tree.

"I lived," I said.

He looked at me then, and I understood the question in

his eyes, wondering how I escaped being put outside the village at birth for the gods' judgment. "Father God looked kindly on you," he said quietly.

"I do not believe in the gods." In the stunned silence, I heard the muffled thud of my heart and saw myself naked in the mud of the pit, banished from the world. What had made me utter such a foolish thing? Even though it was truth, I knew better. If someone asked me if I believed in the gods, I would say "Yes," even though it was a lie. I understood that rule well enough.

Noah did not jump up and throw me over his shoulder to present me to the Elders. He said nothing for several heartbeats, then in a reasonable voice, he asked, "How can you not believe in the gods?" He looked up at the clear sky and then down over the valley below us. "Isn't the wind the breath of Father God and the sun his eye? Isn't the fruit's seed Mother Goddess's promise of life?"

I looked toward the Black Lake shimmering in the sunlight. There was no point in pretending I had not said what I had clearly said. "I do not know where the wind comes from, but when I was young I did not know the origin of my nurse-mother's milk either. It was a magic that appeared when I was hungry and cried, but when I grew older I understood it came from her breast."

"You think we are as children to the world?"

I noticed Noah seemed more comfortable talking alone to me than he had in the crowd at the market or in my father's house. He had adjusted his voice to a quieter tone, although I had not said anything to him about it.

I nodded. "Not understanding something does not mean there is no reason for it. I want to know why everything is, but I do not want to make up the reason just so I can have an answer."

He stared at me again for a long time. "I don't know if I have heard great wisdom or great foolishness."

My toes curled in embarrassment. Not only had I spoken like a teacher to an older person, but a man. No wonder my brother hated me, my father ignored me, and Savta sighed so much.

"I know this," Noah said thoughtfully, without a trace of anger or condemnation in his voice. "Your mind is not damaged that I can see, only different, as your Savta claimed."

I felt such a mixture of things, I was not able to speak—relief that he was not angry and I might escape the pit; fear that he might decide to keep me as his betrothed; fear that he might not. Whenever things got too confusing, I rocked and sang, so I did that. Savta said the Goddess graced my voice in compensation for my other faults. I hugged my knees to my chest, closed my eyes and sang softly, rocking my upper body in rhythm with the tune, a shepherd's song of stars and the stir of sheep in moonlight.

Opening my eyes, I was surprised that Noah still sat beside me, forgetting he was there in my concentration on the song and rocking. I felt better, but he looked bewildered. I tried to explain why it helped me to shut out the world. He nodded slowly, like a man who stood on a bog that might sink beneath him at any moment.

"Why did you buy Benu?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't like to see animals mistreated. His cage was too small."

"Why did you ask to marry me?"

He plucked a piece of grass and placed it in the corner of his mouth. "Because you said I stank."

I waited for a more satisfactory answer.

After a moment he said, "Though my wife filled the air

with words, they were not all true words.” I sensed this was all the explanation he wanted to give.

He sat with me until the moon rose as Mother Goddess. With the brightest of her star-children as companions, she poured blue-gray light onto the hills, just enough to see the white underbellies of the sheep.

Noah left before my relief arrived. Though I was still a child, and he my betrothed, he thought it not seemly to be found alone with me. “I don’t want your father to think I violated my agreement to wait for you.”

For a long time after he left, I sang and rocked, though I kept my eyes open. It was my responsibility to watch the herd.

Chapter Five

Noah came to the hillside many times after that. Mostly he sat with me when I was alone, but sometimes he came on the night watch when Yanner was with me. We did not talk much then, because Yanner assumed an adult man would prefer to speak with a boy rather than a girl, at least that's what he told me. He did not think much of Noah.

The rains began in late autumn. No one could remember a time when it rained so long and so hard. Day after day. People whispered that Father God was angry, but every story had a different cause for his anger. Our thatched roof collapsed in several places, and I worked all day emptying pots of water, while my father and brother tried to mend it. My head began to ache and I could not stop shivering.

Noah came to help. He was too heavy for the roof, so he took the clay jugs from my arms, guided me to a relatively dry spot, and made me rest. I watched him through the haze that clouded my eyes—back and forth. Savta tried to save our best wool cloth from the water's ravages and the flax strands we had tediously teased out of the stalks, bundling them up in rolls.

When the chills made my teeth spasm and brought blood to my lips, she unrolled two blankets, dumping out their contents, and wrapped me in them. My elbows and knees ached. My skin burned on the outside, but inside I was so cold, it felt like my bones rattled against each other. I faded out of the world and dreamed Noah knelt beside me. I was glad he did not stink anymore. He had told me he bathed every night now. He bent closer and took the malachite from his neck, tying the cord around my neck, so the healing stone

would lie against my hot skin.

Then I dreamed the river rose and rose and crept toward us. I dreamed the Black Lake became briny, killing the fish. It swelled and crept toward us, until it lifted our mud and straw house like flotsam, spinning us around and around.

I woke to find myself on the floor in a pool of water.

"Mother Goddess!" Savta cried, throwing her best weaving aside to rush to me, but Noah was already there, scooping me into his brawny arms.

"The river!" I heard my brother cry from the roof. "It's coming!"

"Hurry!" Noah shouted. "We have to get out!"

"I can't leave," Savta cried in anguish. "My weavings, my cloth, my pots—"

"High ground," my father said. "We must get to the hills."

"No time for that!" Noah turned to the door. "The river banks are overflowed, and the ground is too soaked to absorb any more."

Almost too weary to care what happened, I opened my eyes. Water slopped into the house, rising quickly to Noah's knees. Bennu gave a shriek that jerked me from my fog of misery. "Bennu," I croaked. "We have to take him."

"Leave the stupid bird," Tubal snapped. "Maybe he'll figure out how to fly."

"He still cannot fly for long," I protested through cracked and bleeding lips.

Noah waded to Bennu's perch and coaxed him to his shoulder, holding me with one brawny arm. The water was now to his knees and Savta's thighs. Tubal was out the door, carrying whatever goods he deemed of value. Father grabbed Savta and pulled her through the skins that covered our

doorway.

Outside, the water pulsed against our house. Wind worked it into wrinkles and then waves. Rain pelted us with the force of tiny stones. Bennu hunched miserably as close to Noah's neck as possible.

Tubal scowled at Noah, who held me against his chest. "Is that the best you could carry out? Better to leave her for the fish and save something of worth."

His words meant nothing to me. I was like the ground, too full of them to absorb any more, but my ear was to Noah's chest and a low growl rumbled there.

"The hills!" Father cried above the wind and rumble of thunder.

"No." Noah shook his head. "You'll never make it through the valley."

"We'll make it," Father said grimly. "We have to."

Noah let go of me with one hand and grasped Savta's thin arm. "The women won't. They come with me." There was no question in his voice, despite the fact that he had no authority over us, other than the oldest authority of all—strength of arm.

Tubal shrugged and turned toward the valley, but Father scowled at Noah. "Where are you going?"

"To the boats," Noah said.

Father placed a hand on Savta's shoulder. "Take my daughter then, but my mother-in-law comes with me."

Of course, who would cook or clean for him? He would have to take another wife, and he was too stingy to give a bride price.

Savta straightened her back and scowled. "With Na'amah ill? Who'll care for her?" She shrugged off his hand. "I go with my daughter's child."

Anger flared in my father's face, but Tubal called to

him. "Let them go! We must hurry."

I knew little of our flight through the village; only glimpses remain in my mind, like torn bits of a nightmare. I remember Savta pushing a floating tree branch from us, Bennu squawking, familiar faces twisting in panic, and Noah yelling, "To the boats!"

Animals swam by. I thought I saw Dawn paddling bravely and reached for her, but the water bore her away. More dogs swept by and boar-pigs, even wild creatures—a fox and a deer, eyes whitened with fear. People cried and begged for help. I was too weak even to cling to Noah. At first he held me to his chest then, when he needed an arm to ward off floating debris and pull Savta back when a current threatened to overwhelm her, he slung me over his shoulder. A tiny head bobbed by. I reached after it, but it was gone almost before I realized what I had seen. With a shudder, I vomited into the swirling water. My last thought was a vague relief that no one would have to clean it up.

I woke to a gentle rocking. My eyelids were stuck closed. I moaned. At once, something damp wiped across my face and when it lifted, I could see. Savta's lined face hovered over me, framed in a sky so blue it made me blink. My eyes watered, blurring her features.

"Na'amah," she said and the world was in that word, all her care and loving, all her fears. "Thank you, Mother Goddess," she whispered.

"Thirsty," I managed.

