

MOONFALL

A novel

By

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Dedication

To my husband, Thomas



TRAVELER'S GUIDE

CHARACTERS

Abidan	Yoni's father, elder of Benjamin's tribe
Abu	Rachav's grandfather, an expert archer and horse trainer
Adah	Halatya's wife
Ardon	Son of Calev
Azuvah	Calev's wife, a healer, Salma's adoptive mother
Calev	War chieftain over all the tribes, Salma's adoptive father
El Elyon	God Most High, sacred name of Yisra'el's Supreme God
Ephron	Son of Abu Hantili, a Hurrian from the Mitanni Empire
Halatya	Rachav's oldest brother
HaShem	"The Name" used in conversation to avoid blaspheming the sacred name of El Elyon
Issus	Rachav's mother, a Hittite, niece of King Takawa of Kanesh
Kikkuli	Rachav's older brother, an archer and watchman on Yericho's ramparts
King Nur	Newly-crowned young king of Yericho
Malkha	Yericho's bārû, or wise woman
Puduhepa (Pudu)	Rachav's little sister
Queen Supoket	King Nur's Egyptian wife
Rachav	Daughter of Ephron Hantili
Rafi	Visionary from the Levite tribe
Samar	Rachav's best friend
Salma	Prince of the tribe of Yehuda
Yoni	Yonatan, prince of the tribe of Benjamin, son of Abidan

Zaron	Rachav's identical twin
Zeruel	Salma's half-brother, elder of Yehuda's tribe
Queen of the Night	Evening star; consort and guide of Yerach. The author took creative license in the use of this title. There is no record, as yet, of this goddess in Yericho.
Yerach	The moon, patron god of Yericho.

PLACES

archaic names and their contemporary translation

Beyt Anu	Literally, House of the Sky, it refers to Yericho's temple. The main floor contains shrines to the Queen of the Night; the rooftop is devoted to Yerach, god of the moon
Hatti/Chatti	Modern day Hittite Empire, consisting of Hurrians and Hattians, roughly corresponding to modern-day Turkey and parts of Iraq. A sometime ally of Ken'n
Hanigalbat	Mitanni Empire of Indo-Europeans in southeast Turkey/North Syria
Kanes	Hittite city near present-day Kultepe, Turkey
Ken'n	Canaan, an area roughly corresponding to present-day Israel, Lebanon, and western parts of Syria and Jordan
Habiru	Derogatory Akkadian term denoting slaves, outlaws, or raiders, sometimes applied to Yisra'el's tribes
Yisra'el	Federation of Israeli tribes descended from the twelve sons of Yaakov

Levant	A term originating in the Middle Ages referring to countries along the shores of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, sometimes extending from Greece to Egypt.
Nuzi	Known today as Yorghana Tepe, Iraq, a city in the Mitanni empire, Abu's original home
Yarden River	Now known as the Jordan River, originating north of Lake Kinnereth and flowing south to the Dead Sea
Yericho	Jericho, a fortified city and surrounding farmland northwest of the Dead Sea; Yericho is derived from Yerach, meaning moon.

PART I
THE NIGHT GODS

YERICHO 1407 BC
CHAPTER 1
FORBIDDEN WINE

“I found it,” Rachav whispered to Samar. She pushed through the screen of laurel branches behind the *Beyt Anu*. A brilliantly painted urn, nearly as tall as her best friend, stood near the back door of the moon temple.

“Hurry, before the sun sets.” Rachav climbed onto the portico and beckoned Samar.

“Keep your voice down,” Samar whispered.

“Everyone’s at the festival.” Rachav circled the urn, trailing her fingers across the intricate design. The fading light animated the Queen of the Night’s fascinating yet fierce countenance. The goddess’s blue and silver robes seemed alive, fluid.

Samar gripped Rachav’s elbow. “We found it. Now let’s go.”

Rachav gently pried Samar’s fingers off her arm. “We’ve come this far, don’t you want to see what’s inside?” She worked off the urn’s clay cover and inhaled. Cinnamon, grapes, and something else ... Grasping the silver ladle, she lowered her arm into the urn and trolled through the liquid.

Samar inhaled sharply. “Stop. It’s qadosh.”

“The acolytes wouldn’t dare leave it unattended if it had the power they claim.” She scooped up the pungent liquid and took a long drink. The wine’s warmth turned to fire as it coursed down her throat. Eyes watering, she stifled a cough.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine.” Rachav swallowed hard, trying to wash the burnt feeling out of her throat.

Samar backed away. “Come on or I’m leaving without you.”

Rachav held out the ladle. “It’s nothing special. Tastes like scorched grapes and flowers.”

Samar stretched her neck to look at the liquid, but kept her feet planted at the edge of the porch. “Something’s floating in it.”

Rachav poked her finger into the red liquid. “Lotus petals.” The beverage churned her stomach like liquid fire. Hands shaking, she replaced the stopper. Overhead, purple streaks marked the rise of the night gods. They had stayed too long.

Something pricked the edge of her vision—a veiled lady gliding behind a red-blossomed pomegranate tree. Rachav threaded her fingers through Samar’s. “Look. Who is that?”

The woman turned toward Rachav. Her eyes glittered midnight blue.

“I don’t see anyone,” Samar whispered.

Rachav blinked. The garden was empty.

“You’re pale.” Samar touched Rachav’s cheek with the back of her hand. “And you’re hot.”

“Don’t worry.” Rachav forced a smile. “Let’s go back to the party.”

The temple’s bronze-plated door clattered open before they could hop off the porch. Rachav grabbed Samar’s wrist and they slid to the floor behind the painted urn, nose to nose with the fearsome visage of the Queen of the Night. Faceted lapis lazuli stones shimmered in her eyes. Rachav broke the gaze with effort.

Sandaled feet brushed toward them across the wooden boards.

Rachav’s legs pulsed with the urge to run. Leaning on Samar, she pushed her deeper into the shadows behind the urn.

The door rattled again and a woman called from inside, “Litva! Where are you going?”

Litva’s footsteps drew closer to the urn, and she trilled in a girlish voice, “I heard something.”

“Come back and finish cleaning up this blood.” The woman in the temple sounded much older than Litva.

Rachav squeezed Samar's arm. They should never have left the king's party.

"I'll be back in a moment," Litva answered.

"Our Lady will be looking for you." The older woman's voice took on a strained quality, like threads stretched too tight on a loom.

Rachav silently willed Litva to go back inside. She tensed her legs, poised to leap out and scream like one of the dementeds living in the Wadi Qelt caves. A temporary distraction, just enough time for Samar to escape.

"Only if you tell her," Litva murmured. She stood in front of the urn and fiddled with the cap, so close Rachav could smell the incense on her robe. She stepped away and then retreated.

After the door closed with a resounding clang of bronze, Samar wrapped her hands around Rachav's arm. "I'm cold."

"Me, too." The warm excitement of their adventure had extinguished like a lamp sputtering out of oil.

