

# CITY OF REFUGE



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*CITY OF*  
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## *Dedication*

Thanks Chad, for your thought-provoking exhortation. Thanks Jennie, for reading this first. And thanks Ellie, for adding one more question for Abi to ask!

## CHAPTER 1

Life is hard, but death is harder. This much Abi had learned in her eleven years.

Abi thought about things like death and life more than most girls her age. Perhaps growing up between brothers and sisters so much older and nieces and nephews so much younger gave a girl too much time to sit alone and think. Or perhaps it was just growing up with the knowledge that her life had cost her mother's death.

Whatever the reason, death came three times to Abi's town of Golan one warm week, just as the winter rains were ending.

The first death was deeply mourned, but not unexpected. After all, it had been less than a month since Abba and the other elders of Golan had made the long journey across the Jordan River to hear the final words of the famous military captain Joshua Bin-Nun.

"Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!" Abba had come home both inspired and troubled by the great leader's last speech.

It was just Abi and Abba left in the big house since the last of her siblings had married, so Abi got to hear many of Abba's thoughts about what Joshua had said. "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God, a jealous God." Then, as now, Abi had also been the messenger, running to the homes of each of her brothers and sisters, calling them to hear the report that Abba had brought.

Now they were gathering again to discuss how the great captain's death would affect the tribes he had led so well. Abi was sorry that Joshua had died, of course. But she couldn't help feeling excited about an evening with her little nieces and nephews!

Abi's oldest sister was first to arrive. She and her husband each held the hand of one of their young ones, who promptly let go and screamed, "Abi!" as soon as they saw her. Abi held her arms out wide to hug them as they ran to her, and no sooner did she look up than her oldest brother's family was upon them. It was the same as each of the children arrived: running to throw their little arms around her while their relieved parents joined the chatting group. Last to arrive was Nathan, the youngest of Abi's older brothers, with his pregnant wife Rivka and their little girl. Abi was surprised to see Nathan looking so grumpy. Rivka's

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beautiful face was pinched in a scowl too, though she tried to hide it with a fake laugh as they joined the noisy group.

“I guess we just can’t expect these men to know what we suffer to carry their children, can we girls?” Rivka asked her sisters-in-law with a too-wide smile.

Abi saw two of the older ones exchange a look. They all knew how much Rivka suffered in her pregnancies, as she never missed a chance to tell them. But Abi’s attention was on little Rachel. The small face peeking from behind Rivka’s skirts was as delicately featured and striking as her mother’s.

“Come to Abi, Rachel?” she asked softly.

The tiny girl was staring wide-eyed at the boisterous mob of cousins, but turned with a shy smile to her young aunt. With one last hesitant look up at Rivka and Nathan, she seemed to gather up her small courage and toddle to Abi’s waiting arms for a cuddle.

As the grown-ups drifted inside, Abi gathered the children around her for a story. Abba liked for her to tell them stories from the history of their people. The stories were important, he said, to help them see what the Mighty One had done in times past.

“Does anyone remember Joseph?” she asked the little group. “He had even more big brothers than I do!”

With little Rachel settled on her lap and the other cousins gathered around her, Abi began the story. She started at the beginning, with Joseph’s ill treatment by his brothers, and took them through Joseph’s rise from slavery to power. Abi was a born storyteller, and her small nieces and nephews sat and listened with rapt attention. She loved the dramatic climax of the story, with Joseph revealing himself to his shocked brothers. And then finally the end.

“Joseph was surprised when he found out that his brothers were afraid of him. But after all, they had hurt him so much, even though it was a long time ago. But he already forgave them! So he told them, ‘Don’t be afraid! I know you did what you did to hurt me. But the Mighty One wanted to save lives—yours, and all these people. You may have meant it for evil, but the Mighty One meant it for good!’”

Abi was always a bit puzzled by that part. Did the Mighty One really mean it for good? Did He mean for it to happen in the first place? Why would He intend for those horrible things to happen to poor Joseph? It always bothered her a little.

But there was no time to think about it now. All the children had enjoyed the story, but now that it was over, they were ready for more boisterous play. It was while Abi was settling a dispute between two of the small boys that she heard a piercing shriek behind her.

Turning quickly, she saw Rachel crumpled on the ground. Abi ran over and knelt by the tiny figure, aghast to see blood running down Rachel's little face.

"Oh, little lamb," Abi crooned, scooping up her niece and trying to staunch both the tears and the blood. Rachel must have tripped on the uneven ground and fallen against the outdoor bake-oven. Abi pressed the corner of her own robe over the gash on the child's forehead.

"My baby!" Abi turned to see Rivka running toward her. "What have you done to my baby?"

The other children had stopped their play to gather around their young cousin, but now scurried out of the way. Abi hesitated, trying to keep her blood-stained robe over Rachel's wound, but Rivka snatched her daughter out of Abi's arms.

"My poor baby!" she wailed over Rachel's cries. "Oh, Amma's here. I should never have left you!"

Abi flushed. Glancing up, she saw the other adults pouring out of the house and rushing over to the commotion. Nathan was there by Rivka, trying to reach in and press a cloth on the now panicky Rachel.

"She's all right; it's all right. Head wounds bleed a lot; it's all right," he attempted to calm his wife and daughter. But Rivka was inconsolable, and Rachel was loud.

"It's all my fault," the young mother wailed. "I should never have left her alone with someone who's hardly more than a child herself!"

Abi was so stunned by the unfairness of Rivka's words that she hardly noticed the others looking down at her in silent sympathy. Nathan finally managed to maneuver Rivka's arms so that he could reach Rachel's wound with the cloth he had brought. Slowly the little girl's cries subsided, and Rivka allowed Nathan to take the toddler in one arm and put the other arm around her. With one last apologetic glance back at Abi, her brother shepherded his little family out and down the road.

The other parents were gathering their own broods, talking quietly as they reassured the children and each other that everything was fine. Abi, head buried in her arms, felt a soft hug and a squeeze on her shoulder, but didn't look up until

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the yard was quiet. Only when everyone had left did she pick herself up and trudge into the house.

Abba was there waiting for her. "I heard part of the story you told the young ones, Abi," he smiled. "I think you're a better storyteller than even your mother was."

The extravagant compliment could not cheer Abi tonight, though. "It wasn't my fault, Abba, really it wasn't!" She burst out. "I watched her so well the whole evening, and I only left her alone for a moment because the boys were quarreling!"

"Of course you did." Abba looked surprised, but still spoke with his usual quiet seriousness. "You didn't think Rivka meant those cruel words, did you? Everyone knows you have a kind of charm with the little ones. And accidents can happen to anyone. No one blames you. Even Rivka wouldn't have said such things if she wasn't already so troubled by her condition."

"Why do women like her even have to have babies?" Abi asked rebelliously. "I wish she never did." Though, truth be told, Rivka was far from easy-going even when she was not with child.

"Ah, my Abi, my joy," Abba pulled her close to him. "You must not let your heart become bitter, especially on account of someone like Rivka. Wasn't it the story of Joseph I heard you telling the little ones tonight?"

Abi hung her head. She understood perfectly well what he was saying. "Yes, Abba, I'll forgive her like Joseph did."

"That's my girl," Abba hugged her; and once again all was well. That is, until the next death arrived.

## CHAPTER 2

The days following the news of Joshua's death were mild and pleasantly spring-like, so it was especially incongruous that they brought a second death to Golan. It was the afternoon of the Sabbath, usually a quiet time for Abi and Abba, when Abi's brother Nathan came running into the house.

“Abba, the baby is coming!” he burst out.

Abi and Abba both looked at him in confusion for a moment. Abba recovered first.

“Rivka's baby?” He spoke slowly, but concern laced his usually calm voice. “But she cannot be far enough along yet.”

“No,” Nathan looked truly frightened. “No, she isn't. I can't stay; I'm on my way to fetch Rivka's sister. Abba, do you think...” He couldn't seem to finish the question, and it hung in the air for a moment. Abba rose from his seat and put both hands on Nathan's shoulders.

“Trust in the Mighty One, my son. Abi and I will pray to Him; you go now and bring what comfort you can to your wife.”

Nathan nodded. “Thank you,” he said, his voice calmer but still unsteady. Nodding again, he turned and was soon off running. Abba slowly returned to his seat, his eyes sad and faraway.

“Abba?” Abi crept over to him nervously. “What does it mean?”

Abba looked up as if he had forgotten she was there. With a weary smile he took Abi's hands. “When a little one tries to start its life too early, it can be dangerous for both the child and the mother. Do you understand, my Abi?”

Abi nodded slowly. She knew of babies that could not survive their births. And then there were...

“Oh! Abba, is that how it was with me?”

Abba pulled her onto his lap. “No, my Abi, you waited until the proper time to join us, just as you should. It was your Amma that...” His eyes took on that faraway look they always wore when thinking about the mother Abi had never known. “But Rivka is young and strong. We will pray for her together, no?”

Prayer was both a daily ritual and an immediate reaction to trouble for Abi and Abba. Abi stood and placed both her hands in her father's as he began the familiar words, “Hear, O Israel...”

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Nathan didn't return that night, and it took Abi a long time to fall into an uneasy sleep. Still, she woke early to the sound of soft voices outside her window. She roused herself to join them, but by the time she slipped outside, only Abba stood leaning against the wall of the house and staring into space.

"Abba?" Abi crept over to him and slid herself into the circle of his arms.

"Good morning, my Abi, my joy." He hugged her gently, but his voice held none of its usual cheer.

"I heard someone here," Abi ventured tentatively.

"Yes, your sister just left." He sighed and continued sadly, "Rivka's baby came last night and—"

"Rivka's baby?" Abi interrupted with excitement. "Was it a boy or a girl? When can we go to see them?"

"It was a boy," Abba stroked her hair gently, "but no, we cannot see him now. He was born too soon and died in the night."

Abi stared up at her father, shock and dismay leaving her momentarily speechless. She had known this was a possibility, of course; that was what she and Abba had prayed about last night. But somehow she had never really imagined that such a thing could really happen in her family.

"But... but..." There was no baby? Just like that, Rivka was no longer with child? "Why, Abba?"

"Who can say, my Abi? Many mothers before Rivka have conceived a child that is not strong enough to be born into this dark world."

"Oh, Abba." Suddenly Abi felt her insides swooping out from under her. "Abba, I said that the other night. I said I wished she would never have a baby!" The realization hit her like a physical blow. "Abba, it's my fault!"

Tears sprang to Abi's eyes. Abba had told her not to let her heart become bitter, but it was so hard with someone like Rivka. The weight of the guilt she felt buckled her knees. Abi found herself sitting on the ground, her back to the wall of the house. "Oh, Abba, I didn't mean it. I'm so sorry!"

For long moments Abi sobbed into her hands. She hadn't meant it! Not really! Poor Rivka, poor Nathan. And the poor lifeless baby!

When Abi finally looked up, she was surprised to see that Abba had brought a stool from the house so he could sit with her on the ground. His hand was on her arm. It must have been there for some time, though she hadn't noticed it before.

“Oh, my Abi,” he said gently, “you are right to remember the power that our thoughts and words have.” He paused, as if weighing his own words carefully. “But you must remember, it is an ungodly arrogance to claim control for ourselves over things in the power of the Mighty One. You could not have caused this tragedy even if you had wanted to. It is prideful to convince yourself that you did. You are not the Mighty One. We must let Him be God, and we must be content to be what He made us to be, no?”

Abi sniffled, but Abba was not quite done.

“But, yet, we must consider what responsibility we do bear. Could your words have reached into Rivka’s womb to hurt her child?” He paused, and Abi slowly shook her head.

“So, then, what harm could your words truly do?”

Abi thought about that one for a while. “Well, they would have hurt Rivka, if she had heard them.”

“Yes, that is true. And who else? Who is suffering the most because of your thoughtless words?”

“Oh!” Suddenly Abi understood. “I am.”

Abba squeezed her hand and tightened his arm around her shoulders. “Oh, my Abi, my joy. Do you see? We must guard our thoughts and our words well. They never had the power you would have granted them. But they can poison our own souls. When we dwell on harmful thoughts, it robs us of our ability to love the way the Mighty One loves us, and to forgive where it is so desperately needed.”

“Oh, Abba, you’re right!” Abi exclaimed. “I do have trouble loving and forgiving Rivka.”

Abba only hugged her tighter.

“And I really am sorry,” Abi sighed, “now that I know what to be sorry for. I wish there was something we could do to help them.”

“Well, perhaps there is,” Abba replied. “Rivka will be in no fit state to work today, nor to take care of little Rachel. Perhaps we could bring them some food and invite Rachel to come and play. We’ll just keep her away from the bake oven, no?”

“Abba!” Abi protested, laughing.

“Oh, my Abi, my joy. It does this old heart good to hear you laugh.” He stood up slowly and picked up his stool. “You must remember to do the best you can in that which you control, and leave the rest to the Mighty One. Matters like

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when a life should end, it is simply not for us to decide.” Abi stood too, giving her father one last hug.

“Of course, there are times when men do end a life,” Abba remarked thoughtfully as they entered the house. “But may the Mighty One grant that you never have to concern yourself with that.”