She held a chipped bowl to my lips. The water slid like a cool blessing down my parched throat. Only then, did I smell the stink of tar pitch and realize I was on a boat. A squawk made me look up. Bennu perched on one of the thick ropes that bound the reed bottom. Four other people were on

the gently rocking raft—Aunt Adah, the stone knapper and his wife, and Noah.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You’ve slept for three days and nights,” Savta said. “I thought we would lose you.” She leaned close to my ear. “Mother Goddess wrapped you in her arms and saved you for her special purpose.”

I considered the tightly bound reeds sealed with pitch that separated us from the water beneath us and thought it more likely that Noah’s strength and skill in boat making saved us both. “Father?” I asked.

Her face pinched. “We don’t know who made it to the hills yet. Many perished. The village is devastated.”

I hoped Yanner had survived, but I did not ask. I was too weak to handle it if he had not. “I am hungry.”

She worked a small piece of lintel bread from her apron. “I saved this. There was little food. No one thought to bring water, so we drank from the Black Lake and many sickened.”

I did not want to think about that and pushed aside the vision of bodies being heaved over the boat’s edge. I chewed the bread, despite its moldy taste and struggled to sit up. Bennu made a clucking noise and bent down, grooming a strand of my lank hair. Beyond him, I saw only water and several other boats rocking in the wide water’s embrace. The river must have pushed all the boats downstream into the Black Lake.

Noah made his way to my side. Weariness stained the skin around his eyes, but they were still clear and blue as the sky. He nodded at me, approving that I lived.

An odd weight pressed on my neck and I lifted it, recognizing Noah’s malachite stone. I had not dreamed that part, then.

I must have looked like a piece of flotsam. My hair hung in dirty strands and my face felt like a dried leaf, but I said, "Do you still want me for wife?"

His brows drew together in puzzlement. "Yes."

It was father's place to set a bride price, but he was not there, and I knew what I wanted. "Then you must build me a house," I said. "A house that can float."

I remembered his laugh. As I leaned back, strength draining from my body like grain through a sieve, my heart lightened at that uncontained, azure sound that was wide as the sky, embracing and challenging the fearsome world.

Chapter Six

I did not like changes. I noticed everything, and when things were out of place, it confused me. But there was so much to do, I had no time to rock and hum to myself, so whenever I could, I shut my eyes and pretended that was what I was doing, instead of hauling water or debris, or gathering the scattered sheep. The goats had stayed together, but the stupid sheep scattered over the hillsides and took many days to find. Our best shepherd dogs survived, having stayed with their charges in the hills, but many hunting and companion dogs living in the village had perished, including old Dawn.

Noah did not forget his promise to me, but he had little time to work on the boat-house, as my brother disdainfully called it. I thought it was an accurate name and used it, which irritated him. Tubal was now head-of-house since my father died trying to cross the flooded valley. The water had spun a piece of timber across Lamech's head, and Tubal could not reach him before the current took him under. I did not grieve much. My father had never given me much attention, but I was sorry Tubal was head-of-house.

It took several moon-cycles to clean what remained of the village. So many of our family and people I knew had not survived, including my nurse-mother. Yanner lost his entire family and moved into a friend's house. Only Aunt Adah, and one of her sons, Jabel, were left of our family.

Much of the herd that survived the storm in the hills was slaughtered to feed us, even the ewes. All the crops and grain stores were ruined. Everyone grew accustomed to a gnawing belly.

Tubal insisted on rebuilding our hut over the old one. The water had melted away the walls and left only a few

branches that had supported the mud-clay walls. I liked the thought of living in the same place, but I knew it was as stupid as the sheep that had gotten lost in the storms. What if it rained like that again? I told Savta we should build on a hill or move into Noah's boat-house. Everyone in the village laughed at the idea of such a thing. Tubal had spread it about to ridicule him, but Noah ignored them.

"Go ahead and tell your brother to build on a hill," Savta grumbled, her fingers busy mending Tubal's tunic.

Of course, I did not. Tubal would have only struck me for my trouble and disrespect.

In the moon-cycles following the flood, the Hunters grew stronger in influence because there was no grain, and we depended on their skills. It was a difficult winter. Tubal rose in prominence, becoming the leader of the young men of Hunter Clan. This was a fine thing, for it kept him busy, and I did not have to wait on him the way he demanded when he was home. We also had plenty of meat, because the young huntsmen gave a cut of whatever they killed to our house. Tubal was supposed to distribute what we did not need to the widows and orphans, but I think most of it went to his own friends. I wished he would take a wife, but he seemed content for me and Savta to do all the work.

Hunters may work hard when they were hunting, but when they came home, they sat around like hibernating bears and just ate, drank and slept.

It was a very cold night when Savta woke me. "Get up, Na'amah. I need you."

I tried to snuggle deeper into my furs and murmured something about the water being too deep to go outside, confusing the waking world with a vague dream that dissolved before I could return to it.

“Up,” Savta ordered, her words sharp icicles.

This time, reality asserted itself and I sat up, alert now, and worried. “What is it? What is wrong?”

“A birthing. I need you.”

My eyes widened. Savta never took me to birthings. I was too clumsy and not much help to her, though I was fine with helping sheep or goats give birth. “Where is Adah?” I asked, as I tied the lacings of my foot coverings. My aunt always helped Savta.

“She’s gone to visit her cousins. Hurry. Things are not going well.”

I hurried, but I was not happy. What if the baby was born with a misshapen head, as I was, or a missing limb? Would I be the one instructed to take it out in the woods and leave it? This worried me.

Savta did not have time for my concerns. I carried the things she needed in her basket and stumbled behind her, still groggy. We crossed the center square, careful to avoid the pit. Father God’s oil pot burned brightly, the small flame twisting upward, protected from the worst of the wind by the surrounding walls of the workshops and houses. It provided enough light to see our way, as clouds hazed the moon. Our destination was a house on the far side of the square.

It did not take us long to find the right place. Inside, a girl not much older than I, writhed on the floor. The women around her parted at once to let Savta go to her. My grandmother knelt, feeling the girl’s tight, swollen belly, giving her a kind word, and then parting her legs. I stood in the same spot, like a stone embedded in the ground.

I could not see anything for the press of women around the girl, but I heard everything, including her pants and groans of pain that battered me like panicked crows.

“How long has she been like this?” Savta asked.

The older woman to her right rocked back on her heels and dabbed her forehead with a woolen shawl. Her lips were a tight slash across her face, her cheeks pinched in the firelight. "Since the moon rose. We thought it would be an easy birth with no need of you. I've seen many children into the world. Never been a problem with the baby's head already visible, but every time I try to put her on the birthing stones, she screams to wake every ancestor's spirit that walked the land."

"Pain is normal," Savta said. "But being on the stones should be easier on her at this stage than lying down."

The fire, well fed by wood, put out enough heat to pop sweat from my forehead and palms, despite the cold outside. I did not know what to do.

"Na'amah," Savta's sharp voice startled me from my trance. "Come here with my basket."

I moved beside her.

"Bear grease," she snapped.

I reached for the pot and held it while she slathered it on her hands and then carefully worked her way inside the girl I now recognized as Coel. Like all the other girls, she never had much to do with me. I had volunteered to take her herding duty on the day of her wedding.

Coel winced and panted like a dog, while Savta explored the baby's head and then reached deeper. Finally, with a grunt she sat back, scowling.

"What is it?" the woman who had spoken first asked. "What's wrong?"

"The birth cord is wrapped around the baby's neck," Savta said. "If it is born, it will die. If it is not born, the mother will die."

Silence filled the house. I did not need to hear words to know what everyone there was thinking: There had been

enough death.

“Is there nothing that can be done?” Coel’s mother sobbed. She held the girl’s head in her lap. “My poor child!”

Savta sighed, then straightened her back and held her hand out to me. “Na’amah, the knife.”

I will hear Coel’s screams for the rest of my life.

Savta’s skill saved the baby, in spite of her prediction, but Coel began to bleed and there was nothing to do to stop it. By dawn, she was dead.

Had I caused my mother such pain? I shivered in the room’s heat and did not stop, even when we returned home, and I crawled back under my furs. Savta did not chastise me or make me rise to do my chores. She gave me a hot broth that finally stilled my shivers and eased me into a dreamless sleep.

Savta never took me with her to a birthing again.

Chapter Seven

When the next spring came in its fullness, I was relieved that it did not rain more than normal. Elder Batan and Elder Kahor pacified Father God with the sacrifice of a first born lamb. Elder Mariah placed the round moon cakes on Mother Goddess' altar. Savta's perfect cakes were likely among them. All the chosen women now gathered in the village center, bringing the special length of thick wool thread each had spun and dyed. Savta chose red, a favorite of the Goddess. I would not be allowed to participate until my blood came, so I stood with others along the walls to watch. The women had moved all of the blankets and market things to make room.