Rachav clambered to her feet and pulled Samar up, steadying her friend when she swayed. She glanced at the temple doors. Still closed. For now. "Let's leave before they come back."

They fled back through the sacred precinct toward the colonnade. Passing between the columns, they slowed down to enter the royal gardens where King Nur's post-coronation festival was in full swing. Still holding her best friend's hand, Rachav skirted around a large lotus pool and clusters of brightly dressed women intently discussing the latest Hittite fashions, Queen Supoket's new baby girl, and the best way to discipline children.

For once, the mundane talk was a relief, a welcome return to normalcy, until her gaze found Adah. Her sister-in-law stood at the fringe of several women congregated around Queen Supoket.

The queen held her baby, Princess Halima, high above her head, basking in the admiration of Yericho's matrons. When Prince Nur returned last year from his studies in Egypt accompanied by an exotic

Egyptian wife, Rachav's parents, along with most of Yericho, did not approve.

Yericho's older generation had never forgiven the pharaoh, Supoket's grandfather, for withdrawing his garrison so many years ago. Without Egyptian soldiers, Yericho became vulnerable to greedy neighbors like the Chatti who coveted her numerous date palms, barley fields, and grapevines, not to mention fields of wild roses and blue flax along the river.

Now that Supoket had birthed her first child, the women of Yericho seemingly welcomed her to the ranks of motherhood with a universal acceptance that transcended geographic or political boundaries. The little princess's upper arms were wrapped in white cotton emblazoned with a bright blue, eight-pointed star. It was a clever tribute to Yericho's Queen of the Night. Rachav smiled at the tableau until Adah caught her eye.

Her sister-in-law made the tiniest 'come here' motion with her fingers.

"Uh oh, someone's waiting for you." Samar pulled away from Rachav. "I'm suddenly quite hungry. Come to the banquet table if you need me."

"Coward." The aroma of roasted meat and vegetables tempted Rachav to follow her best friend, but Adah's grim face brooked no refusal. In no hurry for a scolding, Rachav ambled toward her sister-in-law between lush beds of pink roses, orange blossoms, and spiky cinnamon. When she passed a bank of white lilies, she plucked one and tucked it into the neckline of her tunic.

Eyes locked on Rachav, Adah stood utterly still, arms crossed, hands cradling her elbows. "Your father's looking for you."

"Is anything wrong?"

"He took your sister to the archery tent. The new king may be asking for a display of Abu's bows." Adah picked at the ends of Rachav's long braids and muttered about the beads coming untied.

"When did they go?"

Adah released Rachav's hair with a sigh. "Hurry up and you'll catch them. And try not to frown."

Plastering a smile on her face, Rachav squeezed into the crowd. She double-stepped past a large lotus pool—a blurred splotch of blue, streaked with white blossoms. Two girls from the village called her, but she ducked her head and stayed on course. Her hair swung forward, the frayed ends tickling her arms. The myriad of tiny plaits had been Adah’s idea. Her sister-in-law said it would make the twins look stylish, but the weight and sound of the beads clicking every time she moved made her skull ache. She flicked the unraveled strands over her shoulder. Maybe the king wouldn’t notice.

Ahead, the archery pavilion poked its central spire at the dusky sky, and she pushed her way inside, turning her shoulders to squeeze through the crowd. Snatches of conversation buzzed—indistinct laughs and exclamations like a secret language she couldn’t decode. Her stomach gurgled and she pressed her fingers against her lips to stifle a burp.

“Rachav, there you are.”

She turned around. Her father, Ephron, was walking toward her. She eagerly closed the distance between them. “Has the king been here yet?”

“No.” Ephron led her to the rear of the tent, explaining as they walked. “Galadel, the king’s steward, brought out a few of the bows Abu crafted before he died.”

When they reached the weapons rack, her twin, Zaron, scrutinized her from behind turquoise lidded eyes and thick kohl. “Your hair’s a mess, and you’re sweating.”

“Look at the gnats circling above your head.” Rachav pointed. “They can’t wait to lick that pomegranate stain you smeared on your lips.”

“Girls,” Ephron whispered fiercely. “Listen.”

Zaron mimed a cutting gesture across her throat and mouthed, “Later.”

Wrapping an arm around her abdomen, Rachav swallowed an acidic belch as the gurgle in her stomach swelled to a painful cramp. Her throat burned with the aftertaste of temple wine.

Ephron continued, “A few years ago, you shot Abu’s bows for old King Aknur’s twenty-year celebration. Do you remember?” Ephron put

a hand on each of their shoulders. “The king’s steward asked for my daughters again tonight, in honor of Aknur’s passing and to celebrate the coronation of his son. Who am I to refuse?”

“Please don’t put us on display.” Zaron’s voice rose.

“Think of someone other than yourself for a change,” Rachav said.

Ephron pulled two bows off the rack and steered the twins to the edge of the tent.

Rachav blotted perspiration off her forehead and took her weapon, holding it lightly to test the balance. She wanted to get this over with; she was going to be sick. Taking the grip in her right hand, she pulled on the sinew, checking the tension.

Two targets—goat hides stretched over wooden frames—rested against the walls of Beyt Anu on the far side of the courtyard. A white chalky “X” marked the center of each.

Galadel joined them, his plump, bejeweled fingers steadying the pompous *mitznefet* on his head. “Ephron, make ready. His Majesty comes to watch.”

Rachav lowered the weapon. A phalanx of spear-bearing guardians—shirtless young men barely older than herself—mustered around her family. The nearest guardian caught Zaron’s eye and winked. She had that effect on boys.

King Nur strolled between the guardians, his deep-set eyes watchful, curious. Long black hair framed a narrow face.

“Carry on,” Galadel said to Ephron.

Rachav raised the bow and nocked the arrow. Next to her, Zaron did the same. They stood elbow-to-elbow, as Abu had taught them since they were old enough to walk. Rachav drew the bowstring with her left hand; Zaron with her right. Two identical girls side-by-side. A mirror image.

The still air was silent, punctuated only by the sound of stretching sinew and the scent of spiced wine.

Rachav stretched the sinew with her left hand until the grip pulled against her right. She touched the small knot on the sinew to her lips

and released it. Zaron did the same. Both arrows propelled across the courtyard like a hot zephyr. Their arms remained poised mid-air until the arrows sunk into the hides with a distant thunk.

While a young slave retrieved the targets, Rachav handed her weapon to Ephron and rubbed her arm where the sinew had slapped her skin. Either she was out of practice or the wine had taken a toll. Ephron grinned when the boy returned with only one target. The twins' arrows had pierced the center of the X, literally on top of each other, their shafts pressed together as one.

King Nur stepped out of his circle of guardians and clapped delightedly.

"Ah, Ephron, ladies, please greet His Majesty." Galadel genuflected and gestured impatiently for them to do the same. As she bowed low, Rachav composed her face into what she hoped was the kind of charming, confident expression she'd seen Zaron effect.