They did not know, then, about the third death that would visit Golan that week.

## CHAPTER 3

When the last of Abi's older siblings had married, there had been considerable discussion in the family about what Abi and Abba would do. Of course in the winters, when most of the villagers crowded into town, at least one of the families shared the big house. But in the spring they scattered to the farms and pastureland. How would Abi and Abba survive all through summer and fall in the big house alone?

That first year, even Abi was surprised how well they managed. Perhaps her cooking left something to be desired, but she worked hard and was getting better all the time. This year, no one had doubted her. Even Rivka had commented on what a good housekeeper Abi had become. And there was something so very pleasant about the silence and solitude.

They all could see how much Abba enjoyed staying in town. Abi knew that her older siblings laughed a little at how often Abba sat at the gate with the other elders, even when it was not strictly necessary. But Abi was proud of her wise and respected Abba. Her steps were always light when she made her way to the city gate to walk back home with him.

Abi could always tell whether the elders were involved in serious business, or just chatting. If it was the first, she would wait quietly until Abba was finished. But if it was only talking, she knew she could run to Abba for a hug and hear, "My Abi, my joy!" That was how it was this afternoon, and Abba held her on his knee for a moment as he finished listening to a story one of the other men was telling.

It was a dull story, about someone Abi didn't know, and she looked idly around the gate area while the old man spoke. Like many walled cities, the two sections of wall coming from each direction overlapped here at the gate. It formed an open courtyard between the two walls, where the elders met and business was conducted. On one end you could keep going on into the city proper, and on the other end was the gate leading out. Abi watched the day guards without really paying attention to what she was seeing. But suddenly she realized that they were arguing with a tall stranger trying to enter the city.

She sat up and looked at the man. He was not anyone she recognized from Golan, and he looked disheveled and out of breath. The day guards were keeping their voices low, but the stranger was becoming more and more agitated.

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“No! You must let me in!”

Now Abi could hear his voice clearly, and several of the elders closest to the outer gate turned at the sound. Abi heard one of the day guards say something in what was meant to be a calming voice, but again the stranger burst out.

“I will state my name and my business to the elders of Golan!”

Even the rambling storyteller had become silent as they all turned to the little drama at the outer gate.

“I claim the right of sanctuary in Golan, as promised in the laws of our fathers!” The stranger’s voice rang out clearly in the now-silent gate area. Abba and a few of the others exchanged concerned glances as they slowly stood up and made their way to the outer gate.

“What seems to be the trouble?” Abba asked.

“Well, sir, this man came running up all crazy-like, and he won’t tell us his name or his business.”

Abba stared at the young man, who was breathing hard after his run and his exertions. “I think we will not be in any danger from listening to his story. Come,” Abba gestured to the stranger, “tell us why you claim refuge here in Golan.”

Looking relieved but still wary, the young man followed Abba back to where the elders sat waiting. By now passersby were starting to notice the disturbance, and several others joined Abba as she hung back and watched.

“Now,” Abba spoke to the stranger as he took his place with the other elders, “you may begin. But be warned that we will seek the truth, whatever it may be.”

The young man held Abba’s gaze for a moment, then looked away. Finally he straightened up and began to speak as if he had been practicing the words.

“I am Joah bin-Laban, and I have killed a man without intention or malice. That is why I claim refuge in the city of Golan, as commanded in the laws of our fathers.”

Abba and the other elders nodded calmly, but a ripple of excitement ran through the small crowd listening. Joah looked up at them for a moment, then back at the elders.

“It was just this morning,” the young man was still breathing heavily, and glancing around with nervous, frightened eyes. “We were working and Michal was underneath when the bricks fell, but I didn’t know the platform wouldn’t hold...” his voice trailed off at the confused expressions all around him.

“Perhaps you had best start at the beginning, no?” Abba suggested gently.

“The beginning?” Joah bin-Laban looked a little wild-eyed. “You mean, when I first met...” The young man’s voice trailed off, but Abba smiled reassuringly. “You are a builder?”

The young man took a deep breath, then began again more calmly. “I am a farmer, but I love to build. They’ve hired me for nearly all building and repairs around Peresh since I was a boy. And Michal too.” Joah’s face looked pained for a moment, then he continued.

“We were both working on a house in town. They wanted to build a room on the roof.” Again Joah stopped, unsure what he should tell them.

“The bricks?” One of the elders supplied gently.

“The bricks,” Joah repeated. “They were on a platform. We built it partway up so we wouldn’t have to carry everything up the ladder to the roof. Michal can just barely reach it from the ground, he’s not as tall as I am.” Again Joah paused. “I mean, he wasn’t.”

Another long pause; this time it was Abba who broke the silence. “And this morning?”

Joah bit his lip and turned towards Abba. “I was on the roof working, and Michal was down below. Two of the bricks were crumbling so I wasn’t going to use them. I reached down to put them on the platform. I could have just carried them down the ladder! It was only two bricks!”

Again his agitation threatened to overwhelm him, but Joah caught his breath and continued. “But when I went to put the bricks on the platform, the whole thing collapsed! It all fell, right on Michal. He screamed.”

Joah shuddered. “I came down as quickly as I could... I dug him out... I didn’t even realize anyone was watching until someone started screeching that he was dead and that I had killed him. And then... I came here.”

Joah glanced around, looking almost as amazed at his story as the rest of them. Abi heard a buzz of noise from behind her. Spinning around, she saw that the crowd had grown considerably since Joah had begun speaking. The young man could not seem to figure out where to look with all the crowd, and stood awkwardly staring at his feet. Abba and the other elders said nothing, looking thoughtful.

Finally Abba spoke, “You know we must verify that your story is true.”

Joah nodded, still looking down.

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“And you must stay here in Golan until we have come to a decision,” another elder added.

Joah’s face pinched, but again he nodded.

“Then I suppose the best thing to do is to think on it tonight and meet again in the morning,” Abba concluded, and the others agreed.

It was decided that Joah would stay with one of the other elders until things were sorted out. With distracted goodbyes, they all headed towards home. Abi and Abba walked quietly for a while, each lost in their own thoughts.

“So, my Abi, what did you think?” Abba asked as they neared home.

“I don’t know! It was all so strange... I guess I was just surprised,” Abi admitted.

Abba chuckled. “Yes, I suppose we all were that. Do you remember what the law of sanctuary is?”

Abi smiled. Of course she remembered what Abba had taught her about the laws of the Mighty One! “When someone kills another person without meaning to, they come to Golan and no one can punish them.”

Abba nodded slowly. “Yes, that’s right. The Mighty One values the lives of the men and women He created. And He has commanded that taking a life is punishable by death. The closest relative of the dead becomes a blood-avenger, and is even permitted to take vengeance on the murderer himself when he meets him.”

They had reached home by this point, and Abba held the door open for Abi.

“But if they come to Golan they’re safe,” Abi finished for him.

Abba smiled. “But they must stay here in Golan for good.”

“Until the high priest dies, over in Shiloh!” Abi was pleased with herself for remembering this part.

“Yes,” Abba nodded, “it is a mercy of the Mighty One to provide refuge for those who find themselves in such a terrible place.” He looked thoughtful.

“Though it is up to us here in the City of Refuge to try to determine their guilt or innocence before we offer them our protection.”

Abi looked up sharply. “Do you mean that man might have killed the other one on purpose?”

Abba’s brow wrinkled, and he stared over Abi’s head for a moment before he spoke. “I don’t know, my Abi. I hope not.”

“But you don’t think he was telling the truth?” Abi pressed.

Again Abba paused before answering. "No, I don't doubt what he told us... I suppose I wonder about what he didn't say."

"What he *didn't* say?"

"I think young Joah may have told us the truth, but there may be more to the truth than what he said."

Abi thought about that for a while. "Like what?"

Abba smiled, seeming to shake himself from his thoughts. "I suppose, my Abi, that is just what we will find out in the morning."

## CHAPTER 4

Abi looked around the empty, silent room, looking for... what? A reason to leave and go down to the gate area? Or a reason not to?

Of course, she knew that she would hear some of what was happening when Abba arrived home tonight. But would it be so wrong to go and listen for herself? After all, she had finished all her morning's work. And Abba had not exactly said that she couldn't go. Of course, she had not exactly asked him. She had just inquired this morning about whether "people" would be allowed to listen as the elders questioned Joah. And she had received a distracted reply that yes, they would.

So, what was stopping her? With one last glance around, Abi closed the door behind her and hurried through the dusty streets. As she approached the gate area, it became obvious that she was not the only person with this idea. Curious neighbors—children and adults—sat on the ground, leaned against the city wall, even watched from the flat roofs of nearby houses.

There was Joah, the stranger, standing at the other end of the corridor formed by the overlapping sections of wall. And there was Abba, sitting on a bench to one side with the other elders. Abi worked her way as close to Abba as she could before squeezing herself in and curling up on the ground with her back to the wall.

Joah was talking as Abi arrived. She had to listen for a few moments before she figured out that he was carefully describing how he had made the bricks that had fallen on the other builder. The elders watched him with expressionless faces, occasionally inserting a question about the process.

At first Abi listened eagerly; she had never really thought about how bricks were made. But she grew bored of bricks long before the elders did. Her mind wandered as they continued an endless list of questions about how many days the bricks needed to dry, and how the finished bricks were stacked.

Finally the subject of bricks was exhausted. Silence hung for a moment, and Joah looked about nervously, perhaps wondering what line of questioning the elders would begin next. Then the oldest of the men lifted his gaze toward the stranger.

"I'm very curious about that platform you built," he said slowly. "Do you think you could tell us how it was made?"

Joah's face became thoughtful. "Yes, sir, I don't understand what could have happened, how it collapsed like that."

He began another detailed explanation. Prompted by the elders, Joah carefully described the wooden platform with its attached ropes, and the fasteners that had held the structure together. At certain points they even had him drawing diagrams in the dirt to illustrate.

Abi wasn't sure what she had expected. But she was a bit disappointed how... well... how *dull* the elders' investigation seemed to be. Evidently, she wasn't the only one feeling that way. The children on Abi's right had left during the brick discussion, letting Abi scoot a little closer. And as Joah carefully detailed the construction of stairs, the two young men on Abi's left quietly slipped away. By the time the discussion got around to the wood they had used to create the platform, the crowd had thinned enough that Abi could touch the bench where Abba sat.

Finally the elders ran out of questions about temporary platforms. An excited hush fell on the crowd that remained, and Joah's worried expression returned. Abi leaned forward; surely now the discussion would turn to something more interesting and make the morning of listening worthwhile. She looked up when she heard Abba's voice.

"Thank you," he was saying. "It sounds like a truly ingenious idea. Now, can you please tell us about the room that you were building?"

Abi sighed and leaned back. Around her, she could see the other onlookers react with similar disappointment. One more slipped away as Joah began describing the original home. Others followed as he sketched another diagram in the dirt of the room they had started building on the roof. By the time they reached the problems of outdoor stairs, the only villagers still present besides Abi were a serious boy who fancied himself a scholar, and two men who seemed genuinely interested in construction.

Abi let her gaze wander over the small group still there. Perhaps she would head home too. It was only getting hotter as the day wore on, and boredom was making her hungry. One of the most careful of the town elders was requesting an explanation of the process of mixing plaster. Abi stifled a yawn and was about to get up herself when she happened to glance up at Abba. He was watching her and, though he looked appropriately serious, she was sure she saw him wink.

Abi leaned back, thinking. Had the elders actually wanted the villagers to get bored and go home? She looked back at Abba, but he was once again so

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completely focused on Joah and his plaster that she might have imagined his look of amusement. But she was certainly not leaving the gate area yet.

“Who might we ask about all these matters?” One of the elders was enquiring. “The owner of the home perhaps? Possibly a message might be sent to him?”

For the first time all morning, Joah’s face relaxed into a true smile. “Oh, yes.” He looked over at the man with obvious relief. “And he might have some idea of what happened to the platform. His name is—”

“Abba!” A shriek burst through the gate area.

Abi started; all heads turned to seek out the source of the disturbance.

“Abba!” The voice was clearly that of a very young child, and seemed to be coming from the outer gate. Abi looked beyond where Joah stood wide-eyed, and saw a young man and woman leaning against the wall near the day guards, holding a small girl.

“Abba!”

Actually, you couldn’t really say they were holding the thrashing child. It was more of an attempt to restrain her. With this last insistent shriek, the woman gave up entirely and set the squirming girl on the ground. As fast as her chubby legs could manage, the child ran to Joah bin-Laban and threw herself at him, wrapping her little arms around his knees.

“Abba,” she repeated contentedly, as a dazed Joah bent to pick up what was apparently his daughter.

Even some of the elders were slack-jawed as they turned from the child to the two newcomers. The man’s face was twisted in worry, the young woman leaned limply against the outer wall. In spite of her evident fatigue, the woman was exceptionally beautiful. Something in her fine features and slim form reminded Abi of her sister-in-law, Rivka.

Joah had turned to face the newcomers, his expression intense, as if he was trying to communicate using only his eyes. The young woman straightened up and raised her chin, staring back at him just as determinedly.