The women faced each other, making a square within the square of the village center. Elder Mariah's voice rose into the silence that settled like soft snow around her. She faced the small Goddess in the temple's alcove. "Today, we honor the Goddess for the fruit of her womb, for the life that comes forth in this season to bring us the harvest in another. We recognize her," she intoned, pointing to the four sacred corners of the square, "as Mother, Virgin, Lover, and Blood-seeker."

As always, I wondered how the Goddess could be all these things at the same time. How could a carving, even in the shape of a woman, be anything more than a piece of stone? It never spoke or moved. How could it be so powerful? I did not understand, but I loved watching the woman weave the tapestry, and I gladly ate the moon cakes Savta made that were not perfect enough to qualify for an offering.

Flute music began, a sweet soaring that danced like

blue and green ribbons before my mind's eye. The women on two sides of the square walked toward each other. When they met, they each grasped an end of the other's thread and then backed into their original places. This left them holding two threads, one in each hand. When the flute reached a certain phrase, the woman lifted their arms over their heads. Those on the opposite sides of the living square tied off the ends of their own threads to the waft edges and moved under the canopy, weaving them between the ones held tautly above.

"This is stupid and boring," Yanner declared under his breath.

I glared at him and spoke my first sarcasm. "I am sure it is much more meaningful to roll around in the blood of an animal."

He looked stunned. "That is a secret Hunter rite. How do you know of it?"

With a sniff, I turned back to the ceremony. "Everybody knows that."

"Well, you're not supposed to," Yanner grumbled. "Come on, let's sneak away and play sticks."

"No."

"Yes, come on, Na'amah. I'll let you have first drop."

"I want to watch the weaving."

"Na'amah—"

"No."

"You are so stubborn. You're more stubborn than Gadem's ox."

This was a definite insult, as Gadem's ox was famous for its defiance. Sometimes it gave him as much trouble as a wild auroch. I punched Yanner on the shoulder with my knuckle, as he had taught me.

"Oww," he protested, but stopped nagging me.

The ceremony continued and, as always, I lost myself in the weaving, absorbed in the details of the yarns' journey that spoke of spider's web and bird's nest and the lacing of branches.

Finally, the women tied off the ends of their threads and the music stopped. The weaving they had created was a beautiful work of many colors.

Normally, there would be a ceremony of removing and burning the old one, but the flood had taken last spring's weaving, so the women simply hung the new tapestry. The bold design hanging in its proper place on the west wall of the square made things feel right again. Mother Goddess would bless our grain fields and the women's bellies with children. At least, so I was taught. I still had not the first glimpse of her. Perhaps the little fat stone goddess in the temple wall alcove was only a receptacle for the Goddess, like the moon and stars. I could understand that some force brought the seasons, but that force did not appear to care what we did. I could not discern any actions on our part that caused the clouds to choose a perfect rain for crops instead of a flood. I held my doubts to myself, and Noah had not breathed a word of my blasphemy.

One morning of summer's second moon in my fourteenth summer, I awoke and helped Savta prepare food. After we ate, Tubal went to hunt. When he left, Savta said, "Na'amah, I need you to grind barley today. I'm going to visit Adah."

Happy to have time alone, I first went to bathe, using a place where the river flowed into a side pool. Since the flood, I avoided water that churned or moved fast, but a daily bath was my habit.

I dried with lamb's wool and returned to the house,

running my fingers through my wet hair to smooth out the tangles. Settling cross-legged on the floor, I opened a jar of barley and dipped some out into a quern. Bennu waddled over to see what I was doing. He tried to climb onto the edge of the quern, but I shooed him away before his weight could spill the grain.

“Hello?”

I started at Yanner's voice. Normally, I would have heard his tread, but Bennu had distracted me. I turned to see him in the opening to our house, pulling aside the skins. The set of his shoulders meant he was unhappy about something.

“Enter,” I said. “No one here but me.”

“I thought I'd get to go on the hunt today,” He squatted by the fire pit, picked up a kindling stick and snapped it in two.

Now I understood what was bothering him.

“I heard a hive,” I said, sharing the news I had been saving. This captured his interest. Honey was a prized find, both for medicine and sweetening food and beer.

“Where?” A thread of excitement weaved into his voice. Finding honey was almost like hunting.

“I do not know exactly yet, but I heard them a moon-cycle ago in the glen by my mother's grave.” Our tribe did not bury the dead under the houses like they did in other villages. Perhaps because our ancestors came from a different land, far to the south in Eden, and we brought different customs.

The glen was a place I liked to go, the rare times that were my own. Those opportunities had become even rarer after the flood. I did more than my turn watching the herds, but I did not mind that at all. I lifted Bennu, who had snuck back and put a claw on the saddle quern, spilling the grain. “Bennu!” He was completely unaffected by my scolding,

pecking at the grain. I put him on my shoulder and carefully recovered all the partly-ground meal I could. Without fear of Savta's disapproval, I put the quern aside, knowing the procurement of a pot of honey would more than compensate for less barley meal ground that day.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Yanner's beautiful face was alight. I cast my eyes down, uncomfortable with looking at him, but smiling at the memory of my glimpse. I could look at the memory, because it was frozen, and I did not feel anxious trying to understand all the different movements that danced across his face.

If I swallowed my discomfort and watched faces, I would get stuck. Other things did that. Sometimes, especially if I were tired, the visual aspects of sound crowded into my mind, and I could become lost watching them. Branches swaying in a crosswind or a waterfall could do the same thing. It was hard to get unstuck and stop staring.

"Na'amah," he said impatiently. "I said, why didn't you tell me about the bees?"

I pulled my attention back to him, but kept my eyes on his toes. He had knobby toe knuckles. "It was too soon. They needed time to settle and make honey."

"Are they ready now?"

"I think so."

"Good. I'll get the smoker."

I nodded. "Meet me in the clearing at my mother's grave."

He jogged off and I went to the spot, adding a brown rock with red flecks that I had found by the river to the pile that marked her bones. The protective red ochre, the blood of Earth, had long ago washed away from the other stones there and, though I had never seen the evil spirits that seek to steal the dead from their families, I was not certain enough that

they did not exist to leave my mother at risk. I made certain the stones were in the order I liked and then sat beside them, closing my eyes to listen.

At first, there were too many distracting sounds, but I put them aside one by one, searching for the subtle undertone of an active hive that wove in the air like Savta's fine stitching.

Yanner's footsteps alerted me, and I opened my eyes, putting my fist to my mouth to remind him not to speak and break my concentration. He bore everything we would need.

I stood and closed my eyes again. This was a matter of trusting my instincts more than my mind. I did not really think about where I was going, just let my feet take little steps, following the gold thread of sound. Yanner's job was to keep me from running into a ditch or a tree. Bennu, on my shoulder, never disturbed me during bee hunting. Yanner said he looked as intense as I did.

After a while, I realized I had steadily made choices that moved me south. The sound was not much louder, so I moved that way without the tedious circling. Then I stopped again to determine the volume. More intense. The gold in the thread was a deeper hue. Good. I smiled at Yanner.

"How do you do that?" he whispered.

"Hush."

I led him deeper into the trees, losing the sound several times and then finding it again. The start and end of hive tracking were the hardest parts, the first because it was so faint, the end because it was loud.

"I hear it now," Yanner said. "That way." He pointed over my shoulder.

I moved a few steps in the direction he indicated. "No." I redirected us. "This way."

With a sigh, he followed, and we found the hive in a

tree hollow.

I sank onto the ground, lying back on a patch of ferns, and Bennu exchanged his perch on my shoulder for a walk on my stomach. The intense concentration bee hunting required exhausted me, and I was glad to let Yanner do his part in starting the fire that would send smoke up into the hollow and lull the bees into a stupor. Then he would cut out a section of the comb, careful not to disturb the queen. Normally, people just stole the whole thing and crushed it to strain out the honey, but I would not let Yanner do that. It was not because bees were sacred to the Goddess; it was because the hive would recover in a moon-cycle or so, and we would mark our trail and come again for more treasure.

I was pleased with myself.

Bennu also seemed happy. He waddled up to my chest and regarded me with a tilted head, opening his mouth as though to speak his mind. Then, spotting something I could not see, he bent forward and nibbled thoughtfully at my eyebrow.

Chapter Eight

The following day, I was restless, though Yanner and I would have the night watch on the north hill, and I should have stayed home or found a place to sleep until then. Instead, I took Bennu and my sling to my practice spot beside the mounded earth and stones that covered my mother's body.