"Ephron, you never told me your daughters were identical. And so lovely." The king's hand appeared in Rachav's field of vision, but before she could kiss the royal signet, a sharp pain jabbed the back of her left knee. Her precarious posture wobbled, and she flung her arms out to break the fall. Goddess, please don't let me make a fool of myself in front of the king.

Warm fingers gripped her wrists, and she righted herself, breathing harder than the exertion called for.

"That was quite a bow," King Nur said, still holding her wrists. He tilted his head, and his face crinkled into a boyish smile that seemed truly delighted to see her. "If only all my subjects were so fervent."

She barely heard the words over the blankness in her mind. If she were Zaron, she'd toss her hair over one shoulder and smile as if she had a tempting secret. Instead, she studied her sandals and murmured, "Your Majesty." She was an idiot.

His fingers relaxed their hold and trailed across her palms. Tingly. She dared to raise her eyes and found his gaze assessing her with an interest she wasn't accustomed to.

Zaron made what might have been a snort or a choking sound.

Rachav snapped out of her reverie. She was being ridiculous. He was simply waiting for her to kiss the signet, of course. She took his hand and lowered her head to the crescent moon.

When her lips touched the silver on his index finger, a spark burned her lips and a surge of energy raced up her arm. Dizziness seized her, and sound and color dissolved to gray, like storm clouds eating a blue summer sky.

Misty swirls formed into the shape of a gray-bearded man crowned with a round white disc. Behind him, a second man raised a dagger, as if to plunge it into the old man's neck. No, no, don't!

The vision ended as abruptly as it began. King Nur withdrew his hand, cradling it to his chest. She tried to read the strange expression on his face, but her stomach clenched and unclenched like a fist. She turned her back on the king just as her stomach hurled out its contents with a force that made her eyes water. Hunched over, she wrapped both arms around her caved-in abdomen. Staring at the ground, she realized she'd soiled the steward's curl-tipped leather shoes. This is not how her meeting with the king was supposed to go.

Ephron gripped her elbow. "My deepest apologies, Your Majesty. My daughter is unwell, and I beg leave to take her home."

Eyes still watering profusely, she was vaguely aware of the steward waving them out of the king's presence while he called for a slave to clean his shoes.

Ephron steered Rachav away from the tent, and she stumbled along, blinking and wiping her eyes with her knuckles. Her father was a tall man and she had to do a little half skip to keep up with his long strides. When they neared the lotus pool, Adah joined them with jerky, rigid steps. Her pinched face had the tight look that meant she was building up to another this-is-for-your-own-good lecture.

"She vomited on the king's steward." Ephron released her arm with a small shake. Something in his tone caught her attention. Eyes fixed on

Galadel, Ephron chewed the corner of his lip, a gesture he often made when concentrating on inventory or weight calculations for the caravan.

Adah yanked a handkerchief out of her sleeve and wiped Rachav's mouth. "How could you humiliate the family like this?"

"I'm going to be sick again." The slurred words didn't sound like her voice at all.

Zaron leaned close to Rachav's face and sniffed. "Were you drinking temple wine?"

Ephron glared at Zaron. "Why would you say that?"

"Galadel is coming, Ephron," Adah muttered. "Rachav can apologize."

Rachav wanted to formulate a suitable response, but her thoughts skittered around like trapped birds in a cage. I'm sorry Your Majesty, but I just had a terrifying vision, or I always throw up after drinking temple wine....

"Peace, Adah. All will be well. I told the king she was ill."

"Something's happening at the temple." Zaron pointed at the Lunarium atop the Beyt Anu.

Green and blue torchlight illuminated the open-air pavilion on top of the roof. Two moon watchers, bearing staffs topped by alabaster discs, stood at attention. The silver-robed young women appeared four times a year—at each solstice and equinox—placing their staffs into floor sockets to mark moon shadow, to initiate the planting and harvesting of crops. Tonight's appearance was unscheduled.

Rachav followed the line of their sight skyward. A sickled-shaped shadow hid the moon's west side. A dark red stain dimmed what was left of the orb.

"Tonight, of all nights." Ephron twisted the copper signet on his middle finger.

Galadel joined them and tipped his head skyward. "Tonight indeed."

Chills rippled Rachav's skin. An eclipse.

Bells tolled from the Beyt Anu. A score of priestesses emerged on the lunarium, their faces gleaming with adoration. Each carried a silver staff

topped with an alabaster disc, sacred symbol of the moon god, Yerach.

Galadel pitched his voice above the bells. “It appears my lord Yerach is displeased.”

CHAPTER 2

THE SECRET LIFE OF GOATS

Rachav dressed slowly. Even small movements vibrated her skull, as if the stonecutter and his hammer had taken up residence in her head.

Her youngest sister, Pudu, rummaged around their chamber, looking behind the trunk and under the stool. “Has anyone seen my sash?”

“Not so loud.” Rachav pressed a finger against her lips.

Zaron sat in front of the bronze mirror, admiring her profile while she tied a fringed, blue scarf over her hair. “You’re in trouble,” she said in a sticky-sweet, singsong voice.

Rachav pulled Pudu’s sash out from under the bed and helped her tie it around her waist. “Let’s get breakfast,” she whispered.

Finished with her toilette, Zaron quick-stepped to the door. She reached across the frame and blocked Rachav’s way. “You ruined the party.”

Rachav patted Pudu’s bottom and nudged her out the door below Zaron’s outstretched arm. She’d never admit it to anyone, but Zaron scared her lately. It wasn’t just the kohled eyes and pomegranate lips either. She spent too much time in the upper city with her friend, Hoba. When she was home, a sullen silence enshrouded her. The only good thing? Everyone could tell them apart now.

Chin up; she wouldn’t let Zaron think she was intimidated. She grasped her twin’s wrist, intending to pull her away from the doorframe and walk through. Instead, something like a cold fist slammed her in the chest. She jerked her hand back, but not before the blurred edge of yet another vision began to develop: Zaron wearing a silver circlet on her head.

Rachav bent down and adjusted her sandal strap to hide her discomfiture. Whatever the vision meant, she didn't want to know. Besides, Zaron always came out on top of any situation.

When Rachav straightened up, Zaron still blocked the door. Not wanting to touch her again, she pointed at her twin's left eye. "Your kohl brush missed a spot. There." With Zaron once more occupied in front of the mirror, Rachav followed Pudu downstairs.

In the common room, her mother, Issus, sat on a low stool in front of the loom. Grayish shadows ringed her eyes. She nodded at Rachav, but kept on feeding yarn through the warp. "Is it true, what Adah told me last night?"

Rachav stopped mid-stride, gaze locked on her sister-in-law. Adah hunched over the counter, blunt fingers tracing the entries on the customer ledger, but Rachav knew she heard every word. Last winter, the family had agreed to protect Issus from any bad news that might push her into a relapse. Throwing up at the feet of the king's steward definitely qualified as bad news.