The silence had stretched long enough to be awkward when Joah finally seemed to remember the people of Golan watching him.

“I...” he bit his lip and shifted the weight of the child snuggled against his shoulder. “That is...”

With one last, unreadable look at the beautiful stranger, he turned back to the elders. “May I introduce you to my wife, Kezia, and her brother Dan.”

The young woman lowered her eyes and stepped closer to Joah and the child as the city elders murmured confused greetings. For another long moment no one seemed to know what to do. Finally Abba broke the silence.

“We welcome your family to the city of Golan,” he said slowly. “It has been a long morning for you, Joah, and for all of us. Perhaps it is best if we pause for a midday meal.”

The other elders nodded their agreement and rose stiffly from their benches. The young man, Dan, stepped forward and said a few words to his sister that Abi couldn’t hear. One of the elders joined them, and in a few moments the little family had turned wordlessly and followed him back to his house. Others walked away slowly alone or in pairs, but Abba was still on the bench, talking in a low voice to the man next to him.

Hesitantly, Abi approached him. “Abba?” she asked uncertainly.

Her father looked up with a distracted smile. “Go on, my Abi,” his voice was gentle but determined. “Perhaps I will be along to eat in a little while.”

Abi made her way home alone. Somehow, the fact that Joah bin-Laban had a pretty wife and a young daughter made the whole strange story seem somehow more real. The long morning of construction techniques had almost made her forget that one man, no older than her brothers, had died.

And one little girl had a father who might be a murderer.

## CHAPTER 5

Abi waited a long time before eating, but she was not surprised when Abba didn't come home. She quickly tidied up before hurrying back to the gate area.

Turning a corner, Abi was pleased to find she was walking just behind Joah and his pretty wife. The young child was still being carried by her father, and her little face peeked at Abi from over his shoulder.

Abi grinned and waved at her, and the girl's face lit up as she waved back. Abi made a silly face, and the little one giggled. This drew her parents' attention, and they both looked back at Abi as they walked.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Abi stopped. The look on Joah's face could have been displeasure, or something else.

His wife smiled warmly though. "You enjoy children?"

It was the first time Abi had heard the woman's voice. It was soft and pleasant, and her expression was friendly.

Abi nodded. "I have a lot of nieces and nephews," she explained, drawing another laugh from the girl with another funny face.

This time even Joah smiled a little. "This is Dinah," his wife said, "and I am Kezia."

"I remember," Abi nodded again. Even the woman's name was beautiful.

They were approaching the gate area, and Joah turned to his wife to hand the child to her. But little Dinah, bouncing happily in her father's arms, clung tightly to him even as her mother attempted to pull her away. Another round of shrieking seemed imminent, and both adults looked warily toward the small crowd at the gate.

Impulsively, Abi stepped forward and tickled the little girl's chin. Startled, Dinah turned her head and allowed her mother to pluck her gently from her father's arms. But, to Abi's surprise as much as anyone's, Dinah now turned her determined little face to Abi. The girl held out her arms in an obvious attempt to get to her new friend.

"May I?" Abi asked. Both parents nodded, and Abi scooped up the little girl. With a short burst of toddler syllables no one understood, Dinah wrapped her chubby arms around Abi's neck and smiled contentedly.

"Thank you," Joah's face finally showed a genuine smile. He squeezed his wife's hand before stepping ahead to his place with the town elders.

Kezia stood near Abi and watched her husband go. After a moment she turned to Abi with another friendly smile.

“She always loves her Abba,” Kezia gestured to her young daughter. “But she’s been especially frantic since he left yesterday. I wonder if she understands...”

They both stared at little Dinah, now happily playing with Abi’s hair.

“Well, I’d miss my Abba too,” Abi offered, and the two shared a smile. Together they followed Joah back to the gate area, and sat down together on the ground.

The group at the gate looked much as it did that morning. “Dan already went back to Peresh,” Kezia remarked.

Abi looked up at the young woman. Her husband was accused of murder, and the only other person she knew in town was gone. Suddenly Abi felt a rush of sympathy for Kezia, and little Dinah too. She determined that she would do anything she could to help them. Anything.

One of the elders cleared his throat, and silence descended as they all turned towards him. “I wish for you to tell us a little more about Michal,” the man said.

Beside Abi, Kezia stiffened slightly. She said nothing, though. They both watched Joah as Dinah cuddled on Abi’s lap.

The young man was taking his time answering. “Michal is... was... a clever man,” he began, looking wary. “And a wealthy one. His father was an only son, and his mother inherited property in her own right as she had no brothers. Their family owns a great deal of land and hires servants and laborers to work it for them.”

This caused a little stir, even among the elders. Few families in Golan were what could be called wealthy. And Abi had never known any who hired servants, though she had heard of it.

Joah stopped, unsure. “He was a builder, also?” one of the elders prompted gently.

“Yes, he is... was...” Joah shook his head, catching himself in the mistake again. “He loved to build things. He was always planning or working on their house. He’s always full of ideas, looking for new, better ways to build things, or make things work. Better designs, better tools...” his voice trailed off.

“Better than everyone else?” It was Abba’s soft voice.

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“Most of the time,” Joah answered, lost in thought. “Not always though.” The young man’s head shot up. “That is... not that we were in competition... it wasn’t like that.”

“Of course,” Abba reassured. “But you knew him well?”

“Oh, yes,” Joah responded, “that is, I suppose so.” He stopped, unsure again. “You worked together often?” another elder asked.

“Yes,” Joah nodded. “People used to call on both of us for help in building houses or walls, sometimes fancier things.”

“Would you say you two were friends?”

“I...” Joah had his mouth open to answer, then closed it. “We...” he tried again.

“What’s wrong, Joah?” An angry voice spoke from somewhere behind him. “You don’t want to tell these good people how you and my brother were the best of friends growing up, but now you haven’t spoken in years?”

For the third time in two days, everyone turned amazed faces to the city gate. This time it was a tall man, standing so near the day guards that they jumped when they heard his voice.

“Avner,” Kezia breathed, stiffening and involuntarily grabbing Abi’s arm.

Abi herself felt a chill as she looked at the dark stranger. He was tall and thin, with a young face that could have been handsome in spite of its sharpness, but wasn’t.

The stranger brushed past the day guards and into the city.

“I see that Joah is not going to introduce me,” he said, his voice still harsh. “I am Avner bin-Hanniel of Peresh, come to see that justice is done for the murder of my brother.”

Of course, Abi had been taught not to stare at strangers, or to treat people unkindly because of physical deformities. But she could not seem to take her eyes off of this man. Even the elders could not help staring. One of Avner bin-Hanniel’s eyes gazed at Joah, full of anger and spite. But the other eye simply... didn’t. It seemed to be focused in another direction, up and off to the side, somehow. More than one head turned to see what the newcomer might be staring at, then snapped quickly back in embarrassment. Of course the man couldn’t help it, but the effect was uncomfortable, even a bit frightening.

“Well, Joah?” The stranger seemed unfazed by the stir he had caused.

Joah said nothing. Abi glanced over at Kezia, who seemed to be holding her breath. Somehow the child in her lap had not reacted to the frightening

newcomer; when Abi looked down she was relieved to see that little Dinah had fallen asleep.

On the benches before them, Abba cleared his throat. Abi could see the elders stirring nervously, as though shaking themselves out of some kind of spell. Some of the men were only now turning their gazes from the intense newcomer to look around sheepishly at Joah and each other.

“Avner bin-Hanniel,” Abba’s voice was soft. “The city of Golan welcomes you, and shares your desire to see that justice is done.”

Avner nodded curtly, his one-eyed gaze still focused on Joah.

“Now, Joah,” Abba continued. “Avner bin-Hanniel has made some very serious statements about you and about his brother. And it is important for us to know the truth of what he says. Were you indeed close friends with Michal bin-Hanniel in your youth?”

“Yes, sir,” Joah’s quiet reply seemed directed to the dirt below them. His face bore an expression of utter defeat.

“And is it true that you have become less close in recent years?”

Joah gave a small nod and looked about to answer, but Avner cut in.

“Less close?” He echoed sharply, his good eye turning away from Joah for the first time. The look he gave Abba might have been scornful. But it was difficult to tell, when his other eye was aimed in a completely different direction.

Abba turned a mildly reproachful gaze to Avner before looking back at Joah. “You were saying?”

“Yes, sir,” Joah still did not look up.

“Often a natural distance grows as young men marry and assume new roles in their communities. Is this what our friend Avner is referring to?” Abba’s voice was mild, but Abi caught several sharp looks between the other elders.

For a long moment there was no answer. Then, finally, Joah’s quiet voice could be heard. “No, sir.”

The gate area had become very quiet indeed. Abi could feel herself holding in a pent-up breath, and only now noticed that Kezia was still gripping her arm.

“We will assume that you would have told us this information yourself, had Avner not arrived,” another elder was saying in a guarded voice. “But you can see how important it is for us to determine the nature of your relationship. What can you tell us about Michal bin-Hanniel?”

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Another long silence followed. Joah glanced up as if about to speak, then bit his lip and looked away again. Once again Abi found herself holding her breath, and released it slowly.

Not slowly enough, though. A loud cry from Abi's lap broke the silence as little Dinah awoke from her short nap. All eyes turned in their direction, and an embarrassed Kezia fumbled to gather the little girl into her own arms. But for some reason this only made the child cry louder. Kezia struggled to her feet, murmuring soothing sounds as she tried to hush Dinah's increasingly loud wails.

Nervously, Abi looked up, unsure what to do and hoping to catch Abba's eye. But, instead, she found the disquieting gaze of Avner bin-Hanniel on her. There was something so unnatural about that one eye on her and the other rolling uselessly up. Abi turned away with a shudder.

Eager to get away from Avner's half-stare, Abi scrambled to her feet and turned toward Kezia and Dinah. The little girl's sobs were slowing down, and Abi could hear Kezia's quiet words.

"Hush now, it's all right, little one," Kezia's voice was soothing as she gently patted Dinah's head. "You're all right."

"Perhaps it is time for all of us to rest," one of the elders was saying. The others seemed to agree, though Abi did not turn around to see. Somehow she could not bear to even look at Avner bin-Hanniel watching her.

"It's all right," Kezia was still murmuring. With a little sigh, Dinah's cries stopped and she relaxed her head on her mother's shoulder. "See, you're just fine."

Kezia smiled at Abi, and Abi tried to smile back. But a coldness Abi couldn't explain was growing inside her.

In spite of Kezia's reassuring words, Abi was not sure things really were just fine. For little Dinah and her parents, life might not be just fine. Not fine at all.

## CHAPTER 6

It was subtle, unspoken; the town of Golan no longer quite trusted Joah bin-Laban. The looks were a little less friendly, the words a little more guarded. When the elders decided to be done for the day after Dinah's disturbance, it was quietly arranged that Joah would stay at one house and his wife and daughter at another. No one said that they were afraid of him running away.

But they didn't really have to.

Joah was still welcome with the family who had hosted him the previous night. And Kezia and Dinah, it was agreed, would go to the big house with Abi and Abba. They had all seen how much little Dinah had taken to Abi, and most of the elders seemed only too glad to avoid the boisterous child themselves.

Abi had not forgotten her determination to help the young mother and daughter. She did her very best cooking, though it had to be admitted that no one was all that hungry for meals. And the next morning, she even offered to keep little Dinah at home so Kezia could watch the proceedings at the gate.

So it was that Abi found herself alone with an extremely active toddler for the morning. At first she enjoyed it a great deal. They played games, sang songs, told stories and went for walks. As midday approached, however, little Dinah grew restless and cranky. When Abi was holding her, she wanted to be put down. But before she had gone more than a few steps, she began whining to be picked up again. After going through this routine several times, Dinah burst into frustrated tears and began pounding on Abi's shoulder.

It was at this exact moment that Rivka appeared at the door, little Rachel on her hip.

"Having trouble, Abi?" Rivka asked. There was genuine concern in her sister-in-law's voice. But was Abi imagining her look of satisfaction at seeing Abi's failure?

"No, I'm fine," Abi answered.

And, surprisingly, it was true. Seeing new faces had startled Dinah out of her tantrum, for the moment at least. Abi walked her slowly toward the door, speaking in what she hoped was a calming voice.

"Look, here's Rachel. She's just about your size. Actually, she's a little smaller, though I think she's older than you. Do you want to go talk to Rachel?"

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At close range now, the two little girls looked at each other for a moment. Finally Rachel gave a slow, shy smile, and Dinah began to laugh. Abi and Rivka grinned at each other, in a shared delight that Abi seldom found with her sister-in-law. Together, they walked the children to the center of the room and set them down on the floor to try and play together.

It was only then that Abi thought to wonder why Rivka was there. It was not uncommon for Abi's other siblings to stop in with offers of help or food, but Rivka was usually too busy with her own affairs.

With a grimace, Rivka lowered herself to the floor next to her daughter. Abi gasped—how could she have forgotten the terrible ordeal her sister-in-law had so recently been through? Of course her period of uncleanness was over, but the young woman still looked worn. Feeling guilty for her unkind thoughts, Abi sat down on the floor across from her.