Each morning when I went to the river to bathe, I searched for stones. Round ones about half the size of my fist were best for the sling. Sometimes I found a special one, not necessarily round, but interesting in color, texture, or shape. I would save that one. There was one in my pouch now with silver sparkles in it. I added it to the collection of stones that marked my mother's burial mound. Did she know I did this, seeking a connection with her? The Elders say the ancestors speak with the wind's whisper, but I never heard a word from my mother, and I had very good hearing.

I removed the rest of my stones and laid them in a line on the ground to practice stooping and loading in case I ran out of stones in my pouch. Yanner taught me this way to practice.

Tubal mocked my prowess with the sling, as he mocked everything I did. He was right that I was awkward at new tasks, but I loved my work and a good shepherd must be proficient with a sling. The sheep depended on me. So I practiced whenever I could. Today was a good day; I hit my target, a large tree stump, almost every swing.

When I was tired, I lay on my back in a sunlit grass patch. Bennu perched in a nearby tree. I could see glimpses of his beautiful white tail and crest through the leaves of a beech that swayed in a gentle breeze. He would warn if any

threat approached. He saw as well as I could hear. No snake would slither close or bear wander near without warning, as long as he stood guard.

The same wind waved the yellow flowers that towered above me, their skins luminous with cupped sunlight. Scents of earth and onion grass drifted into my nostrils, and so many sounds—birds conversing, a clicking from Bennu, the rustle of grass, a dog barking in the distance, and there, beneath the other sound, the hum of the beehive Yanner and I had found. I drifted into its subtle vibration and the sweet, furred arms of sleep.

The harsh, throaty croak of a heron woke me to a sky deep into dusk. Hastily, I called a cranky Bennu to my shoulder and took him home before running out to the north hill.

Yanner and I had spent many seasons on that hill together when it was our turn to take a night watch. The hill afforded a clear view of the herds and the forest's edge. That was how we became friends. Since he now had completed the manhood rites, he would not normally have tended the herd like a child, but the flood had decimated us and everyone did several tasks, whatever the tribe needed.

Yanner resented it.

"You're late," he greeted me. He sat just outside the entrance of a small cave where he had already built up the fire. It was first watch's responsibility to feed the fire from the pile of dried dung gathered by the younger children. Yanner had hated that task, but I never minded. It was important work, not just to feed the fire, but because it kept the sheep from getting sick. In the past, I would have apologized for being late, but my belly hurt and I was in a foul mood. Perhaps I had eaten too many dates dipped in

goat's milk.

"I fell asleep," I said.

He sighed. "Sorry to snap at you. I'm tired."

I sat next to him. "Me too."

"I wish things would go back to the way they were."

He did not have to say he meant how things were before the waters washed everything away, including his brothers and younger sister. It was the first time I remember hearing something from another's mouth that echoed so closely my own feelings. I knew Yanner's mind was not damaged like mine, but I wondered if perhaps others sometimes felt the same as I did. The thought gave me comfort. Maybe I was not so different.

Yanner put his hand on my back. "It's been hard for everyone."

His tone was that of a kindly older brother, which annoyed me. His hand stayed on my back. "Where's that old bird?"

"Bennu gets cranky if I keep him awake, so I did not bring him."

"I don't think he likes me."

"He does not like many people," I said. "Only me and Savta and Noah."

Yanner scowled. "Why did your father allow you to be betrothed to such an old man?"

"He is not that old," I said, shifting to find a comfortable spot.

"Almost as old as your father."

"One-Eye is going to give birth tonight," I said, wanting to change the subject. One-Eye really had both her eyes, but a black mark partially circled one. I gave names to most of the sheep. Many of the other children could barely tell one from the other, which seemed stupid to me. They

were very different from each other, not only in appearance, but in habits. I could know by touch if they were nervous or calm. This trick did not work with people. People are more difficult to understand than sheep.

"How do you know she is going to birth tonight? How do you know such things?" Yanner asked, not questioning my pronouncement. I was rarely wrong.

"The way she holds her back legs and head," I said. "And she has an inward look in her eye. Her body is speaking to her."

Yanner's attention for One-Eye waned quickly. He took a piece of sharp obsidian from his pouch and stroked the smooth, shiny surface. "I've had to start shaving," he said, trying to sound casual, but I heard the note of pride in his voice. "Do you prefer men clean-shaven or with beards?"

"You are too young for a beard," I said. "I would not like it on you."

He smiled and began to play with my hair. "Your hair is smooth as water," he said.

I closed my eyes, lulled by the soft pull on my scalp. It was soothing, like when Bennu groomed my hair, but exciting at the same time. As an infant, the press of my nurse-mother's breast against my cheek evoked a deep calm, but at ten moons, I began avoiding touches. They made my skin prickle. I hid under the sheepskins and furs when Savta got out the oil, but now that I was almost a woman, I liked it. Touches did not feel prickly anymore, as long as they were not sudden.

When his hand found its way to the back of my neck, it sent chills down my spine and covered my legs with bumps like a plucked fowl. I flinched a bit and laughed. He smiled at me and pulled me closer. "For warmth," he said, and I did not disagree, even though the night was not that cool. The

press of his side against me made my heartbeat quicken. His hand stayed on my neck stroking gently. Something melted in my belly. I had never felt like this. I was liquid.

With a gasp, I pulled away from him and pulled my dress from my thighs. His green eyes widened. "What are you doing, Na'amah?"

There was no mistaking the stain on my leg, even in the dimming light. "My blood," I said, stunned that my womanhood was upon me.

He drew away. "Oh." Confusion or distaste furrowed his brows. "It's bad fortune for a Hunter to touch—" He stopped, rising to his feet awkwardly. "Should I tell your Savta?"

I felt light-headed. My womanhood. I was only fifteen summers, too young. Most were sixteen or even seventeen before their first blood. I would never be a girl again. Change swirled around me like a storm's breath.

Gradually, his words sunk into my awareness. No, I most certainly did not want Yanner announcing my first blood to Savta or anyone else. I stared at him. He had backed away a step, as if readying to flee. "If you tell anyone," I said, "I will wipe your face with my woman's blood while you nap on the hillside."

With satisfaction, I saw he paled. Then he straightened his shoulders. "It's woman's business, anyway. Who cares?" He left me then, even though he should not have. At least a pair should watch together during the night. I wondered if I should find an adult to tell, but I could not abandon One-Eye.

I rose slowly, almost doubled over with a sudden stab of pain in my belly. What was so eagerly awaited about this? While I waited for the pain to stop, I ground my teeth in annoyance. My leg was sticky with blood.

I hated being dirty. Savta fussed about my use of water

for washing that we needed for cooking or drinking. "Go swim in that pond off the river you're so fond of," she would direct, and so I did, even in winter, taking sheepskins to wrap in and running back to the house to keep warm.

Here there was only a spring on the other side of the hill. I waddled in that direction, trying to keep my legs wide and my dress away from getting further stained. Without doubt, I looked like a drunk or a bear cub balancing on two legs, and I was glad Yanner had abandoned me.

My path took me through the herd, and I stopped to pluck fluffs of undercoat stuck to the grass and bushes until I had several handfuls. At the stream, I cleaned myself, pulled and awkwardly twisted a couple of strings from the wool. They were thick and uneven and would have earned me an exasperated look from Savta, but they were strong. I moistened the remainder of the wool enough to make it stick together like a swath of felt. Removing my cord belt, I fastened it back around my waist, under my dress, and tied the strings from the felt pad to it. It felt strange, and my bone knife would be awkward to reach, requiring me to lift my dress. With such an arrangement, I would also have to carry my sling and bag of stones, but it was worth the inconvenience. Proud of my ingenuity and new womanhood, I started back.

The moment I topped the hill, I froze and dropped to my belly, heedless of its complaints. The tall grass almost hid the shape at the herd's edge, but the twitch of tail that had caught my attention was unmistakable. A long, shuddering breath made its way through me.

Tiger.

Tigers rarely approached, but the flood had altered habits and terrain for many creatures. What was the beast waiting for? The wind blew toward it, so neither the dogs nor

the sheep had scented it. It was close enough to have its pick of prey.

Then I realized what it was waiting for.

One-Eye had decided to give birth. In the time it had taken me to clean myself and make the felt, the lamb had worked itself partially out. Head and forelegs were visible, I noted with approval. No need to reach inside and turn it.

The tiger too must have approved. A newborn lamb would be a tasty morsel and a helpless one.

I did not know what to do. What were my choices? I could call the dogs. They were effective at protecting the sheep from most predators, including cheetahs, but they were outmatched by a tiger. They would harass it, perhaps draw it off or anger it enough that one or more dogs would die. We could not afford to lose any herder dogs. Not now.