Rachav swallowed a sharp retort at her sister-in-law's thoughtlessness and forced a smile at Issus. "Some food at the banquet must've made me sick." The most important thing was keeping her mother calm. At the cabinet next to the hearth, she poured date juice for herself and Pudu and sat at the planked table where the inn's wealthier patrons sometimes took their meals.

"Your father lost respect because of you. How can he find you a husband when you embarrass the family like this?" Issus pressed down the weft with her beater.

"Father *is* proud of me. In fact, he's letting me help with the caravan."

Red blotches stained Issus's face and neck. "Do not speak of the caravan. You will never go while there is breath in my body."

"He promised to take me this year—"

Adah interrupted. "Focus on your future. No man wants a wife who brings him dishonor."

Rachav wanted to say that she didn't care about getting married, but Adah had outsmarted her again, bringing up the topic in front of her mother, knowing Rachav wouldn't argue for the sake of keeping the peace. A well of hostility bubbled up against her sister-in-law, tempered with concern for her mother's health.

Issus's dark eyes glazed over, her arms went slack, and the beater fell onto the flagstones with a clatter.

Rachav rushed to Issus and smoothed back her damp hair. "Breathe deep."

Adah laid down the ledger and slipped a cushion under Issus's feet. "Mother Issus, would you like Rachav to fetch you some spring water? She can tie a prayer cloth on the Mother Jujube while she's in the oasis."

"I'm all right." Issus leaned back and closed her eyes.

Adah glanced at Rachav and pointed to the cabinet. "Take the big jug."

Rachav lifted the two-handed jug. "It's still half full ... never mind." Rachav emptied it into a smaller container and stalked out. When her elder brother, Halatya, married Adah last year, the young couple built a small home near the family vineyard. Despite the demands of grapevines and marriage, Adah spent more time meddling at the inn than keeping her husband's house.

Bracing the jug on her head, Rachav walked down Market Alley. Cinnabar and saffron banners hung between the rooftops, shading the merchants as they prepared for tomorrow's market day. After pausing to greet their neighbor, Timor, and his son, she hurried past the others with a few quick waves.

When Rachav reached the *dariik*, she turned left toward the city gate. Outside the walls, she went down the rutted hardpan everyone called Barley Road, until it dead-ended at the oasis. Before she entered the cool shade, a familiar voice hailed her. "Rae!" Nuzi stood surrounded by his flock on the village commons.

She waved and hurried over, tripping a little on the freshly cut barley stubble. "Welcome home."

"What's wrong?" Nuzi gripped his staff and circled around her,

assessing her as though she was a new piece of livestock.

“Nothing.” She brushed the hair out of her face and realized she’d forgotten to comb it this morning. “I was sick last night.” The excuse was partly true. She dared not tell anyone, not even Nuzi, about the sacred wine.

“You’re tired.” He shaded his eyes from the sun and squinted at her. “And you’re angry.”

“When did you get back?” She steered the conversation away from herself.

“Last night. The temple lights were still burning. How was the coronation party?”

Ignoring the question, she jabbed a finger at his chest. “You smell like goat urine.”

He snorted and flicked a long strand of black wavy hair out of his eyes. “I had an encounter with old Split-Horn, but naturally I won.”

“Tell me what happened.” Nuzi’s stories always lightened her spirits.

“Right after I gathered the flock at the highland pool, lightning struck the sycamores.” He raised his staff and pointed at the tree line on top of the western ridge. “A tall woman came running out of the trees. She had dark reddish hair. Long, like yours and Zaron’s.”

Rachav touched the ends of her hair. Not many people had hair the color of dried cinnamon. In fact, she and Zaron were the only two she was aware of in the entire valley.

Nuzi’s eyes, normally expressive, went to a troubled place she couldn’t follow. “She waved her arms and kept talking in some strange language. I hefted my staff like a spear. It worked. She backed away and headed south. By then, four of my nannies—and their kids—had run off.”

“Did you round them all up?”

“It took me a while. The last one showed up this morning.” Nuzi nudged the cluster of baby goats at his knees. He picked up a small kid and thrust it into Rachav’s arms. “I was carrying this little one back to his mother when Old Split-Horn charged me from behind and knocked

me down. I had to grab him by the horns and flip him over to pound the fight out of him. See this?" Nuzi hiked his tunic, showing a pair of vivid purple bruises on his thigh.

"Maybe he's ready for the butcher." She tried to look sympathetic, but the image of Nuzi wrestling the big buck made her lips wobble with suppressed laughter.

The severe expression on Nuzi's face broke into a smile.

The small kid in Rachav's arms nibbled her neck, and the sun warmed her skin. She wanted to pretend they were children again.

"You're hungry, aren't you?" Rachav cupped the baby goat's head, rubbing the little nubbies where horns would someday grow.

"That strange woman ... it was just odd, her having the same hair." Nuzi stabbed his staff in the ground like a spear. "At first I thought she was you."

Rachav clutched the baby goat tighter, uneasy for no particular reason. "Can you not forget about it?"

"During the next flash of lightning, I realized it couldn't be you. She had fabric wound around each leg, and a narrow strip of leather at the waist. I'm not even sure how to describe the top half. It was white, wrapped up over her shoulders and around both arms down to the wrist."

Today, of all days, Rachav needed his carefree smile. She lightly tapped his temple. "You spend too much time alone with the animals—it's affecting you."

"I tell you, I had trouble sleeping that night. I half expected to wake up with her standing over me."

"I don't know who she was, but I'm glad you're safe, and I'll burn a honey cake to thank the Queen of the Night when I get home."

"Speaking of home...." He stared at his staff, twisting it deeper and deeper into the ground. A long lock of hair fell forward and he impatiently brushed it aside. "I have enough livestock for a bride price at the fall festival."

"Weddings are everyone's favorite topic today." First her mother,

then Adah, and now Nuzi. No matter how much she pretended, they were both growing up.

“Did someone ask you?” The staff stilled in his hands and his eyes burned into hers.

Realization gripped her chest, squeezing the air out of her lungs. She twined her fingers through the kid’s soft fur. Dear, sweet, funny Nuzi. She couldn’t marry him. How could she make him happy when she herself was so discontented?

“No, my father hasn’t been able to get rid of me yet.” She flashed him a self-deprecating smile, an unspoken plea to drop the subject. The kid wriggled and she released him to the field of stubble.

Shading her eyes, she watched the little goat prong away to its mother. She couldn’t bring herself to look at Nuzi. She didn’t want to hurt him. Didn’t want to have this conversation.

He knew her better than anyone else, but no one understood the restlessness that woke her in the night and drew her eyes to the stars. A nameless yearning stirred too deep in her heart to be satisfied by village life, even with Nuzi.

Nuzi worked his staff back out of the ground, and she looked at him sideways. He caught her eye, and his mouth curved into a smile that bunched his cheeks and then found its way to his eyes. Not the carefree, nobody-can-beat-us grin that glowed like a thousand candles of hope, but it would do.

“It smells like rain.” He picked up the jug she’d dropped earlier. “Better hurry or you’ll get wet.”