“Here you go, Rachel,” Abi handed her niece one of the wooden bowls little Dinah had been stacking up and knocking over earlier that morning, and for a while both girls played happily. Soon Dinah grew restless again, though, scowling at the toys Abi brought and sniffling as though she might begin crying.

“Here y'go,” it was little Rachel, echoing Abi's words as she stood up and walked shyly over to hand one of the wooden bowls to Dinah. The younger girl brightened right up, so much so that she tackled Rachel with an exuberant hug. Before either Abi or Rivka could catch her, Rachel had fallen to the floor.

Abi braced herself for a scolding from Rivka for not keeping control of little Dinah. But it didn't come. Instead, her sister-in-law merely scooped up her own daughter and comforted the child in a sing-song voice.

“Poor baby lamb, your little friend didn't mean to hurt you, did she now? It's all right, little lamb.”

It was only as Abi bent to pick up Dinah that she saw what Rivka must have already noticed—Abba and Kezia in the doorway. Kezia had already started toward the commotion in the center of the room.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” she breathed as she bent to make sure that Rachel was all right. “She doesn't mean to hurt anyone.”

Rachel peeked out from where she had burrowed in her mother's arms. “It's all right,” Rivka looked up at the newcomer with a friendly smile. “You must be Dinah's mother?”

“Yes, I'm Kezia,” she answered. “And are you Abi's sister?”

“Sister-in-law,” Rivka corrected.

Dinah was only too happy to go back to her mother, and Abi hurried over to give Abba a hug.

“Did it... was everything all right?” she asked him quietly, as the two mothers chatted.

Abba shook his head slowly. “Well, my Abi, I just don’t know. I’m afraid this matter is going to take longer to sort out than we thought.”

“Do you mean... do you think that Joah actually murdered that man?” she asked, still keeping her voice low.

Abba took a long time to answer. “I don’t know, my Abi. I hope not. But, if he did, then he must face justice.”

Abi followed her father’s gaze to Kezia and Dinah, and she shuddered a little. Kezia’s husband could not have done that terrible thing. He just couldn’t!

But what if he had?

“And what did he say?” Rivka’s voice cut through Abi’s thoughts, and a wave of irritation swept over her. Of course, that was why Rivka had come over! Not to help Abi, but to hear about the investigation.

Kezia seemed embarrassed by Rivka’s question. “I suppose he had to tell them the truth. There really was a reason why Joah and Michal stopped speaking to each other.” The young woman flushed and looked away.

“Ah,” Rivka seemed to understand without being told. Abi didn’t, though.

“What did he tell them?” Rivka’s voice was surprisingly sympathetic.

“He said that the end of their friendship came when my father agreed to our marriage,” Kezia’s voice was almost a whisper.

Oh... men fighting over Kezia. Abi remembered the tension leading up to Nathan’s betrothal to Rivka, the competition for such a beautiful prize. Abi remembered long, anguished talks between her father and brother, and her own sense of pride that Nathan had emerged victorious. Guiltily, she also remembered her own later thoughts, that Rivka had not been worth the bother.

Abi glanced up at her father, but Abba had slipped out. Abi saw him through the window, apparently busy outdoors. Rivka too was glancing around for her father-in-law, as if hesitant to ask more in his presence. Not seeing him, she turned back to Kezia.

“Was it your father’s choice?” There was a kindness in her voice that Abi wasn’t used to hearing.

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“No,” Kezia answered. “Well, I mean, yes. Of course it was his choice. But Abba wanted my happiness more than Michal’s money. No amount of wealth would be worth that temper.”

Somehow, Abi had never thought of the situation from that point of view before. Kezia’s happiness. Had anyone considered Rivka’s happiness? Had her Abba, when he agreed to give her to Nathan? Of course, Abi’s brother was cheerful and kind, nothing like this Michal. But, still, had Rivka been happy?

In Abi’s family, she knew that her sisters were pleased with the men that Abba had chosen for them. Each had been enthusiastic in looking forward to her wedding. Abi had never given much thought to her own future marriage. But she felt sure that her Abba would behave as Kezia’s had, desiring his daughter’s happiness. Had that been the case for Rivka? Abi realized she might never know the answer—truly, it was none of her business. But it did cause her to look at her difficult sister-in-law in a more sympathetic way.

“Well, obviously those rumors Michal spread about you weren’t true. And, Kezia, none of it was your fault!” Rivka’s voice cut through Abi’s thoughts. How much of the conversation had she missed?

“Wasn’t it? Who can say? We all knew Michal had a temper. He was always used to getting his own way. But no one expected him to react so harshly.” The young woman sighed. “I know it was the end of their dream to work together. They’re both so clever, always so good at taking each other’s ideas and making them better. They were already making a name for themselves in Peresh. Together they might have been the best craftsmen in Gilead. But now...” her voice trailed off.

“They work separately?” Rivka asked.

Kezia laughed sadly. “You might say that. Joah’s family has always been poor, we have so little. With Michal’s support, Joah could afford to leave the farm and work with him. But without Michal,” she sighed sadly, “he’s stuck, never able to do what he loves most.”

“And Michal?”

Kezia shrugged. “He’s been working with his brother Avner. Michal’s still good, but it was the two of them together that had something special.”

Rivka took Kezia’s hands. “It still wasn’t your fault. You know that.”

Kezia sighed. “Wasn’t it?” she repeated. “Even with all that, the death of Joah’s dreams, I’d still make the same choice. I’d still rather starve with Joah than spend my life with a man like Michal. I kept hoping and praying.” She

sighed again. "When Old Bethuel hired them both this spring, he gave us more money than we'd seen in a long time, so Joah could pay his cousin to do the farm work." The young woman smiled a little. "Sometimes I'd hear them working together when they didn't know I was there. One of them would suggest something, and just for a moment they were brothers again, creating something beautiful together. I'd always hoped that maybe, one day..."

A chorus of wails from outside startled them all. Both of the mothers jumped, glancing frantically around for their little ones. Abi was already on her feet, but it was Abba in the doorway, one small, crying girl in each arm.

"I..." Abba's words were drowned out by the exclamations of the mothers, and the wails of their children. Smiling tolerantly, the older man handed off each crying child to her mother, and put his arm around Abi.

"Maybe I am not so good with the little ones as you are, my Abi?" he smiled down at her.

"I didn't even see them go outside," Abi admitted.

"No?" Abba smiled again. "I thought perhaps your sister-in-law could do more for our poor Kezia than either of us. But now, how about some lunch?"

The commotion of children was settling down as the two of them returned to the house. Rivka was saying her goodbyes to Kezia. Was it Abi's imagination, or was her sister-in-law even a little warmer to Abi and Abba than usual?

They ate quickly, and it was decided that both Kezia and Dinah would stay back with Abi when Abba left again for the afternoon. Kezia offered to help clean up, but Abi could tell that the young woman was exhausted. It took little urging for both mother and daughter to curl up for a nap.

As she tidied up from the meal and the visiting toddlers, Abi thought about Kezia's story. The dead man, Michal, seemed unkind, even cruel. But he had been Joah's friend once. And, at least from Kezia's point of view, he had been the cause of a lot of pain in their family. But that would never be enough reason to kill someone, would it? Of course it wasn't.

Abi glanced at Kezia and Dinah, sleeping peacefully on borrowed mats. What would happen to them... if it was?

## CHAPTER 7

Abi had plenty to do while Dinah and Kezia slept. Truly, she loved keeping house for Abba, though it often meant she had less time for friends her own age. She even enjoyed the solitude of the quiet, empty house.

Today, though, she enjoyed the company. Kezia awoke before her daughter, and the two of them chatted quietly while they worked through Abi's chores. Like Abi, Kezia also came from a large family, though she was in the middle of a brood of siblings. Perhaps one day Abi could meet Kezia's younger sister and brothers! It was a pleasant thought.

Little Dinah was still sleeping when they heard Abba outside, along with another familiar voice.

“It’s Joah!” Kezia exclaimed happily, rushing out to see her husband.

Abi glanced at the still sleeping Dinah before she joined the adults. Kezia had hardly seen her husband for days; it was so sad that the little family had to be kept separated at such a frightening time. Of course, if Joah really had killed that man, it had to be done. But Abi still couldn’t see Dinah’s father as a murderer.

“They said I can walk alone with you,” Joah was saying to his wife, “as long as we stay on the main road inside the city, and come back before sunset.”

“Almost as strict as my Abba, like we’re courting again.” Kezia smiled, but it was a sad smile.

Joah took his wife’s hand, then looked around. “Is Dinah...”

“She’s still napping,” Kezia replied. “Abi, would you mind looking out for her while we’re gone?”

“Of course!” Abi agreed.

“Perfect,” Abba smiled. “You two young people can take advantage of the baby’s nap time, and I will follow her example and rest a bit myself.”

Abba slipped inside the house while Joah and Kezia walked away, their heads close together and their voices low. Abi watched them for a moment from the doorway, lifting her face to the late afternoon sunshine. She ducked inside to check on Dinah, and was on her way back out to enjoy the warmth, when a movement outside caught her eye. A figure was emerging from the shadows between Abi’s house and the next, his head twitching back and forth to scan the area for anyone watching him.

It was Avner, the dead man’s brother!

Quickly Abi pulled herself back inside. What was he doing here? Had he been there listening to them? It gave her a nasty, creeping feeling to think of that unpleasant man hiding between houses and spying on her family with his single working eye. Why was he here?

Moving slowly, she ducked down, trying to position herself so she could watch him from just inside the open door. From this angle Abi was pretty sure she would stay hidden in the shadows, just as he was attempting to do.

The strange young man had crossed the street to where the shadows were longer and the buildings closer together. As Abi watched, he slipped between two houses, then stopped and looked around again.

From just up the street Abi heard the sound of Kezia's laughter, then saw Avner scowl before sneaking past the next house, closer to the walking couple. Was he following them?

Abi shivered. She knew it was wrong to judge someone based on a physical deformity. But the stranger's unnatural eyes were only part of why she found him so scary. Why was he so harsh and unpleasant toward everyone? What did he know about his brother Michal's life and death?

And why was he following Joah and Kezia?

For that's what he was doing, she was certain now. Abi watched the young couple turn a corner taking them out of her line of sight, and soon Avner had copied their movements.

Without even stopping to think about Dinah, Abi ran out the door after them. In only a moment, she had reached the spot where the three young adults had turned. Still trying to stay out of sight, she stopped to catch her breath against a wall. Ducking down, she cautiously peeked around the corner.

There he was!

Barely breathing, Abi whipped her head back. Avner was right there, so close she could have touched him, leaning against the next wall of the same building!

Slowly, silently, Abi took a deep breath. From her quick glance, it seemed that Avner had been totally focused in the other direction. Bracing herself, she peeked around the corner again.

This time she got a better look. She saw Joah and Kezia's backs as they walked, still holding hands. This was a larger road, and other villagers were also wandering by, alone or in small groups. She noticed people turning to watch the

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newcomers as they walked; surely by now Joah's story was the subject of much gossip in Golan.

Avner's back was to her as he leaned against the wall, his arms crossed and his gaze squarely focused on the young couple. Again Abi pulled back to her side of the house.

This was ridiculous. There were plenty of people around. Whatever Avner was up to, he wasn't going to harm Joah or Kezia on a busy public street. She was acting like a fool, and surely every neighbor she knew was watching her from out their windows and laughing.

Shaking her head at her own silliness, Abi turned toward home.

She heard the loud wails from two houses away. She had forgotten about Dinah!

Quickening her steps, Abi could hear another voice as she drew closer. Little Dinah had woken up Abba, and now Abi would have to tell him what happened. Abi sighed. She had been hoping no one would know how foolish she had been.

"I'm so sorry, Abba!" Abi exclaimed as she burst through the front door. Her arrival surprised Dinah into silence for a moment, and Abi took quick advantage of that by scooping her from Abba's arms and giving her a snack. Now distracted, the child nestled against Abi as Abba watched them both.

"Are you all right, my Abi?" he asked, finally.

"Yes. But Abba, Avner was here! The dead man's brother. He was sneaking around outside our house, and he was following Joah and Kezia!"

Quickly Abi told her father the story. Abba studied her, nodding slowly.

"So," his voice was even more slow and deliberate than normal, "you decided to sneak out and follow Avner, to try and see why he was sneaking out to follow Joah and Kezia?"

Abi flushed. "Yes, Abba."

"And did he tell you why he was following them?" Abba asked.

"No, Abba." Abi sighed.

"Oh, my Abi, my joy, it is not your job to solve this mystery. I do not think Avner would hurt you, but you still should not be sneaking around after him."

"He might have hurt Joah and Kezia, though," Abi defended herself.

"Well, yes. That's why he is here. If we determine that Joah did kill his brother intentionally, Avner will take the lead in executing the sentence."

Abi shivered. She knew that this was why Avner had come. That's what it meant to be the avenger of blood when someone you loved was killed. Still, it seemed so horrible!

"But I don't believe he will act without our permission," Abba was saying.

"Then why was he following them?" Abi wondered.