I clinched my bag of round stones, carefully selected from the river bed for their uniformity of size and shape. I could try to drive it off, as long as my ammunition lasted, but at this distance my efforts would not be much more than an annoyance at best and more likely, I would miss him entirely.

Wisdom said to run to the cave and blow the ram's horn, alerting other shepherds and the dogs. I had left the horn, so I could have both hands to hold my skirt from my legs. Foolish.

If I ran for the cave, the lamb would die and maybe the ewe, and possibly dogs, but I would be safe. It was the only reasonable thing to do. One-Eye gave a soft bleat. The lamb was almost out. I should be there helping her. Anger wove into the fear and my reasoning. One-Eye was my responsibility, and the lamb she had carried for moons was not going to be a tiger's meal.

I stood and dropped a stone into my sling, whirling it

above my head and moved slowly toward One-Eye, screaming as loudly as I could. Sheep scattered in all directions, bleating in confusion. One-Eye's head rose, and she looked at me in consternation, but she was in the throes of labor and did not try to rise.

At first, nothing moved in the tall grass where the tiger crouched. I walked right toward it. I knew better than to run, because that would elicit the tiger's instinct to attack. I was counting on the loud noise and the confusion of my approach to convince it to seek another target. Even if it went for another of the sheep, at least its prey would have an opportunity to flee.

The dogs, not understanding what I was doing, were trying to herd the fleeing sheep. I deliberately did not signal the danger whistle or the come-in shout. I kept screaming, though my throat was dry and scratchy. As loud as I was, I did not think other herders would hear me, as I was in the dip between hills and they do not hear as well as I do.

My scream died in my throat when the tiger stood, tail whipping in agitation. A magnificent creature, rippling with power and grace, he took my breath.

We stood facing each other, the bloody lamb between us, struggling to enter the world.

I knew I must make my choice now. My arm was wearying. Either I had to drop the sling or send the stone. An almost imperceptible tightening in the tiger's haunches decided which. I let instinct choose the timing to release the knotted end of the rope, keeping the other in my grasp. The stone flew. If it hit anywhere, there was a chance of startling the beast into retreat, but if I missed, I was dead.

I stared, realizing I had missed. The creature did not move through the length of the entire breath I dragged into my lungs. Then, to my astonishment, the tiger collapsed onto

its side.

With disbelief, I ran to it, hiking my dress to get to my blade. The animal lay on its side, massive paws almost the size of my head splayed. My stone had struck its left eye and imbedded into the brain. The body twitched. It still breathed. I sawed through the skin with my knife, slitting its throat.

Blood musk, thick and salty gushed into my nostrils. Spotted Dog and Grey Dog appeared, whining and nosing the limp creature with concern to assure it was not a threat.

With trembling hands, I helped One-Eye birth her lamb, watched her lick it clean and helped it find its mother's teats. Neither she nor One-Eye seemed overly concerned about the dead tiger nearby. Blood was part of the birth smell.

When the lamb, which I named, Fortune, was safely suckling, I went to the tiger's side, running my hand in wonder over its marvelous coat and regretting that life no longer pulsed in such a splendid creature's body.

With the suddenness of a blow, all the fear I should have felt while stalking the tiger slammed through me. I squatted on my heels and rocked to shut it out.

After a while, Grey Dog's worried tongue on my cheek brought me back to the world. I opened my eyes. The dead animal would attract coyotes or wolves. On unsteady legs, I rose and headed up the hillside to the cave. Somehow, I would find the strength to blow the ram's horn for help.

Chapter Nine

The village buzzed like a hive with news of my kill. We received the choicest parts of the meat, and the skin was given to Tubal, as head-of-house. If I were a boy, he would present it to me in a ceremony honoring me. To keep it for himself would make him appear ungenerous and bring dishonor. He threw it at me with a scowl. "I've never seen such a lucky stone throw," he said. "Don't count on it ever happening again."

I did not understand why my brother hated me.

The tiger skin made me sad, remembering the magnificent creature it had been, but the skin was beautiful, and Savta showed me how to soften and stretch it.

Several women in the village came to celebrate my coming of age, including my mother's marriage-sister, Aunt Adah, who brought a lovely red ribbon. It was a happy time. No men were allowed in our hut. Savta braided my hair with the ribbon. We feasted on a newly killed goat and barley beer, and I was the focus of attention for the first time in my life. I received a fine linen dress also from my aunt, made of flax. It felt like a cloud on my skin. Savta produced a set of fleece shoulder pads to protect me from Bennu's talons and gave me a necklace of white shells.

To my surprise, the Elder Mariah came to our house. Savta greeted her and led her proudly to me. "Elder, this is my granddaughter, Na'amah."

I stood of course. Elder Mariah was one of our three elders and represented the Goddess. Somewhere to the west of us was a holy cave where the Goddess' Priestess lived. She had sent Mariah to us.

Mariah was a tall woman who carried herself straight as a cedar tree. She wore her silver-streaked brown hair tied

in many small braids, beaded with tiny shells and dyed seeds. Her high cheekbones and arched brows added to the dignity of the red-dyed staff and white robes she always wore.

“Na’amah,” she said, greeting me with a smile. “Congratulations and happiness on your womanhood.”

“Thank you,” I replied, only looking at her face briefly and then studying her sandals.

“She is very shy,” Mariah remarked to Savta, “for a woman who has killed a tiger.”

Savta did not try to explain me, even to Elder Mariah. My father often acted embarrassed about me, and Tubal refused to be seen with me, but Savta gave no excuses or explanations. She smiled her lopsided smile. “My granddaughter is special.”

Mariah studied me for a moment. “She is very beautiful. I’ve noticed her on Market Days. I’m sure many young men will want to wed her.”

“She is already betrothed to Noah,” Savta said proudly.

“Noah, the boat-maker?”

“Yes.”

Mariah nodded. “He is a good man.” She turned to me.

“You will be happy with such a man.”

“I will,” I said. “He will let me be with the sheep.”

Her mouth dropped slightly open, and a clear laugh like water spilling over stones escaped her lips. She pulled a copper bracelet from her wrist and put it on mine, still smiling. “I like the sheep too,” she said quietly.

I knew this was truth because she kept all the sheep and goat lineages in her mind. If a dispute arose about who owned what ewe, Mariah would settle it. She was a wise woman.

“How can the Goddess be Virgin and Mother at the

same time?" I asked, deciding to take advantage of her knowledge.

One of Mariah's brows rose.

Savta shook her head, but did not rebuke me, other than to say, "You should request to ask such a question, Na'amah."

I nodded, still looking at Mariah's sandals. "May I ask a question, Elder?"

Stealing a good glance from my eye's corner, I saw her mouth twitch in a way that reminded me of Savta. "I believe you already have." Then she surprised me. "You remind me of my daughter."

I wondered if she meant my behavior reminded her of her daughter or how I looked. Was it that I asked a question without permission or some feature of my face? I would have asked her, but I worried that I was only to be allowed one question, and I did not want to waste it. I did, however, want to know if she had a daughter like me. No one in our village was like me, but Mariah had not come from our tribe. The Priestess had sent her to be our Elder. I curled my lower lip between my teeth, something I did when I was practicing patience. If the waiting got too hard, sometimes I bit down a little to keep from speaking. Mariah had still not said if I could ask the question.

"Ask your question again, Na'amah," she said kindly.

Relieved, I blurted, "How can the Goddess be virgin and mother at the same time?"

"That is a good question and can be answered many ways." She paused. "This is one way: I am a woman, an old woman. My daughter has daughters. It is obvious that I am a mother. That is easily understood, true?"

"Yes," I said gravely, listening with great care. Perhaps she would tell me something that would open my eyes to see

the Goddess where I never had before.

"Before I became a mother, I was a virgin, a girl. I knew youth and strength."

I thought of Noah saying, *In my mind, I am young. I race up these hills as I imagine you do.*

"My skin was as smooth as yours," Mariah continued, "my belly as tight, my breasts as proud."

I imagined her as a girl with mischief in her eyes and no grey dulling her hair.

"Time has no dominion over our true selves," she said. "That youth is me, as much as what you see before you." She held forward her wrinkled hands. "My outside is so." Then, both hands rose to her chest, like leaves born by a sudden breeze. "Inside, I am still that youth. I am still that virgin. Every woman is, as much as every woman is a mother."

"Even those who have not born a child?" I asked.

"We are not mothers merely because a baby has grown between our hips. If you have ever cared for anyone, ever given of yourself, in time, in efforts, you are a mother."

"So every woman is the Goddess?" I blurted.

Her face went very still, and she turned to Savta. "Those who have whispered your granddaughter is slow of mind are very wrong."