He was letting her go for now. “Thank you.” She took the jug from his outstretched hand. “I’ll see you later.”

Rachav hurried back to the stand of palm trees that guarded the spring and followed a grassy path into the cool, green shade, weaving in and out of the tall, slender trunks to the clearing where Mother Jujube spread her protective branches over the water.

A giant stone, older than time, stood guard at the edge of the pool. The water gurgled gently, and tiny wavelets lapped at the edge of the stippled monolith.

A misshapen figure emerged from behind the jujube. Rachav's thighs tightened and she sprang up, ready to bolt. Wild animals encroached on the waters occasionally.

The stooped figure straightened into an old woman leaning on her staff. Like a crow with a broken wing, she limped around the Mother Jujube tree. The bārû, village wise woman.

Rachav held the empty jug close. "Malkha, you startled me."

The bārû cocked her head to the side. "You cannot hide."

"I'm here to draw water for my mother." A few days ago, she and Samar had laughed behind their hands when they saw the bārû hobbling across the village commons talking to herself. With no one else around, the old woman didn't seem funny at all.

"He'll find you, Rachav." Malkha's tone was expressionless, as if repeating a message to a stranger. "And then he'll come for the rest of us."

A skittish laugh caught in Rachav's throat. "Who will find me?" The only thing that had found her lately was trouble.

Malkha's pale gray eyes glimmered in the shadows. She braced her hand on Mother Jujube.

Unease made Rachav's skin itch. "Malkha. Are you all right?"

"The *Habiru* comes." Where the bārû's hand rested on the tree, the fingers darkened and scaled, matching the bark.

Every inch of Rachav's body tingled with the urge to run.

Bark covered the woman's hand, encircled her wrist, and crept up her arm.

"Your hand. Look." Rachav worked her mouth to form the words, but no sound came out.

A burst of wind whooshed between the palms, slamming into Rachav's back. Against her will, she stumbled forward and knocked against the bārû, sending both of them to the ground. Dried palm fans dropped down like rain.

“Are you all right?” She shouted over the keening wind. Malkha didn’t respond. Dark clouds chased away the sun, and the oasis fell into shadow. Propelled by the storm, leaves and bits of earth pelted her on all sides. Every child knew that when the night gods blocked the light, they were angry. She thought about the Queen of the Night’s hard lapis eyes on the temple urn and wished she had never touched it.

Malkha gripped Rachav’s hand and whispered, “Habiru.” The wind died down. In the silent void, a misty vision formed: a view of Jericho from above, as if she were soaring with the bulbuls. The city’s massive walls heaved in, then out, like a giant’s labored breath. They heaved faster and faster and then toppled, exposing the city like a wet worm under river rock.

CHAPTER 3

ORACLE

Rachav opened her eyes and found herself between the jujube and the spring. She crawled to the water's edge. After rinsing the taste of earth out of her mouth, she rolled onto her back. Sunlight filtered through gently-waving palm fronds. The spring bubbled gently, and the tranquility of the oasis calmed her stuttering heartbeat.

These visions were disturbing, but they were not real. No. Just an after-effect of drinking the forbidden wine. Nuzi was real. She pictured Nuzi at the highland pool on the crest of the mountain. Nuzi smiling, black eyes crinkled like he was on the verge of laughter, holding his staff between his knees while he re-tied the long tail of his unkempt hair.

A soft footfall disturbed her thoughts. Malkha? She sat up quickly.

A few feet away, Zaron stood with the herb basket, her face drawn with curiosity.

Rachav reached for the jug. "I came to draw water for Mother."

"You're pale." Zaron knelt at the edge of the pool and snipped a leafy stalk of silver weed, then peered at her reflection in the water.

The serenity Rachav had been gathering around herself cracked at her twin's intrusion. She dipped the jug in the pool and Zaron's reflection rippled away.

Zaron smiled coyly. "We used to come here in summer and lay our heads near the water's edge, letting our hair float on the water."

"We were kids." Rachav set the full jug on the bank.

"When Grandfather Abu died last year, I wanted to come here,

but I couldn't find you, so I went to the temple instead."

Rachav remembered. Abu was more agile than any warrior half his age. The news of his accident stunned the Hantili family. Her brother, Kikkuli, an archer and watchman trained by Abu himself, had questioned the accident. By all accounts, however, Abu had been pacing the top of the wall at midnight and misstepped off the edge.

"The old timers came to the inn and dipped their straws into the barley beer, singing and laughing louder through the evening." Rachav swirled her hand through the water.

"And why laugh when someone dies? What's funny about that?" Zaron flipped onto her back at the edge of the pool, and her hair fanned across the water. "I'm sorry we argued this morning."

Rachav stretched out on her back, shoulders touching Zaron's, and let the water lap her neck and ears. "It wouldn't have bothered me if I weren't still sick from last night."

"Did you notice the king's goblet? Solid gold engraved with an Egyptian *Wedjat*."

"Egyptian what?" Soothed by the rippling water, Rachav closed her eyes.

"I visited my old friend, Litva, this morning. She said it's the Eye of Horus, for protection and power."

Litva. The young woman who'd almost discovered her and Samar on the temple's back porch the night of the king's coronation. "Has Litva ever talked about the temple wine?"

Zaron's shoulders bunched in a shrug. "The wine is qadosh, set apart for the priestesses."

"Was she permitted to drink it?"

Zaron sat up and hovered over Rachav. "You drank some, didn't you?"

"Eww, you're dripping on me." Rachav sat up and faced her twin.

"What did it taste like?"

Rachav gathered her hair and squeezed the water out. She did want to talk to someone about last night, but....

“I know we fight sometimes, but we’re still sisters. More than sisters. We used to share everything. Tell me, maybe I can help.”

Rachav watched the ripples subside on the surface of the water. “Afterwards, I started having visions.”

“What have you seen?” Zaron’s lips were parted, her eyes wide.

“Horrible things. A man killing old King Aknur, the city walls crumbling. No wonder the wine is forbidden.”

“The visions started after you drank the wine?”

Plaiting her hair, Rachav nodded.

“And then you were sick.”

“Maybe they will stop in a day or two, the way a fever passes after an illness.”

Zaron combed her fingers through her wet hair and started braiding. “Where is the urn?” she asked softly, as if she didn’t really care about the answer.

Rachav tightened her braid and flipped it over her shoulder. She knew her sister too well. “You seriously cannot want to drink it after what I’ve been through. One drink almost killed me. It’s qadosh for a reason.”

“You’re right.” Zaron stood up and smoothed her tunic. “And hopefully they have it all locked up for everyone’s safety.”

Rachav hoisted the full jug. “Let’s go. Mother’s waiting for fresh water.”

Back inside the city, Zaron continued on the dariik toward the upper city, and Rachav turned into Market Alley. She pushed open the inn’s planked gate. Two rows of customer stalls flanked the courtyard—one on the right, one on the left. She nodded a greeting to customers on the way to her house, a two-story structure that housed the Hantili family at the rear of the courtyard. Five date palms fronted the house, and in between them, banks of flowers her mother cultivated for remedies: wild raspberry, mint, and lady’s slipper.