Now Abba sighed. "Young Avner does not trust our friend Joah. He spent much of our time today trying to convince the elders that Joah would flee Golan in order to escape justice. And he was quite opposed to letting Joah walk and talk unguarded with his wife. It seemed unlikely to us that they would attempt to escape the city without their daughter, and in broad daylight. Nor do I think they would use their precious time together to plot such a thing. But I can only assume that we were unable to convince Avner otherwise. And, like you, he determined to take matters into his own hands."

"I'm sorry, Abba," Abi repeated. "I knew it was foolish. I should have stayed here to take care of Dinah, like I promised Joah and Kezia."

Abba put his arm around her. "I know you want to help your friends, my Abi. But you must remember that Joah may very well have done this terrible thing. The Mighty One has given us this duty, to determine truth and enact justice. It is a mighty responsibility, a task like that of the Mighty One Himself. And we cannot assume that we know the truth simply because in our hearts we like one man over another."

Abi nodded. It was true, Joah was pleasant and kind, and loved by his wife and daughter. Avner was threatening and harsh. But beautiful people could be hiding evil. And unpleasant people could be right.

"Abba, do you really think Joah is guilty?" Abi couldn't help asking.

Abba sighed. "I wish I could be sure, one way or another. When two men fight over a woman, there is always bad blood. But for the one who marries her to then kill the one who doesn't?" He shook his head. "Would cruel words and hurtful rumors be enough to keep a man angry at an old friend for more than three years?"

"Well, Joah would also be mad because Michal has kept him from being able to build things anymore," Abi remembered Kezia's words from this morning.

"What was that?" Abba's voice was sharper than usual. Perhaps Abi knew something that the elders didn't!

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“Kezia told us that Joah and Michal used to work together building things, but now they don’t anymore,” Abi told him.

“Yes, Joah told the elders that also,” Abba replied slowly. “But Michal was preventing Joah somehow?”

“No, not exactly,” Abi tried to remember. “But Kezia said that Joah was too poor to leave the farm to build things, without Michal’s help he couldn’t afford it. Michal used to help him somehow, but now he doesn’t, so Joah is stuck on the farm. Kezia felt bad that because of her Joah could no longer do the thing he loved.”

“Hmmm,” Abba was silent for a moment. “Thank you for telling me that, Abi.”

Abi flushed with pleasure. Perhaps Abba did need her help after all!

“It seems there are more questions we need to ask Joah bin-Laban tomorrow,” Abba was saying in his slow, measured way. “There is still much we need to understand, perhaps more than Joah is not telling us.”

Abba’s voice trailed off, and suddenly Abi was afraid to ask any more questions. For all her desire to help, had she made things worse? If she hadn’t been there when Kezia and Rivka were talking this morning, Abba and the elders might not have known the source of Joah’s bitterness. All Abi wanted was to help the little family! But had she passed along the information that would destroy it?

## CHAPTER 8

It was a tense, quiet evening in the big house. Joah and Kezia returned before sunset, as promised, both looking anxious. Had they noticed Avner spying on them?

Joah thanked Abba for caring for his wife and daughter, but said little else and left soon afterward. Whatever they had spoken of while they walked, it left Kezia somber and silent. She offered to help Abi with dinner, but neither of them could manage the cheerful conversation they had shared earlier. Kezia seemed lost in her own thoughts, and Abi was too full of worry to try and comfort her. Abba was gentle, as always, but even he seemed distant and inattentive.

Only little Dinah was unaffected by the gloomy mood. Full of energy from her long nap, she toddled around busily, full of small noises that Abi would normally have found adorable. Tonight, though, the child's energy seemed exhausting, even annoying. Abi's head began to ache, and the evening dragged endlessly.

Things seemed little better the next morning. Abi hadn't slept well, and, from the looks of things, neither had anyone else. Abba left early to meet with the other elders at the gate, and Kezia still didn't seem to desire company.

"I'll stay back this morning with Dinah," she announced with a weary smile. "But if you'd like to go and hear what's going on I don't mind. I'll take care of the midday meal; it might be nice to have some time to myself."

So Abi once again made her way to the gate area. The men had not yet begun their work when she arrived. Looking around, Abi saw Avner arguing with some of the elders. Quickly she turned to avoid that little group. There was Abba, deep in conversation. Joah, his face anxious, sat on a bench next to the man he had been staying with.

On the other side of the elder was a surprise. Abi recognized Rivka's brother Matthias, a young man a few years older than herself. She gave him a sympathetic look. Children often joked about being called before the town elders for their pranks and problems. But only rarely were any of them so punished. Poor Matthias must have done something truly awful to be called here now, when the men were already consumed with their investigation. Abi didn't know Rivka's brother well, but she remembered him as responsible and clever. She wondered what he had done while she looked for a place to sit.

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Finally, one of the men called the group to order and offered a rather long prayer for divine wisdom. When he was finished, everyone turned their attention to the town elder who was sitting between Joah and Matthias.

“Brothers,” the man began, “my nephew has returned from his journey to fetch Bethuel of Peresh.”

Ahh, that was why Matthias was here. He must have been serving as a messenger for the town elders. But who was this Bethuel? And why was Matthias sent to fetch him? Abi looked around the circle for a new face that could be Bethuel of Peresh.

“Unfortunately,” the older man was saying, “Bethuel was unable to make the journey. My nephew Matthias bin-Yosef will give his report to you.”

All eyes focused on the young man, who now stood up nervously.

“Thank you, Matthias, for making the journey so quickly,” Abba began. “But we are saddened that Bethuel himself could not be here to talk with us about the tragedy that took place at his house. Was the man ill?”

Ahh, Abi remembered now. Old Bethuel was the man who had hired Joah and Michal to work on his house. Of course they would want to learn any information he could give them.

“No, sir,” Matthias was saying. “He seemed to be in good health.”

“Did he give a reason why he was unable to travel?” another man asked.

“No, sir,” Matthias replied.

“Did you explain to him the nature of our investigation?”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a frustrated silence in the group. Matthias looked around, and for a moment his gaze rested on Abi. She watched him continue to scan the group until his eyes hit Avner. Matthias jerked his face away, and Abi smiled sympathetically.

“Well,” it was Abba picking the conversation back up, “did Bethuel of Peresh have any message for us? Anything to help us draw a wise conclusion in this matter?”

“No, sir,” Matthias replied again. “He said to tell you that he knows nothing that would be of value to the elders of Golan. But he prays that the Mighty One will guide your investigation.”

Abi heard a quiet voice mutter something about letting *them* decide what would be of value. She frowned, not sure who had spoken. As she watched, Matthias’ gaze again drifted to Avner bin-Hanniel’s angry, one-eyed glare. This

time, Abi noticed, Avner met Matthias' stare. Quickly Matthias turned his face away, intent on a point over the elders' heads.

"Well," the man who was Matthias' uncle said finally, "the city of Golan appreciates your willing service, young Matthias." Several other voices echoed the thought. "You may return to your work with our thanks."

The young man nodded, then turned to go. Once again, though, he turned to look at Avner bin-Hanniel. But then he turned to look directly at Abi. Was he mouthing words she couldn't hear? Abi bit her lip. Was the young man trying to communicate something to her? What? And why?

There was a quiet shuffling of feet and clearing of throats as the elders of Golan prepared to resume their deliberations without the expected help from Peresh. Abi idly turned to watch Matthias as he walked away, and was surprised to see him again glance back at her. Impulsively, she got up and followed him.

Abi waited until she was sure they were out of earshot of the gate area. "Matthias?" she called softly.

The young man turned, and Abi immediately felt awkward and self-conscious. Why in the world had she followed him?

Small children could talk easily to anyone. And young adults of marriage age had strict rules about communication. But she fit into neither category. And Abi wasn't sure it was even appropriate for the two of them to be talking alone on the quiet street. Uncomfortably, she remembered her promise to Abba yesterday that she would stop trying to solve mysteries.

"Abi," Matthias smiled, and Abi sighed with relief. At least he wasn't upset that she was there.

The young man stepped closer, then looked around. Obviously he, too, felt awkward about this conversation. With a look of determination, however, he plunged ahead.

"Joah's wife is at your house, right?" Matthias began. Abi nodded.

"You need to tell her that something's wrong. I don't know what, but it has to do with that guy Avner. I left at sunrise yesterday, and he was already there at the gate. He tried to bug me about going to Peresh. I didn't talk to him, and the city guards kept him from bothering me. Then, when I came back late last night, he was still there waiting at the gate."

"He thinks Joah is going to try and escape," Abi heard herself telling him.

Matthias nodded. "The guards must have been distracted last night, because he kept trying to ask me what I learned in Peresh. I still wouldn't talk to him, and

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he was getting really angry. I think that's why Bethuel wouldn't come here. You know, that old guy in Peresh."

Abi nodded, but was still puzzled. "What does he have to do with it? Did he tell you something about Avner?"

"No, but I could tell he was afraid to talk to me. Kept looking around as if someone was watching him, starting to say stuff but then not telling me anything, that kind of thing. I thought maybe he was..." the young man made a gesture questioning the stranger's mental facilities. "But then, when Avner kept coming after me last night, I wondered if the old guy was just scared. That Avner is bad news. I think maybe he was threatening him."

"Maybe about money," the idea popped into Abi's head. "Avner's family is really rich."

"Yeah," Matthias looked impressed with her idea. "I bet you're right!"

For a moment they stood there, each thinking about this strange set of circumstances they had been thrust into. Then, all at once, they both realized how strange it was for them to be talking to one another.

Abi stepped back, and Matthias looked away. "Well, anyway," he said awkwardly, "you should tell her. Something is going on in Peresh. They'd never let Joah go back there, but maybe she could. I bet Old Bethuel would talk to her... anyone would talk to her," the young man finished quietly.

Abi shook her head. Boys.

Didn't Matthias know that Kezia would never be able to travel alone in the hills like he could? She would need a husband, or a father, or a brother. Kezia had none of those here. At least, none that could help her. She just had Abi and Abba.

Matthias was watching her, though, waiting for some kind of response. "I'll tell her," Abi promised.

"Well, good." Matthias was edging away, clearly unsure how to end the conversation. "Thanks."

"Thanks," Abi echoed. They each gave each other a sort of nod, then turned away.

As Abi walked, she considered Matthias' theory, and the questions it raised. Did Old Bethuel back in Peresh know something about Michal's death? What might that be? Did it involve Avner?

Had Avner been threatening the old man to keep him from sharing information? Abi knew that she and Matthias both felt intimidated by Avner bin-Hanniel. But would he really be all that frightening to the elders of his own city?

Abi thought about Kezia's words the previous day. Kezia said that Old Bethuel gave Joah money to work for him, enough that they could pay someone to do the farm work. If the man had so much money, Avner couldn't threaten him in that way, could he? Was there some other threat Avner might have made? What could it be? And why?

Abi stopped walking when she came to the biggest question of all.

What could any of them do about it?

## CHAPTER 9

Abi wasn't really paying attention to where she was going as she walked. Lost in thought, she was nearly home before she remembered that she meant to go back to the city gate.

Close to the house, Abi stopped when she saw Kezia sitting alone outside. The young woman's face was down, her arms wrapped around her knees, her head bowed as if she was crying or praying.

For the first time, Abi considered what would happen if Joah really was guilty. It felt impossible, but it could be true. None of them here in Golan really knew the young man. How hard would it be to create a contraption that would collapse on someone else and make it look like an accident?

Even now, the men at the gate might be deciding that Joah had acted with enmity against his former friend. As soon as the city elders came to that conclusion, they would tie Joah up and make preparations to stone him.

Abi had never seen someone stoned, though she had heard about it. Anyone in Golan could come to the open place outside the city gate. They would form a ring around Joah, stones in hand. Avner would throw the first stone, then the rest would join in. The image of Joah's body pelted with stones made Abi's stomach hurt. The whole thing seemed so horrible! Yet, this was the way chosen by the Mighty One to show how valuable human life truly was. Anyone who intentionally took the life of another must be himself killed, openly and publicly, with all the community taking part.

And, if that happened, what would become of Kezia and Dinah?

Kezia would be a widow, but still young and very beautiful. She would return to her father's house, and surely someone else would want to marry her. She seemed so happy with Joah, but perhaps eventually she would find another husband who would treat her with kindness.

And little Dinah? She was so young, she would never remember her father. Abi herself had grown up not knowing one of her parents. But where Abi heard stories all her life of her kind and gentle mother, Dinah would grow up with whispers of her father the murderer. Abi's chest ached for the little girl.

Once again, Abi resolved to help her new friends in any way she could. Even if Joah was guilty, she and Abba would find a way to make sure Kezia and Dinah were all right.

“Abi?” Kezia was standing in the doorway of the house now, face a little flushed but her eyes dry.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Kezia,” Abi stammered. “I guess I was just thinking about... Oh, I have so much to tell you!”

“Well,” the young woman looked surprised. “Come inside and tell me!”

In a rush, Abi spilled out the story of Rivka’s brother. She tried to remember as close as she could the questions the council had asked Matthias about Old Bethuel. She was just telling Kezia about her own decision to talk to the young man when little Dinah woke up from her nap. Kezia began feeding the little girl, still listening to Abi’s story.