"She is special," Savta said again under her breath, so no one but Mariah and I could hear.

Mariah tilted her head. "The Goddess is the earth and the earth is the Goddess, Na'amah."

With another smile and a kiss of luck on my head, she left.

"Do you realize what an honor that was?" Aunt Adah said, coming over to us, her hands on her wide hips. "I don't recall an Elder speaking to me on my celebration day!"

I spun the bracelet on my slender wrist, feeling very

much a woman.

My tiger skin was still drying or they would have had me sit on it. I was pressed to tell the story of my encounter with the beast, which was then endlessly discussed as an omen of significance. Did the Goddess not ride a tiger to war and sit down with lions? Did this mean the Goddess favored our tribe?

Savta was quiet during most of this, but later as she and I sat alone in our own hut, she spun wool and said quietly, "It's a sign."

"What is a sign?" I asked, for we had not been speaking. The glow of my welcome to the community of womanhood had faded when I sat at the loom and found that I still could not imitate Savta's deft fingers.

"Your dominion over the tiger, of course. That is an obvious sign."

I kept disturbing the waft threads, and the weights at the bottom would swing, bumping the others and tangling the threads. Disgusted, I looped the thread on the thin piece of wood carved at the frame's edge for that purpose and went to Bennu to regain my composure. Gently, I scratched his head with my finger. He fluffed his feathers in pleasure.

I broke off a small piece of the honey-nut pastry Savta had made and gave him a bit. Bennu loved treats, especially those made with honey.

"What is it a sign of, Savta?" I asked absently.

"Of Mother Goddess' favor. I told you when you were young, don't you remember?"

I remembered, but it never made much sense. "Maybe Mother Goddess let me kill the tiger because she was looking out for the birthing ewe. I do not know why you think I am anything special, Savta." I felt cross. "I wish you would stop saying it."

That was when she told me why she thought the Goddess had marked me. "When you were born," she said slowly, "I rubbed the salt on you for long life, wrapped you in birthing felt, and laid you aside to tend to your mother's body." For a moment, Savta's eyes glimmered with unshed tears. "My poor Zillah."

She sighed. "When I turned back to you—"

Savta paused and took a deep breath, her hands stilling the spindle and her eyes glazed with memory. "You were covered completely by them."

I frowned. "What? Ants?" I shuddered.

"No." She leaned toward me. "Bees."

I felt my brows rise in surprise. "Bees?" Why would bees be on a baby?

"A swarm," Savta said, her eyes lost in the memory. "The queen bee landed on you and the swarm followed. You made no sound, and I panicked, thinking they had smothered you. I didn't know what to do. I was afraid trying to get them off would agitate them, and they might sting you. That many stings would kill a newborn."

"What did you do?"

"I took a cloth and pushed them away from your nostrils as slowly as I could, trying not to disturb them. You were perfectly still, but I felt your breath on my palm, so I knew you were alive. At first, I feared you would cry and squirm, then I realized the Goddess had you under her protection. You never stirred or cried out, and I waited until the queen bee decided to move on. You opened your eyes and yawned."

Savta connected a piece of pulled wool to the one she had spun, overlapping the raw ends. Then she gave the weighted spindle a twist, starting its turning again.

"Did anyone else see the bees on me?" I asked.

“No, I was alone. The other women had gone and your father left you with me, disappointed you weren’t a boy. “Mother Goddess gave the sign to me alone, and I understood her intent that it be a secret.”

I had no memory of this, but I understood the awe in her voice. A queen bee was a powerful symbol of the Mother Goddess. For a moment, I wondered if the Goddess truly had marked me. Bees and a tiger. I had never heard of bees alighting on a living creature, though I had seen them resting on branches in their search to find a new colony home. Most likely, it was just a strange happening, and I had not moved simply because I was asleep. It was not enough to make me believe in unseen gods who seem capricious and inscrutable with their favors and displeasures.

If I were a goddess, I would let myself be seen and would be perfectly clear what I wanted. I would not need people to worship and praise me. What good did that do? It did not make sense.

Of course, I did not share these thoughts, even with Savta. Not because I thought she would turn me over to the Elders’ judgment, but because I had no desire to challenge the beliefs that were as much a part of her life as breathing and loving me. The wonder was that I did not share them. I knew of no one who did not fear the gods. Why was I different? Did my deformity make me have such strange thoughts?

Chapter Ten

When harvest time came for the wheat, everyone went to the fields, even those of Hunter Clan. The men used obsidian wedges to sharpen fine edges on the stone blades and cut down the wheat shafts with steady, slicing swings.

Shafts fell with their dusky-gold burden and lay in piles on the ground like a game of sticks. The women and children who were not watching the herds winnowed the grain, tossing it into the air for the wind to separate. I would rather have been in the hills, but Savta insisted I come to the harvest. I think she wanted Noah to see that his future wife could work hard. I pouted. Why did Savta want to get rid of me? How could she keep Tubal's house without me? She was very old. Who would fetch water and wood for the fire?

As soon as I could, Yanner and I escaped to the hills to inspect my sheep. It was a good thing we did, because the dogs had gotten into a fight with a leopard and it mauled a young dog. Yanner killed the injured dog and we took it home to cook. It always made me sad to lose a dog. They were faithful beasts, who did not stint in their love for humans or their duty with the herds, but we did not want to waste the meat, and leaving the carcass would attract more predators.

When I was not doing chores or guarding the sheep, I went to watch Noah work on our house, which he planned to construct near his own house in a clearing far apart from the village, surrounded by a wood of beech, oak and maples. The way he coaxed wood to his bidding fascinated me, and I was stubbornly insistent on having a house that would float. I think Noah understood if he wanted me, he had to build this, despite the jesting the idea engendered from others, but he

never gave any sign of resenting his task.

Although the winter rains of this year had not flooded the river's banks, they had turned everything into a muddy morass for many days, and the last winters had been colder than anyone ever remembered. The weather was changing. I knew that in my bones, as well as I knew when my bleeding time was near. I did not like change, but it was stupid not to be prepared for it.

My house was nothing like what I imagined. Noah had decided to build it out of wood—cedar. I was doubtful that anything as heavy as tree trunks would stay afloat with the burden of a house on it, but Noah assured me it would. I was amazed that he could amass so many logs in such a short time and none of them seemed to come from nearby.

With a grin, he admitted his secret. "I steal them from a beaver dam in an arm of the river. The beavers make excellent logs far quicker than I could cut down timber with my tools." He indicated the sharpened stone implements lying about in apparent disorder, though I noticed he knew where each one lay when he wanted it in his hand.

"I float the logs downstream and use the ox to pull them up this creek." He pointed to a small gully. "I have an idea about how to build this wooden house over that little creek that feeds from the river. That way, I only have to lift the logs out of the water and lay them across the top."

"How will they stay together?"

He smiled. "I'll cut grooves in the wood to wedge the ropes and lash them together."

I frowned. Tar pitch would soak into bound reeds and seal it. A coating might help keep the wood from rotting, but I did not believe it would seal the spaces between the logs. Water found its way through the smallest cracks, and I did not want my house to sink.

As if he saw my thoughts, Noah said, "Don't worry, when the logs get wet they expand, and when the rope gets wet, it tightens. No water will come through."

I brightened. "That is wonderful. I have never thought much about boats."

"I can't claim to have invented such an arrangement, but I have given some thought to expanding on the idea. I don't think anyone has ever tried to make a boat into a house. I'm going to peg some of the logs on the base and make support poles, then lash more logs to make the sides."

I frowned again. Walls were made of plastered mud. I had never heard of walls made of logs.

"Like this," he said, stripping off several twigs from one of the logs that lay nearby. He placed them side by side and then stood them on edge, holding them together with his fingers. "This will be the walls of the house."

I considered it, and then smiled. "If it tips over, it will float on its side as easily as its bottom."

Noah laughed—his great booming sky laugh. I liked the sound.

"I hadn't thought of it that way," he said and reached both hands to pinch my ears lightly. "You have a sharp mind between those ears. You will be a good boat-maker's wife."

That pleased me. "How can I help?"

He considered. "I'll need to make a lot of rope to lash the wood together."

"I do not know how to make rope. Is it like spinning?"

"More like weaving. I'll use bark strips of red cedar. They won't rot when they get wet." He reached into a basket and held up a strip of bark.

"That's too stiff to weave with," I said, frowning.

"We'll soak them to make them pliant, and then braid them together for strength. I'll show you, but first, I have a

little something for you.”

Noah dusted his hands and hunted among his tools for a moment, as though not certain where he had put something, but I thought his movements unconvincing. With a glance at me, no doubt to see if I were properly anticipating the present, he drew out a small wooden object and laid it in my hand.