At the center of the courtyard, a large fire pit served as a gathering place for meals and conversation. A tall hawthorn tree shaded the gazebo that housed a small galley and rustic table. Ephron sat within,

studying a worn sheet of leather.

She sat next to him and deciphered the Akkadian symbols. “Inventory for the caravan?”

He made a guttural sound of assent and pointed to the branched pictogram for barley. “Nearly twice the baskets we had last year.”

“You’ll take me this year, won’t you? You need more help and—”

“King Nur has authorized me to trade the barley for a length of purple wool and ten urns of Aramean wine. A new king requires new robes, as if his father’s robes aren’t good enough.” His voice dropped on the last word and he jerked his head up, scanning Timor’s two-story house next door. Timor’s rooftop pavilion provided a bird’s-eye view of the inn’s courtyard.

“The king needs Tyrian Purple, of course. How many days will we be in Tyre?”

He rolled up the leather. “I need you to take care of Issus while I’m gone.”

His words echoed inside her head ... every time they replayed, they said the same thing. For years he’d said she was too young to go. Next year she’d be married. It was this year or never. “Zaron can help Mother while I’m gone. I know the stars better than your drovers do. You said so yourself.” She wrapped her hands around his arm. Heat sizzled through her skin: a flash of her father in a dark, muddy room. She yanked her hands back before another vision could seize her as it had in the oasis. She couldn’t stand being out of control in her own body.

Ephron stood up. “I understand.”

“No, you don’t.” She paused, trying to describe the tightness in her skin, the sensation that she would suffocate if she didn’t get out of the house. “I feel like I’m going to burst, like an overripe grape when its skin cracks open.”

He tapped the roll of leather on his thigh. “In any event, I’m not going to the dye merchants in Tyre. Nur is anxious for his royal robe so I’m making a short caravan to Damasq. With the goddess’s blessing, I’ll leave before the sun rises tomorrow and arrive in three days.”

“Abi, you promised,” Rachav whispered. The term of endearment slipped out. She hadn’t voiced it in years.

“If I were traveling the Sunset Highway to Tyre, maybe. But the road to Damasq is a dangerous place, even for me and my drovers.”

Rachav stood up. “You never intended to take me.”

“Rachav, you think everything is an adventure. You must grow up, take care of your mother, prepare to marry Nuzi.” He tied a string around the inventory scroll.

“No, you don’t understand.”

“I do. Zaron was right. You drank the temple wine last night.” He paused as if waiting for her to contradict him. “You’ve broken my trust. Did you think about the consequence if someone had seen you? While I’m gone, think about earning my confidence again. Keep an eye on Issus and Pudu. Help with the customers.”

She turned her back on him and swiped her eyes.

Ephron spoke softly. “I’ll bring you a vial of scented oil.”

“You don’t have to bribe me.” She tossed the words over her shoulder with as much dignity as she could summon. Careful not to run, she walked to the house.

Unable to fall sleep, Rachav took a blanket up to the rooftop pavilion and stretched out under the panoply of night gods voyaging across sky. In the upper city, the Beyt Anu towered above the other structures. The light of a hundred torches illuminated the Lunarium and the faint melody of mashroqis wafted across the cool air.

Before daybreak, she heard Ephron packing his provisions on the donkey, heard him open the inn’s gate. A muted conversation followed with her oldest brother, Halatya, and then the gate closed. Ephron would now be on his way past the barley fields to Yericho village, where the drovers assembled the pack animals.

Not at all tired, she scooted over to the wall and sat up. The warm bricks reminded her of Abu. How he built the inn with his own hands.

He had always seized what he wanted. Her grandfather had been a man of action, not words. He trained two generations of fighters, taught archers how to make composite bows, and set up defensive patrols on the walls. In exchange, King Nur's father granted Abu a vineyard near the oasis, permission to establish an inn, and rights to the western trade route known as the Sunset Highway.

The bricks she leaned against were part of the city's outer wall. The old city had outgrown its original wall in ancient times, and some long-forgotten king had constructed a second wall outside the first and created a rampart between them to allow for the city's expansion. Against this outer wall, Abu had cleverly constructed the inn.

Several merchants and craftsmen followed Abu's example and Market Alley came to be. Yet for all his success, Abu's life had been less than perfect. He had survived Hittite raids, the loss of his wife and daughters, and captivity. His determination had overcome every setback. She would do the same.

At first light, she went down to the arbor and laid out fresh food for the inn's customers. Inside, she swept and tidied up for Issus before returning to the roof and her solitude. She resettled against the warm bricks, crossed her ankles, and started feeding sticky flax fibers through the water bowl so she could twist them into thread. The midday heat and the repetitive motion lulled her, and she didn't fight the drowsiness when her eyes slipped shut.

A rushing noise jolted her awake. A jumble of arms and legs swooped overhead and landed in a crouch at her feet. Standing up slowly, the shirtless young man held his bow battle-ready as he turned to face her.

Rachav pressed a hand to her thudding heart. "Kikkuli, don't do that."

"What's the good in living against the wall if I can't drop in when I'm hungry?" Laughing, her older brother leaned over and flicked the end of her heavy braid, then drew back. "Hey, you're bleeding."

Rachav followed the direction of his glance. Blood smeared the front of her tunic. Aggravating flax fibers. Fine, like hair, but much coarser.

They'd sliced her fingertips and she hadn't even noticed.

Rachav tossed her spindle in the yarn basket. "Come with me. I'll wash my hands and make you something decent to eat."

He clattered down the stairs behind her. "I'm capable of feeding myself."

"You can't live on barley cakes and dates," she said over her shoulder. "I've been finding the remains of your midnight feasts in the gazebo every morning."

"It's fast and easy. Working the night patrol makes me extra hungry."

"And you're still training new archers on the day shift, too? How long since you've slept?"

"I don't mind working a double shift." Kikkuli followed her through the back door into the lobby and shrugged out of his bow. "Echdol, our best watchman, spotted a fire in the east, out in the Wasteland. Too big for a campfire and not moving like a wildfire. We're keeping an eye on it."

Rachav paused, ladle poised above the pot of gazelle soup.

"They're saying the legendary Habiru are restless." His voice dropped to a whisper and she looked at him askance. "Did I scare you?" Kikkuli laughed. "No one believes those stories except children whose parents are trying to scare them into behaving."

"You're the second person who's mentioned the Habiru in the last two days."

"Every so often people get excited about them. They don't exist, Rachav. Half wild man, half spirit, drifting through the Wasteland in search of lost caravans. Really?" Kikkuli pulled a bowl out of the cupboard. "Anyway, I've got you covered. I monitor the inn when I'm walking the walls."

The soup ladle shook in her hands, and she shoed him over to the table while she filled the bowl.