By the time she had relayed as much as she could recall about Matthias’ words, they realized they had missed the midday meal and Abba had not come home. They both knew that could mean the worst had already happened. But they seemed to silently agree not to talk about it. Together they tried to eat a little, and keep Dinah occupied while they discussed Matthias’ warning.

“Do you think Avner could have threatened Old Bethuel?” Abi asked.

“Well, it’s not impossible,” Kezia admitted. “Bethuel’s daughter and son-in-law live in a house that Michal’s family owns. And I heard rumors that Michal had threatened to kick them out once. But what would that have to do with Joah?”

“Would Michal be mad that Bethuel hired Joah to work with him?” Abby wondered.

“Perhaps,” Kezia’s face had a faraway look. “And if he really was angry, that’s the threat he would have made. But I had so hoped things were changing. I never told anyone, but I thought maybe it was Michal that gave Bethuel extra money for us. I had hoped that it was his way of letting go.”

“But would Avner still be angry?” Abi was more confused than ever.

“Maybe,” Kezia seemed unsure too. “But why would Avner threaten Bethuel? Avner has nothing to hide... does he?”

“Well, Matthias seemed to think that if you went to talk to Bethuel, then he might tell you what’s really going on.”

“He might,” Kezia seemed thoughtful. “Sarah—that’s his daughter—she and I were always friends. If Bethuel knew something that might prove Joah innocent, I think he’d want to help us.”

“But then why wouldn’t he come here when the elders requested it?” Abi exclaimed.

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Kezia sighed. "I just don't know. I don't know about any of it!"

They were still going round and round on the same questions when Abba arrived home that afternoon. This time, different voices accompanied him.

"Rivka!" Kezia, at least, was pleased to see Abi's sister-in-law.

"Oh, Kezia!" The young woman rushed in the door to hug her new friend, followed by Abba and Nathan, carrying little Rachel.

"Matthias came by the farm and told us all about it," Rivka was saying. "We have to do something! And I have an idea."

"An idea I am eager to hear!" Abba smiled. "But first, some supper. At least one of us was so busy he had no lunch today."

Something inside Abi relaxed a bit at this. If the elders had decided today to have Joah stoned, Abba would not be here laughing about missed meals.

Rivka smiled tolerantly at her father-in-law and began helping Abi and Kezia with supper. At first the two young children were unsure of each other. But gradually they began playing closer together, growing noisier as they did. Everyone was glad when it was time to sit down and eat.

Finally, Rivka could wait no longer to share. She cleared her throat to make sure everyone was watching her, but spoke straight to Kezia.

"My brother told us what happened when he went to Peresh yesterday, how that man acted so strange, and wouldn't come back to Golan with him. Of course, Matti thinks you're the answer to everything because he has a crush on you. But the more I think of it, the more I'm sure he's right. We've got to get you back to Peresh to sort this out."

No one knew quite what to do with this speech, least of all Kezia. But Rivka simply glanced around the table and took their stunned silence as agreement.

"They'll never let Joah go, and you have no other male relatives here, so Nathan will take you!"

Everyone looked even more stunned now, except perhaps Nathan. Abi's brother wore an expression that was close to panic. But it was Abba who spoke.

"Rivka," he said gently, "we all want to see justice done. But you know it would never be proper for Nathan to take such a journey alone with another man's wife."

Rivka lifted her chin. "Then I shall go along as well."

"You?" Nathan protested. "But Rivka, what about Rachel? And your condition?"

Rivka turned to him rather fiercely. "My 'condition' was being with child. That always makes me unbearably ill. You of all people should know that. But I am no longer with child, and I am perfectly capable of walking to Peresh and back." She held up a hand as if to stop his next objection. "And I know we can't leave the children behind for days. But Abi will come along to help with them, won't you?"

"Of course!" Abi responded immediately. Even Rivka's bossiness couldn't spoil the thrill of such an adventure!

But Rivka could tell she hadn't convinced them. "Oh, I know it will take us longer than Matti; I can't run there and back in a day." She turned imploringly to her husband. "But Joah and Kezia are our friends, and they need our help."

Now she turned to Abba. "You said yourself that the elders don't see any value in another trip to Peresh. But I do!" The older man's expression did not change, and Rivka turned back to her husband. "If there's information back there that could keep Joah alive, we have to get it. Who else will do it if we don't? Nathan, they need us!"

Abi stared at her sister-in-law in amazement. Rivka was usually so focused on herself and her own problems. This was a side of her that Abi had never seen before.

Nathan looked helplessly towards his father, but Abba's face gave nothing away. He turned to Kezia, who gazed down at little Dinah in her lap, not meeting his eyes. Finally Nathan turned to his wife, who stared back at him with a look half pleading, half challenging.

Nathan sighed. "If Rivka and Abi are willing to make the journey with us, I will escort Kezia back to Peresh." Rivka nodded in satisfaction. "I'll only need time to arrange for someone to take care of things here while we're gone."

"Yes," Abba spoke slowly. "It would be best to leave early tomorrow morning, so you could be back before the Sabbath."

Nathan turned to Rivka, and Abba took the opportunity to study his daughter. "Would you be willing to make this journey, my Abi?" he asked quietly.

"Oh yes, Abba!"

Her father smiled. "I suppose it would have seemed like an adventure to your mother as well."

Nathan turned back to his father, keeping his voice low. "Abba, are you sure this is a good idea?"

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Abba shook his head and frowned, his voice even more slow and thoughtful than usual. “It is highly irregular, my son. And it may well prove fruitless. The elders have decided there is no more help in Peresh, since no one else was there when it happened. And another trip will not show us what was in Joah’s heart.” The old man shook his head again. “But perhaps The Mighty One will lead you to some new source of knowledge. He has put this burden on us, we must trust Him to help us carry it. And, besides,” here Abba smiled gently, “your wife is a very determined young woman. And you did promise her that you would go.”

Nathan sighed. “We could head out by sunrise. And I’ll talk to the guards tonight, so there’ll be no trouble with Avner. I think he’s been sleeping out by the gate since he arrived.”

Kezia was walking Rivka to the door, Dinah still in her arms. “Thank you,” Abi heard her say quietly. Rivka gave her new friend a long hug before scooping up little Rachel and taking her husband’s arm.

Suddenly there was so much to do so they could leave in the morning! Kezia gathered up the things she and her daughter would need, while Abi packed food into small parcels they could carry with them. Abba, after a few quiet words with Kezia, headed out for the home of the family hosting Joah to let him know about their unusual plan.

It was dark by the time Abba returned, and they all agreed that their preparations were as ready as they could be. Kezia settled little Dinah down to sleep, then the three of them gathered for evening prayers.

Kezia had joined their prayers since she had arrived, of course. But tonight there seemed so much more to pray about. Abba’s voice was as calm as always, but he did add an extra petition to the Mighty One for their trip tomorrow. He prayed for strength and courage for whatever they would face, and for the Mighty One’s blessing on their errand, that they would find wisdom and truth as a result of their efforts.

Abi lay awake a long time. She knew it would be an early morning, and a long day. But never in her life had she tried to sleep before such an adventure. For her, for Kezia, for Joah... what would tomorrow bring?

## CHAPTER 10

Abi awoke in the dark the next morning to the sound of Dinah's crying. Abba was holding the toddler against his chest and murmuring softly, while Kezia scurried around gathering up their few belongings. Abi pushed herself up on her mat, blinking away sleep. This was the day!

Quickly they prepared to go. Dinah settled down as soon as she was back with her mother, and Abi found a comfortable way to carry the small parcels. Abba took both their hands and offered a short prayer, then led them out into the dark streets.

It was strange, all the quiet houses full of sleeping neighbors; Abi couldn't help glancing in the dark windows as they passed. Everything seemed different being outside so early.

Abi didn't even realize they were approaching the gate area until she turned a corner and almost brushed up against the bench where Avner bin-Hanniel was lying. She flinched back, but then looked down at the sleeping man. Eyes closed, the frightening figure looked smaller and softer, a very young man sleeping outside, alone in a strange city. Abi almost started to feel sorry for him, until he began stirring in his sleep. Abi jumped away. She still didn't want to be around Avner bin-Hanniel!

Abi hurried to catch up to Abba and Kezia, who were quietly greeting Nathan in the gate area. The night guards seemed unsurprised to see them, and nodded them through. Abba squeezed her shoulder, and Abi followed the little group between the overlapping walls.

It seemed a little lighter when Abi emerged from the gate area to the open space outside the city. Perhaps it was the first few hints of sunrise in the eastern hills. Rivka was waiting for them just outside the gate, hushing little Rachel. She immediately handed the child to Nathan to carry. Without a word, they set off.

Abi had been outside of Golan before, of course. Pastureland for the town flocks was out here, and the small farms of the non-Levite families that owned land. But this morning they kept on going past all these.

And, just like that, Abi was farther from home than she had ever been in her life.

The sky grew lighter and lighter as the little group walked on. By the time the sun had fully risen, Golan was small and faraway in the hills. Abi looked at it

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back over her shoulder, but didn't stop walking. No one stopped, until the little girls began to wake up.

Rachel opened her eyes first. She rubbed her small face against her father's shoulder and looked around, confused. For a few moments she was content to bounce along with Nathan. But before long she realized that what she really wanted was her mother. Nathan passed the child to Rivka, but it soon became clear that Rivka would not be able to carry Rachel and keep walking, at least not for very long. She kept stopping to adjust Rachel's position, and soon the extra fussing had woken up Dinah.

"I think it's time we all had a break," Nathan finally declared. "And some food!"

No one disagreed with that. They found a shady spot beside the path, and both mothers set down their toddlers and stretched tired arms. The little girls were only too happy to run around, and everyone was happy to rest and eat.

As they started up again, Abi offered to carry little Dinah to give Kezia a rest. She pulled the child up onto her back as Nathan scooped up Rachel.

Dinah was content to ride on Abi's back and babble in her ear. But it didn't take long before the load began to feel heavy, and Abi slowed down. Looking around, she was surprised to realize that Rivka and Kezia, with no little ones to carry, had fallen so far behind.

Nathan seemed to notice this at the same time Abi did. He too slowed his pace, watching his wife worriedly. Abi said nothing, but she began to wonder. Had it really been safe for Rivka to make this journey? Nathan had been concerned that his wife was not fully recovered. But without her, this desperate trip could not be proper. Rivka was usually so quick to complain about her troubles. Could it be that now she was truly suffering, and no one realized it?

Neither Nathan nor Abi said anything, though. The two young mothers were laughing as they caught up, with Kezia finishing a funny story about some little thing Dinah had gotten into. They walked on together, Kezia once again doing the talking.

The day grew hotter, and Kezia and Abi took turns carrying Dinah. Nathan still held Rachel, and Rivka leaned on him as they walked. Abi bit her lip. Would Rivka have offered to make this journey if she had not fully recovered? A few days ago Abi would have said no. Her sister-in-law would never put herself at risk for someone else. But now Abi wasn't so sure.

Abi wondered how long of a journey it was to Peresh. Kezia and her brother had made the trip in a morning, and Rivka's brother had been there and back to Golan in a single day. But they must have travelled at a faster pace, and surely hadn't taken as many breaks as this little group did with two toddlers and a very fatigued young mother. Abi watched Nathan watching Rivka, but kept walking.

The sun was high in the sky when they stopped for lunch, and both little girls fell asleep soon after. Again they walked on in silence, each of them trying not to think of the heat, the exhaustion, and their sore legs and arms. Nathan seemed to have good directions, knowing which road to take through the hills each time their path crossed another. Still, it felt like a very long day.

Finally, though, Kezia began to recognize where they were.

"That little footbridge!" She exclaimed. "I remember it when we first started out. You'll see the farms outside Peresh just on the other side of those hills."

They all perked up at that, and Rivka sighed in relief. As the little bridge grew closer, Abi could see the dry, shallow streambed that it crossed. It probably flowed with water in the rainy season, but now it was just dirt and bare rocks.

The bridge itself was narrow, but not very long. Kezia crossed it first, taking slow, careful steps while she patted Dinah's back. Abi followed her, equally cautious. They watched Rivka sigh as she let go of Nathan's arm and stepped out.

"Oh," Rivka stopped, swaying a bit. Nathan reached out an arm to steady her.

"I'm fine," she reassured him, but her next step seemed painful too.

And then, she crumpled.

"Rivka!" Nathan cried out. Kezia and Abi both screamed.

It all seemed to happen at once. The toddlers were crying. Nathan set down Rachel. But then he stopped, fearful to leave her alone. Abi scrambled down into the dry streambed. How could she help? Suddenly Nathan was there, thrusting a terrified Rachel into her arms. Kezia was trying to climb down. The little girls were screaming. Everyone was calling Rivka's name.

And Rivka herself lay sprawled on the rocks, her body unmoving, blood dripping down her pretty face.

## CHAPTER 11

Fear made everything seem confusing. And noise, so much noise. Babies crying in her ears, too many people talking at once. Nathan was trying to tell them something. What was he saying?