A puff of breath escaped my mouth. It was a carving no larger than the size of my thumb, made of white wood. A small horse, its knees tucked under it, looking over its shoulder. Noah knew I admired the wild creatures. In the winter after the flood, the Hunters had taken many in an attempt to spare our sheep and goatherds from utter devastation. I thought they were beautiful, and when they grazed with the herd, I did not let the dogs run them off right away, as I should, but watched them. I thought them smarter than the sheep and wondered what it would be like to sit on their broad backs. They ran with a speed that the dogs could not match.

I cradled the tiny horse in my palm. The wood was smooth with oil. I wondered how Noah's huge hands had managed the tiny details of the eyes and the lines of muscle with his big hands. “Thank you,” I finally remembered to say.

Bennu flew to a perch in a nearby tree. His wing had long since grown out enough to allow him to fly distances. He always returned, so I did not worry he would disappear. He looked down at us and said as clearly as a person, “Na’amah.”

Startled, Noah and I both looked up at him. He cocked his head, but said nothing more. My mouth had dropped open, and I had to think to close it. Noah and I looked at each other to confirm we had heard what we thought we had

heard.

Another man might have taken such a thing to mean a god inhabited Bennu's body, but Noah huffed and said, "The bird seller claimed he could talk, but I thought it was nonsense."

I pondered all the times Bennu had said what sounded like words or phrases. "I think he has been talking all this time, but in the language of the south."

Noah nodded. "If the seller wasn't giving us a load of ox dung, the bird came from the River-People. That's a land south of the Salt Sea. I wonder what he's been trying to say."

"Na'amah," Bennu pronounced again and ruffled his feathers, pleased with himself.

I laughed, delighted, and Noah smiled. "It's good to hear you laugh; you're so serious most of the time."

His blue eyes were full of me. I took in his bared, muscled arms, the breadth of his shoulders and strong set to his jaw, my gaze wandering back up for a quick glance at his eyes. I had made my commitment when he promised to build me a floating house. It was a good decision, I thought. I was a wise woman.

"Bennu's stand washed away in the flood," I said.

"I'll build him another." Noah spread his arms wide and smiled to match the gesture. "No, I'll build him his own room. Why not? All I have to do is lash more logs together and keep the beavers busy. A room all for Bennu."

I clapped my hands. "With branches for him to climb?"

Noah chuckled. "With branches."

I was happy. It was a good thing to have a house of one's own design. I would know every finger breath of it, how the wood fit together, which lashings were made by my hands. A sudden thought formed in my mind. "How many rooms can I have?"

Noah looked thoughtful and then shrugged. "As many as you wish, my beloved. The way I'm building, we can expand. Are you thinking of bargaining my tools or sheep for more birds?" His eyes held a gleam like sun-sparks on water.

I sat straighter, understanding he was teasing me and proud to catch the joke. "Certainly not, but a woman of my wealth should have a room to cook in, a room to spin in, and a room to sleep in."

A belly laugh roared up from him. "You will keep me building this boat-house for the rest of my life! How about a room for each of our children?"

For the first time, the idea of bearing children did not sicken me. The prospect of spending my life with this man felt right, and I turned the thought over repeatedly, examining it in awe and thankfulness. I wanted to hold his child to my chest and drink the pleasure such a gift would bring him.

Chapter Eleven

In my fifteenth summer, I sat in Noah's work area, watching the boat-house I had ordered as my bride price take shape, log by log. How could I know that before I could ever step foot into it, unimaginable events lay in my path?

"Well," an edged voice behind me said, "how is the floating house coming along, boat-maker?"

Yanner had grown over the past several moon-cycles. He was almost as tall as Noah, though slender where Noah was broad. He wore a fox tail tied to his cord belt, a sign of his acceptance into Hunter Clan. The Clan's influence had grown since the flood, even though we had seen a harvest. The people feared another flood or disaster where the responsibility of feeding the village would fall onto the hunters' backs. We still had not replenished the numbers of our herds much beyond what we needed for food. We depended on the goats for milk and cheese, and our main source of trade was our fine wool. We needed the meat from the hunters' arrows and spears.

"Be welcome, Yanner," Noah said, but his mouth curved in a frown. He had not missed the mockery in Yanner's question.

Yanner barely glanced at Noah; his gaze was for me. He was slightly breathless. "Na'amah, may I speak to you...outside?" I shrugged and moved from my perch on a pile of shaved wood to step outside with him.

We moved away from the house into a patch of shade. A breeze off the lake lifted my hair. Yanner reached up to touch a strand. "The sun finds copper hidden in the black." His tone was distracted, but Yanner's words had always flickered with the bright red-oranges of a flame and today they seemed to blaze brighter.

My hands went to my hips and I cocked my head. "What is it, Yanner? You have something burning inside you to speak."

He shook his head, not in denial, but amusement. "I have never been able to hide anything from you. You see into me as readily as you do the sheep, even though you barely look at me."

I kept my gaze steady on his chest, not allowing him to slide away from the subject. "Well?"

Unexpectedly, he grasped both my hands. "Na'amah, I am a man of Hunter Clan now. I've hunted bison in the mountains and brought down deer with my own spear." Pride and fear seemed strangely entangled in his voice. "We have been friends since childhood, but I want to be more than your friend."

I blinked at him.

He plunged on. "I want you to be my wife."

My mouth opened, but speech did not come for several moments.

He looked tormented, and finally I spoke without quite realizing what I said. "Why?"

His gaze darted to the stack of logs behind me, and I turned to see if someone was there, but saw only the wood, waiting for Noah to bind them with rope into walls for our house. Yanner's grip on my hands tightened. His hands were moist. "I want you Na'amah," he breathed hoarsely. "I need you, need to have you."

The rawness of his passion hit me like a blow. My mind whirled with confusion, and I wanted to sit, rock, and hum until it went away, but I knew that was selfish, and I tried to settle myself with deep breaths.

Finally, I shook my head a bit. "You know better than any that my mind is wounded. Why would you want me to

wife?"

"I love you, Na'amah. I don't care that you are different. I don't care what anyone says."

"What do they say?" I demanded.

He hesitated, but knew I would persist until I had an answer. "They say that your children would be like you."

"How like me?"

With a shrug that implied he thought it meant little, he said, "Different."

I knew Savta had given an oath to the Elders that my strangely-shaped baby head was the result of birthing and not a defect that might be passed on to children. If she had not, they would have ordered me put outside the village to die.

A new thought gripped me as tightly as Yanner's hands. What if Savta were wrong or...what if she had lied? Would she have done that? I was her last hope of daughter lineage. Daughters were not much valued by the tribe, at least by men, but Savta remembered the days when the Goddess had greater honor than Father God or any of his male forms. How many times had she told me of the Goddess' Cave where her Priestess reigned, a living symbol of Earth Mother's life-giving force? The Priestess and the Daughters dedicated to her were honored by tribes from sea to sea. The Priestess always sent a Daughter to serve as Elder at a tribe's request, as Mariah had been sent to us.

A daughter would have been important to Savta. Perhaps she would have lied to save me. I felt dizzy. "What if I gave my wrongness to my children?"

"I don't care," Yanner said. "You must be mine. I am ill with wanting you."

I stepped back, out of his grasp. "I am promised to Noah. We are to be wed before the end of this moon." Sadness churned in my stomach. When Noah first came to

our house and asked for me, I did not want him or children. Now I wanted both, but was it fair to him? He had no children, despite his age, and he clearly wanted them. Would they be...wounded, like me?

I sank to the ground right there and pulled my knees to my chest, burying my head against them and rocking. Yanner sat close beside me, his breath in my ear, his body pressed against my side. I could not concentrate on the song with the touch of his flesh.

"He is old, Na'amah. I am young and strong. I am now Hunter Clan. If the waters come again, I can provide for you. That strange boat he calls a house will never withstand a flood, and even if it did, it would only carry you down the river and be torn apart."

Miserable, I looked up at him. "Go away," I said. The happiness that had been a bright gold flower in my chest only moments ago had wilted and browned.

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Chapter Twelve

I spent more time alone after that, taking the shepherd watches of others when mine were finished. Bleary-eyed, I would stumble home and fall onto my mat, wishing for the first time in my life to be oblivious of the indigo croak of the night heron and the loons' warbling laugh, welcoming the oblivion of sleep.

"What is wrong with you?" Savta asked more than once. "Is it your moon time?"

She knew exactly when my moon time fell, but she asked anyway. Sometimes, she said, young girls' bodies did not keep regular pulse with the moon. Mine did. When the new moon's horn pierced the sky, I prepared bundles of felt and bathed twice as often as normal in my river pool.