"Kikkuli!" Pudu skipped in through the front door and barreled straight for her brother. He patted her shoulder and kept on eating.

Rachav pulled out a chair. "Sit here, little one, and I'll fix your soup."

"Me too." Issus tottered into the lobby from her sleeping chamber,

knobby-jointed fingers clutching a goat hair blanket around her shoulders.

“Did we wake you?” Rachav ushered Issus to the table.

“No, I was just resting when I heard my son talking.”

“Good to see you again, Mother.” Kikkuli wiped his soup bowl with his last bite of bread. “But I have to get back to the wall.”

Pudu’s face scrunched into a pout.

“I’m keeping watch for the Habiru.” Kikkuli bulged his eyes at Pudu and leaned over her in a mock pounce.

Pudu raised both hands above her head in an exaggerated gesture of surrender. “Don’t hurt me!”

Kikkuli ruffled Pudu’s hair and retrieved his bow from the hearth.

“My son, be careful on the wall.”

“I always am.” Kikkuli kissed the top of Issus’s head.

Issus held onto his hand. “Are you on the west wall? Can you see Halatya picking the grapes?”

“Yes, and that reminds me. I need to ask Echdol for the day off tomorrow. Halatya needs me to help with the grape harvest. He needs Zaron, too. The grapes are ripe and the ants and birds are feasting.”

Issus released Kikkuli’s hand and rubbed her forehead. “Save as much of the crop as you can. Ephron didn’t want to leave you boys to do it alone, but the king....”

“Don’t fret.” He looked over Issus’s head at Rachav and gave a short nod. “I’ll come back tomorrow.”

After Kikkuli departed, Issus told Rachav to get a slab of salted meat from the galley. “Soak it tonight. Tomorrow, make a kettle of stew. Everyone will be tired and hungry after working in the vineyard all day.”

Rachav went outside to fetch the meat and Pudu came along with the empty bowls. While Pudu drew water in the well trough, Rachav rummaged in the galley. Malkha had warned her about the Habiru, and now watchmen had seen fires in the east. Ephron had gone east. He might be in danger.

A few drops of water splashed on her head and she looked up.

MOONFALL

“Can I go to the vineyard tomorrow?” Pudu grinned. Hands dripping over the trough, she flicked a few more drops at Rachav.

“Of course.” Rachav smiled and shook off her worry. Ephron was fine. The son of Abu Hantili would prevail against any threat.

CHAPTER 4

BEYT ANU

Rachav slept heavily until narrow shafts of sunlight filtered through the timbered ceiling in their sleeping chamber. She'd overslept. After donning a fresh tunic, she finger-combed through her hair, grabbed a yellow hair band, and went downstairs to tend the customers.

In the courtyard, a pleasant shiver rippled her skin, and she smiled at the bright blue sky. A beautiful late spring day. Cool air and sunshine. After her chores were finished, she'd go to the village and visit Samar.

Spurred by the thought of seeing her best friend, she quickened her step and kindled a fire under the tinuru. Some of the customers had already awakened, greeting each other in muted tones as they filled their jugs at the well.

The inn's gate opened with a groan of wood rotating in the stone socket. Issus stood at the opening talking to some who remained hidden behind the sturdy door.

Rachav took long strides across the courtyard and peered over Issus's shoulder.

The steward. Her mouth curled as though she'd eaten sour fruit. The short man had been ever-present at the king's side during the coronation festival, his pathetically oversized mitznefet threatening to unbalance him every time he tilted his head.

Though seated on a little black donkey, he was still eye level with Rachav. He stared at her unblinking, without the slightest nod or greeting.

Issus flashed Rachav a warning glance and motioned her back.

No way was she letting her mother speak to the obnoxious man

alone. She stepped back a few feet but remained within earshot.

“Start the fire.” Issus fixed her with a hard stare until Rachav gave in and walked back to the galley.

She fed tinder into the small oven, glancing repeatedly at the gate. The bits of wood and grass ignited rapidly on last night’s coals, and she replaced the clay plate that separated the fire from the baking chamber.

The customers were slowly gathering at the table under the gazebo. She had no choice but to go back inside for the dough to make their flat bread. In the lobby, she snatched the wooden bowl off the counter. At the nook where her mother kept a small shrine to the Queen of the Night, she stopped to touch the eight-pointed star with her right hand. After pressing her fingers to her lips in homage, she leaned her forehead against the alcove’s polished stones and briefly closed her eyes. She’d forgotten to burn a honey cake in thanksgiving for Nuzi’s safety.

“I don’t think she’s going to help you.” Zaron walked up beside her and lit a piece of dried frankincense in the copper incense bowl. “I’m going to the temple, and I’ll make a sacrifice for you.”

Rachav didn’t actually want Zaron to do anything for her, but she didn’t want to blaspheme by refusing the offer. “You’re supposed to help Halatya and Adah with the grape harvest today.”

Zaron coiled her neat braid on top of her head and tied a pale blue scarf over it. “I’ll go to the vineyard afterwards.”

The courtyard gate rattled. Rachav put down the bread dough and returned to the gate where her mother was standing. Rachav looked down the narrow road. The steward was gone. “What did he want?”

“During the eclipse, an acolyte fell from the temple roof,” Issus said.

The silence stretched out between them. “What does that have to do with us?”

“Galadel has a notion that you somehow got into the temple wine, that you angered Yerach and he hid his face as punishment on the city.”

It felt like the air turned solid, squeezing Rachav’s chest to the size of a dried date. She forced the words out. “Why would he think that?”

“The high priestess complained that a newly-consecrated urn of wine was tampered with on the night of the festival.”

Zaron joined them, her expression carefully composed. Rachav frowned at her twin. She should have expected Zaron to tell Litva about the wine. The betrayal nonetheless cut her to the core.

Issus continued in a strangled voice. “The king demanded compensation. Ephron must pay for your foolishness!”

Rachav inhaled through her mouth, fighting the invisible hand that seemed to grip her chest. Issus hadn’t hesitated to believe the steward’s allegations. Rachav had lost both her parents’ trust.

Issus let go of the rustic gate and swayed.

Rachav reached for her mother’s arm. “Are you all right?”

Issus folded in on herself and Rachav couldn’t hold her weight up. “Zaron, help me.”

They lowered Issus to the ground. Guttural tones rumbled in her mother’s throat, but her lips were slack around unformed words.

“Mother! I’m here. You’re going to be all right.”

Issus’s eyes rolled wildly.

Zaron watched, eyes round and afraid.

“Go get Kikkuli,” Rachav said. “Hurry!”

As it turned out, both her brothers came to the inn. Zaron and Pudu did not return with them, but remained behind to begin the harvest with Adah. By mid-day, Halatya and Kikkuli had Issus in the lobby on a temporary pallet between the commons table and the hearth. Except for occasional grunts and moans, she seemed somewhat stable.

“What happened?” Kikkuli asked.