“...breathing! She’s still breathing!”

Rivka was breathing! That meant she was alive!

Abi started breathing again too. She hadn’t realized she had been holding her breath.

“Did you hear that, Rachel?” she cooed at the distraught child in her arms. “Your Abba says she’s breathing, that means she’s going to be okay!”

The little girl only cried harder at this. If it was scary and confusing for Abi, how much more for a toddler? Abi turned and walked a few steps away from the scene, still talking non-stop to Rachel.

“You’re a big girl, Rachel, you need to stop crying now so we can help your Amma and Abba. Look around, look how far we’ve come. You travelled all that way, didn’t you? What a big girl you must be!”

Behind her, Abi could hear Kezia trying to calm down little Dinah.

“Good girl,” she cooed again. “Remember when you fell and hurt yourself? Now your poor Amma has got hurt. Can you stop crying so we can go help her?”

When the child finally calmed down, she and Abi made their way back to where Nathan was tending to Rivka. Someone had torn a piece from the cloth that their food had been wrapped in. Nathan was using it to wipe at the blood on his wife’s face. As Abi and Rachel joined them, Kezia tore another strip and poured water on it, then handed it to Nathan. They all watched as he gently rubbed away the blood.

Rivka stirred. “You’re getting water in my eyes,” she complained drowsily.

“Rivka!” Their happy cries seemed to startle her, and Nathan held out a hand to keep them from crowding.

“Let me finish cleaning you off,” he said, reaching for another cloth to use as a bandage.

Rivka looked about to argue, but then she relaxed and closed her eyes. Nathan wiped away the last of the blood, then placed a clean cloth over a small gash on one side of her face. So much blood from such a tiny wound! Nathan

held the makeshift bandage gently in place as he helped his wife sit up and look around.

“Amma!” Rachel tried to squirm out of Abi’s grasp. Abi looked at her brother and waited for his nod of approval before allowing the child to scramble down and into Rivka’s arms. Both mother and child sighed in satisfaction.

For a few moments they all sat in the dry streambed, thankful and relieved. A bird flew by overhead, and a bank of clouds drifted past the hot sun, providing their little hideout with welcome shade.

And surprisingly long shadows. It was getting late in the day.

“Do you think you can walk?” Nathan asked Rivka quietly.

Rivka bit her lip, unsure. Abi watched her wince in pain as she attempted to move her legs. “My ankle...”

Nathan took Rachel from his wife’s arms, then tried to help Rivka stand up. She put weight on her good leg, but when she tried to step on the other side, she collapsed again. “I’ll try,” she said bravely.

“No,” Kezia put in, turning to Nathan, “she can’t walk like that. My parents’ farm is one of the closer ones. And we’re almost there; you’ll see it just around those hills. Abi and I can get their donkey and take you there to rest. I know my Amma will take care of you!”

Nathan looked worried about breaking up the group, but there didn’t seem to be any other option. After a few moments’ deliberation, they nervously agreed to Kezia’s plan. Nathan carefully divided the remaining food and water, Kezia picked up little Dinah, and once again they were off walking through the hills.

Neither Abi nor Kezia mentioned it, but they could walk much faster now. Abi turned back to see Nathan moving his family into some shade. Forcing a smile, she waved at her brother.

Kezia led the way confidently along the path. Soon they were circling the hill she had shown them earlier. Just as promised, the town of Peresh opened up in front of them.

“There’s where my parents live,” Kezia pointed excitedly, “and just that way is where Joah and I...” the young woman’s voice trailed off. Whatever the results of their efforts, Kezia and Joah would never again be living in that cute little farmhouse.

Abi smiled encouragingly, and Kezia nodded. “Let’s keep going.”

They walked more quickly now. Even Dinah seemed to know that their journey was nearly over. Soon they were close enough that farm laborers looked

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up from the late afternoon heat to watch them pass by. Kezia led the way to a small house at the edge of a well-tended field, and Abi followed her inside.

“Kezia!” A round-faced older woman exclaimed.

“Amma!” Still holding Dinah, Kezia threw her other arm around her mother, and the two women embraced. “And Dinah!” the older woman kissed her granddaughter.

“But what are you doing here?” Kezia’s mother asked finally.

“Oh,” Kezia sighed, “what a story. My friends in Golan helped me to... oh, Amma, this is Abi.”

Abi stepped out from the doorway and smiled politely.

“Well, hello Abi! Thank you for whatever you have done to take care of my daughter.”

Quickly now, Kezia explained to her mother their sudden trip back to Peresh, and Rivka’s accident on the footbridge. Her mother immediately agreed to help, and rushed out to call Kezia’s father. Soon he appeared, an older man around Abba’s age but taller and thinner.

Again Kezia explained the situation. Wordlessly, her father went to fetch the donkey while her mother gathered some blankets to put on the animal’s back. By now little Dinah had made herself quite at home playing with some toys that her grandparents must have made for her.

“Let her stay here,” Kezia’s mother smiled, already on the ground with her granddaughter.

Kezia’s father was a friendly, jolly man. He entertained them with little stories about Kezia and her siblings as they walked. Abi was surprised how quickly they reached the little footbridge where her brother’s family waited for them.

Nathan helped Rivka on to the back of the donkey, then handed little Rachel up to her. Rivka winced as she settled in, but said nothing. Then, with Nathan on one side and Kezia’s father on the other, they again made their way back to Peresh.

The sun was starting to set behind the hills by the time they reached Kezia’s parents’ farm. But Kezia still insisted on going into town to see Old Bethuel.

“May I go with you?” Abi asked. She had come all this way, somehow she wanted to finish this task.

“Of course,” Kezia smiled. Her mother had made a comfortable bed for Rivka, and the two little girls were playing happily. Nathan stood up to go with them, but Kezia’s father waved him back down.

“You rest, young man,” he ordered gently. “It’s been quite a day for you. Besides, I know the way to Bethuel’s, don’t I?”

Gratefully Nathan sank back down next to his wife. Rivka waved at them and smiled hopefully, and they slipped out the door.

Kezia’s father led them to the overlapping gate of Peresh, making friendly jokes with the guards as they passed by. He and Kezia both seemed to know the way. Not far from the gate they turned a corner, and Abi gasped softly. That must be it!

A large, flat-roofed house sat just in front of them, the beginnings of a structure poking up from its roof. The incomplete building looked somehow sad, as if it knew it might never be completed, or felt bad for the tragedy that had taken place there.

Kezia and her father hadn’t stopped walking, and Abi hurried to keep up with them. They hadn’t even reached the house when the door opened and two children tumbled out, followed by a young woman who must be their mother.

“Kezia!” The young woman exclaimed, hurrying towards them. “I’m so glad to see you!” The two women embraced, the children close at their heels.

A sad-looking older man who must be Bethuel appeared in the doorway. “Come in, come in!” he called.

Tripping over each other and the children, the little group made their way toward the house.

“Oh, Kezia,” the other young woman was saying, “I’m so sorry. I was just telling Abba that he should have gone to Golan to help you and Joah, house or no house!”

“Was Avner threatening your house, Sarah?” Kezia asked. Abi nodded, remembering how Kezia had told them about her friend. This must be Sarah, who lived in a house rented from Avner’s family.

“Avner?” It was old Bethuel who answered. “No, I haven’t seen Avner bin-Hanniel since it happened. Michal was the hot-tempered one.”

“But, Abba,” Sarah scolded, “you still should have gone to Golan to tell them Joah was innocent. Michal can’t hurt us now. And if we had to, Yosef and I could find a new place to live.”

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The old man sighed. "There was nothing to tell. What do I know about how they were building the house or what happened to poor Michal? And where would you go? Here?"

He gestured toward the open door, and for the first time Abi noticed how much they had all raised their voices to be heard above the noise inside. Abi could hear loud voices and laughter, a woman scolding, a baby crying. The old man winced a little, and Sarah sighed. She ducked inside the house, and the baby's crying stopped, at least.

"Truly, I am sorry, Kezia," Bethuel was saying. "If I thought there was anything I could say or do that would help, I would have come."

Abi turned from the adults as a small hand tapped her side. Turning, she saw the boy and girl that had come outside with Sarah. They looked the same age, perhaps five or six, and were staring up at her solemnly.

Abi couldn't help smiling. "Hello," she greeted them, "I'm Abi."

The girl's eyes widened. "I'm Abi too!" She breathed in amazement.

"I'm Abe." Her brother kicked at the dirt, looking disappointed not to share the name.

"Are you twins?" Abi smiled.

"Yup, but I'm older," Abe looked more cheerful now.

"Did you come to visit your grandparents?" Abi asked.

"Yeah," small Abi jumped in to answer. "Amma says we need to come and help out, since *her* Amma is so sick, and her little brothers don't help *at all*. They're *really bad*." She emphasized each word with a firm shake of her head, and Abi tried not to smile at the childish seriousness.

Abi and the children had wandered behind the house, away from the adults, and found themselves near the steps that led up to the flat roof. All around, Abi could see the broken bricks that must have fallen on poor Michal. Looking up, she could see a small wooden platform hanging from a rope leading up to the roof. The short length of rope tied to the other side hung limply down to the ground.

Abi picked up the rope and fingered the frayed end. She looked for the other end of the broken rope, the one that would have held up the other side of the platform. But she couldn't see it in the dim light, perhaps it was up on the roof.

"Oooh, don't touch that," little Abe was watching her examine the platform. "That's where the dog pooped, and dog poop makes you unclean!"

"What?" Abi couldn't quite make sense of the child's words.

But his sister was already looking around nervously. "Hush, Abe. We aren't supposed to tell anyone!" She looked up at Abi, "Uncle Jake said if we tell anybody about it he'll beat us up!"

"I'm not afraid of Uncle Jake," little Abe bragged.

"Yes, you are!" his sister corrected.

But Abi was beginning to see a story forming. "Your uncle put a stray dog on this platform?" she asked.

"No, he didn't touch it!" Small Abi looked horrified. "Touching dogs on the street makes you unclean!"

"But not as unclean as dog poop," Abe put in helpfully.

"So how did he get it on the platform?" Abi asked.

"He trapped it with some food," apparently Abe had decided the thrill of the tale was worth his young uncle's threat. "And then Uncle Levi—he was on the roof—pulled it back up while it was eating!"

"At first the dog didn't even notice!" The little girl was now excited about the story too. "He just kept on eating until it was almost at the top!"

"But then all of a sudden he saw how high up he was, and it was too high to jump!" Abe was gesturing with excitement. "So he started barking, and chewing on the ropes."

Small Abi giggled. "That's when Uncle Levi got worried the grown-ups would hear. So he lowered it down again. But he pooped on it before he ran away!"

"The dog, not Uncle Levi," Abe cut in.

"They made us go fetch water to wash the dog poop off," his sister admitted. "And Uncle Jake said if we told anybody about it he'd beat us up."

The two children looked at each other. They seemed to suddenly realize that they had just done exactly what they promised not to.

"You won't tell, will you?" Abe called.

But Abi was already running back toward the front of the house. It was nearly full dark. But Abi could see Kezia and her father talking with Bethuel and Sarah, who now held a baby on her hip.

"Kezia!" Abi burst in, "I think I know what happened to Joah's platform!"

## CHAPTER 12

For the second morning in a row, Abi awoke before dawn to prepare for a trip. This morning, though, she woke up not knowing where she was. Slowly she remembered. Kezia's parents had made room for all of them in their house the night before.

Kezia's mother was outside, helping Nathan and Rivka bundle food and supplies onto the donkey they would be borrowing. Kezia's father was singing as he helped gather the last of their belongings; he had decided last night to journey to Golan with them. Then, just as the first sunlight was peeking through the windows, they were joined by Bethuel. It was time to go.

Kezia's father led them on a different path around the city to avoid the troublesome footbridge.

"I think my donkey would prefer it that way," he teased, "and so would its rider!"

Rivka, settled comfortably again on the animal's back, smiled and gave Abi a wink. Rivka loved being treated as a brave heroine, and missed no opportunity to remind everyone that the journey had been her idea in the first place. But, rather unexpectedly, she had also decided that Abi deserved credit for their success. Somehow, she now saw the two of them as an unstoppable team.

"No, no, you're doing it wrong," she mockingly scolded Nathan as he adjusted the straps on the pack animal. "Clearly it's only the women in the family we can count on when there's trouble!"

Abi laughed. It was nice to have her sister-in-law treat her as an ally and friend rather than a child.

Nathan seemed amused by his wife's high spirits. He was much more relaxed than on their journey the day before, and looked happy to have Kezia's father leading the way back to Golan. He walked with one hand on the donkey his wife and daughter were riding, smiling at Rivka's teasing and Rachel's babble.

Only Bethuel seemed unaffected by the general cheer. He wouldn't be looking forward to the admission that his own sons' pranks had caused a man's death. But, to his credit, he trudged on without complaint, determined to prevent further tragedy.

The trip seemed so much shorter than yesterday! Abi remembered the surprise that had greeted Joah's and Avner's arrivals in Golan, and she looked forward to the shock this group would bring. But someone must have seen them coming, and the day guards greeted them with eager curiosity. One glance at their happy faces, and the elders at the gate began to relax. Whatever story they brought, it would mean a satisfying end to their investigations, and not another death.