Noah also worried about my sudden quiet and failure to seek him out and inspect my boat-home. "Don't you want to come tell me what to do?" he teased. "Besides, I need more rope."

I frowned at him. "You do not need me to do what your hands can do in the dark."

Yanner also came to me, catching me on my way to the hills and once finding me at my bath. "Go away!" I yelled at him, hunkering down in the water.

"I just want to talk to you." He stared at me before averting his eyes and squatting on the bank.

"I will be at the cave at sunset," I said to make him go.

"Who is assigned with you?" he asked.

"Mallet, I think. Now go!" I wondered why he wanted to know. Was he jealous? I sighed. Life had been much less complicated before womanhood.

That night I stirred the small fire in the cave on the North Slope. Mallet was late joining me. The sun had already slipped into the lake, and a full moon glowed red against the horizon. I did not mind. I liked being alone.

A sheep's bleating called me out of the cave, and I scanned the hillside below. I saw nothing but the shifting shadows of the herd. Slowly, the moon rose higher in the night sky, round as a woman's breast, wrapped in a wispy shawl of clouds. On the sky's opposite side, darker clouds brooded in the west, hoarding lightning within them.

Grey Dog appeared out of the shadows, tail wagging. He approached and lay at my feet, rolling over onto his back in submission. I stooped and rubbed his stomach, smiling at the expression of bliss this always produced.

He raised his head at a distant flutter of bat wings and then lowered it. I smiled at him. He knew he should be watching the sheep, not sneaking off for a belly rub. Abruptly, he sprang to his feet with a low growl, facing down the slope, his ruff stiff. I stood, my hand working the sling from my belt.

Shapes formed out of the moonlight. Men.

"Mallet?" I tested the name toward them. No reply.

My heart began to hammer. Raiders. Rumors had wormed their way from the south about a band of warriors who stole women and young men and vanished in the forests. I slipped back into the cave to get the ram's horn, but it was not in its place, something I had not noticed, because it usually hung out of sight behind a curve in the cave wall. Someone had failed to return it to its place. Irritated and frightened, I loosened my stone pouch, fitting one in my sling and

went back outside.

Three shapes approached. The rocky ground kept me from recognizing their tread. I could take one and Grey Dog another. If Mallet would get himself up here and maybe another dog or two—, but I knew the odds were against us. Still, I stood straight and pressed my teeth together. I would not die or be taken without a fight. Had I not faced a tiger?

To my surprise, Grey Dog sat, his growl changing into a whine. For a moment, I was confused, and then realized Grey Dog must know the approaching people. “Mallet,” I shouted, “you frightened me. For that, you get second watch!” Usually, a stone toss determined who would have to wake before dawn.

Again, no acknowledgement came from the men. Puzzled, I stepped back into the cave shadows, against a wall so I would see their faces in the firelight before they saw me. I looped my sling back on my belt, as there was no room in the small cave for a good whirl, and put my hand on the bone knife instead.

I dropped it to my side when the fire revealed Yanner and my brother, and my brother's friend, Sunnic.

“Na'amah?” Yanner said, trying to peer into the shadows.

“Here.” I stepped forward.

All three stopped. “Is something wrong?” I asked. “Where is Mallet?”

Tubal looked around the cave with a contemptuous scowl, perhaps remembering his younger days here. I waited, bewildered at his presence and unwilling to believe my brother would lower himself to take a shepherd watch.

Tubal turned his regard to me and, as usual, it was heavy with disdain. Yanner stepped forward. He stood before the fire, so his face was shadowed, but tension shaped his stance, and he carried himself oddly, as if unsure of his balance. “Na'amah, I have asked Tubal to give you to me as wife.”

I stiffened. “Tubal cannot give me as wife. I am already betrothed.”

“He is head of your house. It is Hunter Clan law.”

The cave wall at my back was cold, the ceiling close. I suddenly wished I had met them outside. The smell of beer thickened the air. Even their stance foreboded danger. Despite the night's chill, sweat tracked a prickly path down my spine.

“Our father agreed to my betrothal to Noah when he was head-of-house,” I said, trying to let anger cover the waver in my voice. “They spit on it. Tubal cannot change that. Only I can, and I will not.”

“Please Na'amah.” Yanner's pitched his plea low, only for my ears.

“I am sorry, Yanner,” I said, suddenly in pity of him. “I like you. We are friends. You are very handsome and many girls turn their heads as you pass. You will find plenty of women eager to be your wife, even one of your wives.”

“I don't want another,” he said, his voice soaked with misery and slurred with too much beer. “I want only you.”

“Na'amah!” Tubal barked. “I am head-of-house. I give you to Yanner.”

“My chin lifted. “No.”

Unexpectedly, he smiled and my heart fluttered in fear. “Take your wife, Yanner,” my brother said.

I stepped back as Yanner and Sunnic moved in. My back hit the wall. “Stop,” I said, drawing my knife. Despite their drinking, they were quick. One grabbed each arm. Sunnic

twisted my wrist, making me drop the knife. I fought them, but they were stronger.

"Take her down, Sunnic," Tubal snapped. The words were hard shells on the outside, but inside nested a tangle of worms.

"Uh, not so easy," Sunnic muttered. He was behind me and had my arms pinned, though I struggled with all my strength. He sat suddenly, putting us both on the ground. Then he wrapped a leg around each of mine, forcing them apart and held me atop him. I cried out for help, but I knew no one but the sheep would hear me. Grey Dog growled and then whined, unsure what to do. Tubal kicked him and he ran off, whimpering.

I struggled until I was exhausted, and all I could manage was to pant and glare at Tubal. "You are a true son of Cain," I said.

He knelt beside me and slapped my face. Hard. Tears stung my eyes. "Snake," he responded, a man's ultimate insult to a woman. "You will get what you deserve."

"Why?" I sobbed. "Why do you hate me so? What have I ever done to you?"

He knelt close. "You lived. You killed our mother and yet you lived. You should have been put out to die, but you live. Men look at you and see your dark-lashed eyes, your full mouth, the curve of your breasts, but I see the brokenness beneath, the serpent that lies in your mind waiting to bite off a manhood."

I could not stop the tears of confusion, of shame...of fear. He put a finger on my cheek and caught one. With a slow flick of his tongue, he tasted it. For some reason, this frightened me more than being held pinned on the cave floor with my legs spread apart.

"Your wife is ready for you," Tubal said with the flatness of announcing day had begun.

"I stared at Yanner. Do not do this," I begged.

He hesitated.

"Well, hunter?" Tubal mocked. "Is your spear strong enough? You asked for this. You begged me to help you and here I am helping you, but you must do your part."

Yanner removed his tunic and looked down at me, his hands at the cord of his pants. "I can't while she is looking at me."

My brother laughed. "I anticipated this." He stuffed wads of felt in my ears, threw a thick sheepskin over my head, and tied it. I could see nothing and hear very little. I felt my dress lifted and found the strength to struggle again, but I was helpless in this position.

Sunnick's manhood pressed hard against the small of my back. He kept me pulled tight against him and rocked his hips. I was so accustomed to hearing everything around me, even the smallest noise that the forced silence added to my panic. I heard only my heart's thunderous beating in my ears and muffled voices, and then a hand rubbed between my legs, and I took a sharp breath, realizing it was not a hand.

Pain erupted throughout my body. I screamed, but the thick sheepskin swallowed the sound. The thrusting was hard and quick, forcing the breath from me with every push, so that I had to gasp for air in rhythm to his piercing.

They left me in the cave with my head still covered. I lay in the smothering darkness, wishing to sink into it forever. I could. All I needed to do was not remove the skin, but my hands fumbled of their own accord at the string, and I dragged it aside, taking huge gulps of clean air.

Sound returned to the world. Tubal had cut off my hearing to terrorize me. The smell of blood blended with an unfamiliar, salty odor. Yanner had betrayed me. Anger began to replace shame, straightening my back and lifting my chin. If the Goddess existed, she was my anger, my

pain. Men and their god beware.

With no idea how to exact my vengeance, I rolled onto my hands and knees and tried to stand on legs that trembled like pine needles in the wind. At first I just stood, trying to breathe normally, past my fear that they would return. When I could, I stumbled to the creek, desiring only to wash, to be clean again, if ever I could. The cool water soothed my swollen skin and the blood that flowed was less than my moon time, so I thought I would survive.

I would not return to my brother's house. Never. If I had to live by myself in the forest, I would not step over his threshold.

I sat on a rock for a long time watching the moonlit water, until the sun rose over my shoulder. It seemed incredible that another day was born, as if nothing had changed...when everything had changed.