Space was quickly made for the newcomers, and the men looked to Nathan to introduce the strangers.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “Bethuel of Peresh has come to Golan to help us.”

Abi could hear quiet murmurs all through the crowd at the gate. This was the man they had been wanting to hear from!

One of the oldest took the lead. “Thank you for making the journey,” he said to the newcomer.

Bethuel nodded, looking unhappy but determined. “I truly am sorry that I did not come when your messenger first arrived. At the time I believed that I had nothing to offer. However, I learned recently,” he paused, “that is, last night, about certain... events... that took place at my house that are directly related to Michal bin-Hanniel’s death.”

Complete silence fell around the circle. Heads perked up and eyes widened.

“I have two young sons,” Bethuel continued, “twins, born in my old age. They are... high-spirited boys.” Abi saw nods and knowing smiles. “And, though I carefully instructed them not to touch the building materials, they disobeyed my orders and... made use of... the platform that the young men had built to hold bricks.”

Bethuel looked around, hopeful that this was enough explanation. But, with a sigh, he resigned himself to finishing the story. “It seems that they had lowered the platform to the ground, and lured a stray dog onto it. Then they frightened the beast by raising it off the ground. It appears that the dog, when it was trapped on the platform, weakened the ropes by chewing on them. When the young men went to use the platform the next day...” Old Bethuel sighed again, his voice trailing off.

For a moment everyone was silent. Some, like Joah, looked horror-struck. Others were simply puzzled.

“When did this happen?” One of the elders asked after a while.

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Bethuel turned to him. "It was only a few days past, in the evening as the Sabbath was ending."

They all began counting back in their heads. Yes, it had been the next day that Joah arrived in Golan.

"Joah bin-Laban," one of the men turned to him, "you described for us how you built and attached the platform to Bethuel's roof. Would you have noticed if someone had used it the way he describes?"

Joah appeared dazed. "Well, I should have noticed, yes." His voice was thoughtful. "I usually did check the ropes... but I suppose I didn't do that the morning after the Sabbath. Dinah hadn't slept well... she was cutting a tooth... and I was late the next morning. We must have started in right away... yes, I remember Michal was already there working when I arrived..." Joah looked down, the memory still horrifying.

Next to Abi, Kezia bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut as if she was trying not to cry. It seemed a long time that they all sat wordless, shuffling and clearing throats, until Abba finally took the lead.

"In a few hours it will be Sabbath again," Abba stood up slowly. "Is there anything preventing us from concluding our investigation, so we all may prepare for the holy day?"

The elders of Golan looked around at each other. It seemed that they were all in agreement.

"Joah Bin-Laban," Abba called his name formally, and gestured for the young man to stand also. "You came to us claiming refuge in the city of Golan. We have determined, in the sight of the Mighty One who sees all hearts, that you have told us the truth. Although you caused the death of Michal bin-Hanniel, you did so without intention or malice. Therefore, the city of Golan will provide you and your family sanctuary, so long as you remain here in the city and the surrounding lands. However, if ever you leave Golan, you forfeit our protection, and will bear the guilt of Michal bin-Hanniel's death on yourself. Do you understand and agree with our judgement?"

"Yes, sir," Joah's voice was soft as he met Abba's gaze. Kezia squeezed Abi's hand, and Abi could see the young woman's tears streaming down her cheeks.

Abba nodded, and Joah sat down. "There is one more matter to attend to," the older man continued. "Avner bin-Hanniel."

With a surprised rustle, the crowd made room for the strange young man to rise. He stepped closer to Abba, and the older man placed both hands on his shoulders. Avner stiffened, but did not step away.

“Avner,” Abba’s voice grew gentler, “we mourn with you the death of your brother. It is a tragedy which only the Mighty One could explain. We recognize the loss to you, to your family, to your town, and to the future of Israel. If Michal had been murdered, avenging his death would be your right, perhaps your duty. However, no act of violence now can bring back your brother. The Mighty One gives and takes away, blessed be His name.”

Avner’s one good eye looked down sullenly, his other eye seemed fixed over Abba’s head. But at the older man’s words he whispered a quiet, “Amen.”

Abba nodded. “So long as Joah bin-Laban remains in Golan, he is under our protection. You, and all who loved Michal, must accept your brother’s death as from the hand of the Mighty One. You must not take retribution, unless Joah bin-Laban chooses to claim responsibility for Michal’s murder by leaving Golan. Do you understand and agree with our judgement?”

The young man still wouldn’t meet Abba’s eyes, but he nodded and quietly answered, “Yes, sir.”

“Nor is there any place for retribution against those in Peresh whose accidents or negligence were used by the Mighty One to end your brother’s life.” Abi tried hard not to look over at old Bethuel. “The Mighty One gives and takes away, blessed be His name.”

This time Avner looked at Abba with his good eye, “Amen.”

To Abi’s surprise, Abba pulled the younger man into a hug. At first Avner seemed to resist. Then, all of a sudden, his arms were around Abba’s neck and his face was buried in the older man’s shoulder. Abi felt tears in her own eyes as she watched this strange, unfriendly young man—about whom they had all been ready to believe the worst—simply mourn the death of his brother.

Finally Avner bin-Hanniel stood up. If he had been crying, there were no tears now. But something in his expression had softened. His damaged eye still stared unnervingly above their heads. But his good eye looked directly at Abba, and his face wore an expression that might have been respect.

“The Mighty One gives and takes away,” Abba repeated. “Blessed be His name.”

Everyone gathered in the gate of Golan answered together, “Amen.”

## CHAPTER 13

“My Abi, my joy!”

Abi ran to Abba and hugged him tight. She hadn’t realized how much she missed him!

Abba still had things to do, people to talk to, but he kept his arm squeezed around her. She only half listened as he spoke with the other elders and made sure the visitors from Peresh had a place to celebrate the Sabbath.

Slowly the crowd around the gate area began to drift away. Old Bethuel left with one of the elders, and even Avner bin-Hanniel was welcomed by a family Abi knew. Finally, Abba was ready to head home as well.

“I know we haven’t much time to prepare for the holy day,” he apologized as they walked. “But perhaps our guests will not mind pitching in.”

But, when they arrived back at the big house, preparations for the Sabbath were already under way. Kezia and Rivka were busy cooking, Joah was playing with the two little girls, and Kezia’s father had them all laughing at some funny story from Peresh.

“We thought it would be easier for all of us to keep Sabbath together,” Rivka explained cheerfully. “Nathan will be back soon.”

Abi and Abba were both happy for the company and the help. And there was so much to tell as they worked! Abba and Joah hadn’t yet heard about their trip to Peresh, or Rivka’s accident. Everyone remarked how courageous she had been to make the journey when she was still in poor health. And Abi was surprised how easy it was to agree. It made her feel good to honestly have a reason to think well of her sister-in-law.

Then it was Abi’s turn to re-tell the story of her encounter with the twins, Abe and little Abi. This brought more serious reactions.

“I should have known those boys wouldn’t be able to leave our things alone,” Joah’s voice was slow and sad. For all the time Abi had spent with Kezia, she hadn’t really gotten to know Joah at all. The young man had a quiet thoughtfulness about him, as if he was very seriously considering everything you said. Abi could see why Kezia liked him.

“Perhaps this will finally spur Bethuel to take charge of his family,” Kezia’s father was also somber now. “We’ve all known those boys are too much for him.

But if he can make the changes he needs to, before it's too late, perhaps some good can come from this tragedy."

Abi gasped. "Do we have to have another trial now? For Bethuel? Or the boys?"

Abba shook his head. He was smiling at her, but his eyes were sad. "No, my Abi. No one thinks that Bethuel held any malice towards Michal. Only the Mighty One Himself knows why poor Michal's life ended, but we do not need to investigate anyone else."

Just before sunset Nathan arrived, and it was time to celebrate the Sabbath. Abi's heart was full of thankfulness as Abba said the traditional blessings. Their table was full of good food, and surrounded by family and friends. After a difficult few days, everyone was back safely in Golan. Best of all, the trial was over and Joah was safe. And he and Kezia would be staying in Golan!

"One of our neighbors has been having trouble keeping things up," Nathan told Joah as they all ate. "He's been so ill this year, and his sons are too young to be much help. If it's all right with you, I'll talk to him. You might be able to work together, and it could help both of your families."

"And we'll be neighbors!" Rivka exclaimed with a smile.

Kezia and her father would leave the morning after Sabbath to gather their few belongings for the big move.

"Would you be willing to come and help us again?" she asked Abi.

"Of course!" Abi exclaimed. Little Dinah had already crawled on to Abi's lap as soon as the child had finished eating. She made a happy little toddler noise to show she agreed with the plan.

"There is just one thing I don't understand," Kezia's father leaned back and stretched as he finished his own meal. "No one who knows our Joah could think him capable of murder. But even arriving today, I could tell how little the elders of Golan trust him." The older man turned to Abba. "You all seem like good judges of character. But with Joah, even men who wanted to believe him thought he might be guilty."

Abba nodded slowly, and turned to look at Joah. "It's true, what your father-in-law says. Do you have an idea why we couldn't shake the thought that you might be guilty?"

The young man took a long time to answer. "I suppose it's because I thought I might be guilty," his words were slow and measured. "I knew that I had done

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nothing intentionally that would harm Michal. But, did I hold anger in my heart?" Joah sighed. "Perhaps I still do."

Even the children were quiet for a moment. "All our lives, Michal always had more of everything... money, power, opportunities. Yet we were still friends, or at least I thought we were. And then one time I could have something he couldn't," he smiled ruefully, "and it wasn't even mine to give away."

Kezia's love.

The young man sighed again. "And that was the end. From then on he tried to hurt me in any way he could. I knew that I should forgive, let go of enmity and hatred. But did I? I don't think I did. So, can the thoughts in our heart hurt someone, even kill them?" Joah's face screwed up in a scowl. "Even though he's dead, he's still trying to take away what I have. So, you tell me, am I innocent of his death? Am I guilty? Am I something else? What am I?"

"Abba!" Dinah exclaimed, scooting suddenly out of Abi's arms. She scrambled over top of her mother to land in her father's lap.

Everyone laughed a little, and the tension was broken.

"It is a strange and difficult thing the Mighty One asks of us," Abba said finally, his eyes on Joah. "We can be hurt so deeply at the hands of others. But it is the victim that bears the burden of responsibility to forgive the aggressor." He paused, considering his next words. "And a true responsibility it is. For if we do not choose forgiveness, there is no telling how much of our lives can be destroyed by bitterness."

Abi nodded. That sure was true. Who could blame poor Joah for being angry at his former friend? But that hidden bitterness had almost caused him to be stoned for murder! Abi shuddered at how close their little family had come to losing everything.

"I do wonder why the Mighty One requires this of us," Abba continued thoughtfully. "Why was Joseph of old asked to forgive his brothers for so much? Why do those who suffer have even more asked of them?" He looked around. "Perhaps it is because in choosing that heavy burden of forgiveness, we become most like the Mighty One. Is there anything else in life that can teach us so much? How else could we see what it costs Him to bear with us, His children?"

"Amen," Kezia's father agreed. The two old men shared a look of understanding.

"I do not know what the Mighty One will be teaching you, Joah," Abba concluded. "Some wounds take longer to heal. But if we are determined to come

to righteousness, the Mighty One will lead us there. You can learn to forgive; and I believe that you will.”

“Well, if living in Golan is a punishment, you certainly will pay,” Kezia’s father teased. “Though I have heard some say that getting away from your in-laws is actually a reward, not a punishment.”

Even Joah laughed this time. He held his daughter close while the others cleaned up the meal and Abi and Abba found sleeping mats for their guests. It was so nice just to sit together, chatting idly and playing with the children.

Finally Nathan and Rivka rose to leave. Rivka scooped up a tired Rachel, while Nathan gathered the food and dishes they had brought over. Dinah was already asleep, but the rest of them walked the little family to the door, with many hugs and “Good Sabbath” wishes.

“Good Sabbath!” Abi hugged her brother, and turned to her sister-in-law. She was just leaning in to kiss little Rachel when Rivka exclaimed loudly.

“Oh Abi, I saw Matti this afternoon. He was minding things for us while we were away. I told him how you and I solved the mystery together, and he was so impressed. I think he has a crush on you now!”

Abi stumbled back, horrified. Here she thought they were finally getting along! Why did Rivka purposely say things like that? Furious and embarrassed, she fought the urge to run back inside.

Somehow Abba caught her eye. His brow was furrowed in concern for her, but he was smiling too. Without meaning to, Abi glanced around. No one looked disgusted, no one looked mocking. Even Kezia wore an expression of gently amused sympathy.

Abi took a deep breath. Joseph could forgive those brothers of his for selling him into slavery. Joah could learn to forgive Michal for all the pain he had caused. And surely she could forgive Rivka for... well, for being Rivka.

Abi leaned forward, kissed her niece, and hugged her sister-in-law. “Good Sabbath, Rivka!” she said.

And she meant it.