“The steward came. W-we were talking and she fell—”

Halatya interrupted. “Will you be all right alone? While we stand here, the birds are filling their bellies with our grapes.”

Rachav felt Kikkuli’s eyes on her. He was watching her with more than a little concern.

She nodded. "We'll be fine."

"You don't so look so well." Kikkuli turned her by the shoulders and studied her face. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Go on. Mother wanted you to finish the harvest."

Both brothers bent down and awkwardly kissed Issus's head before leaving.

Still alone at sunset, Rachav lit the small lamp on the lobby counter and coaxed Issus to sip a cup of kefir with crushed mint. Exhausted, Rachav fell asleep on a pile of cushions next to her mother.

The next morning, Samar's voice awakened her. Rachav sat up and nodded at her friend before checking on Issus. Still breathing. She sat up and arched her back. The cushions kept sliding out from under her last night and she'd finally given up and slept directly on the floor. She rubbed the grit out of her eyes while Samar poured pomegranate juice for all of them.

"Your brothers are already picking grapes. Kikkuli asked me to tell you they worked late last night and slept between the vines so they could start again at first light." Samar straightened the blanket at the foot of Issus's pallet. "He told me about your mother."

Rachav held the juice to Issus's lips and slowly trickled it into her mouth, mindful of Issus's throat convulsing with each swallow. "It was the steward's fault," she finally said.

Samar refilled Rachav's cup. "Galadel came here?"

Rachav's throat ached. She didn't trust her voice enough to answer.

Samar dropped her voice. "Does it have anything to do with the night of the festival?"

Issus moaned and opened her eyes, fixing her gaze on Rachav with an unnerving intensity.

"I can't talk about it right now." Rachav had the uncomfortable sense that Issus heard every word, and she was determined to protect her.

Samar squeezed her hand. "I'll go back and let Kikkuli know you're both all right. I'll come back later after I draw water for my mother."

Rachav went to the courtyard and checked on their customers. Afterwards, she fed her mother and cleaned the lobby. Working kept her mind off the steward's absurd accusations and her mother's precarious health.

Something rustled at the front door. The *bārû*. As if things weren't bad enough.

Leaning on her staff, the old woman shuffled around the counter.

"Welcome." Rachav had to be hospitable, her mother would have insisted.

Malkha limped to Issus's pallet with a gust of dry air, lowering herself in a heap of fringed black garments. "I've brought you some honey." She pulled a clay vial out of her pocket and thrust it into Rachav's hands.

Issus shut her eyes and frowned as if in pain. Rachav glanced at the *bārû* and mumbled a half-hearted thanks, hoping the old woman would take the hint and not stay for long.

"Here ... an image of the Queen of the Night to bless your house." She pulled a bulky package out of her pocket. "Keep it covered until the sun hides his face from the moon. When the night gods appear in the sky, dig a hole by the inn's east foundation, and place her in it."

Rachav took the linen-wrapped bundle, and felt the lumpy shape within. It was cold, like the snow that occasionally fell in winter. Her hands shook as she laid the package on Issus's pallet. The goddess knew they needed all the help they could get.

The woman pointed her staff at the shrine on the wall. "Your fire is out."

The lamp her mother normally kept lit for the Queen of the Night no longer burned.

Using the staff to pull herself up, Malkha scowled at Rachav.

This was not a good thing. Rachav sprinted to the courtyard and grabbed a copper spoon to dip a hot coal for the lamp.

When she returned, Malkha stood waiting at the shrine, her black eyes inspecting Rachav from scarf to sandal. "The moon hid his face from you the night of King Nur's coronation."

Rachav silently lit the lamp. How much did the bārû know about everything else that happened that night?

“You angered the night gods. You cursed yourself. The gods marked you that night, yet you cheated them. Now they follow you, seeking vengeance if not from you, from your loved ones.” Malkha’s voice carried a peevish sound.

The old woman’s words stunned Rachav. “Mother’s illness is my fault?”

“How many more lives will the gods claim until you give them what they seek?” The shrine’s flickering lamp drew long shadows across the old woman’s face.

“What do they want?”

“You must lay Issus on the mountainside, north of the city. Tell your father when he returns.”

Face to face, the old woman’s breath smelled of strong garlic and rancid meat. Rachav breathed through her mouth. “The necropolis is a place for the dead.”

“Foolish girl. The gods have already claimed her. You must let them take her completely.”

Rachav walked away from the shrine and crouched by Issus. She couldn’t leave her mother for dead. Issus laid quite still, eyes closed, but a troubled frown still marred her forehead.

“Mother?” Rachav whispered.

Issus opened her eyes and fixed them on some distant point by the hearth, which unnerved Rachav more than the panicked stares of this morning. What if Issus heard and understood the bārû’s words?

Ephron placed Rachav in charge of caring for the family and customers, and she wasn’t going to hear any more of the bārû’s advice. She scooped up the little pot of honey Malkha had brought. Turning back to the old woman, she made a polite bow. “Thank you for the honey. When Father returns, I’ll tell him that you came to see us.”

“Heed my words.” Malkha limped to the door.

Rachav observed her leave with relief. When Malkha tripped on her long

black robe, Rachav stepped forward to steady her. If the old woman fell down and injured herself, hospitality would demand she stay at the inn until recovered. Rachav couldn't allow that happen. "Let me help you."

Malkha grasped Rachav's hands and the honey pot fell to the floor, shattering clay and sticky, amber liquid on the flagstones.

"Are you all right?" She tried to pull free, but the old woman's grip was surprisingly strong.

Malkha's eyes glazed over and her lips parted.

"You're hurting me."

The bārû didn't move.

"Malkha? What's wrong with you?"

"Many will die." Malkha's voice deepened. "Death comes. Flee!"

Rachav's scalp bristled, and she pulled harder against the bārû's grip.

"The blood of the dead cries out." The wise woman's voice was hollow, like an empty corpse, her face vacant.

"Let me go!"

The old woman released her and Rachav stumbled backwards.

Staring sightlessly, Malkha intoned. "Many seek your life. Wait for the true one."

Rachav's arms tingled, and she shuddered. "I don't understand."

Malkha suddenly twisted her head back and forth as though chasing away an annoying fly. Her eyes focused and she spoke in her usual, age-widened voice. "My legs just give me trouble now and then, but the walk here was good for me."

Rachav couldn't let the bārû leave without an explanation. "Who is coming, Malkha? Who is the true one?"

"You're talking nonsense. Tell your father to mind my words." She shambled away, her staff tapping the flagstones until she was out the gate.

Throughout the afternoon, Rachav sat on a cushion next to her mother and tried to spin flax while Issus continued to stare sightlessly at the wall. A fearful dread settled over her like a goat hair blanket draped

around her shoulders.

In the late afternoon, Zaron returned from the vineyard alone.

“Where’s Pudu?” Rachav said.

Zaron flopped down on a pile of big cushions in the common room. “She went home with Halatya and Adah.”

“No, she can’t do that.” Malkha’s visit still cast a pall, and Rachav wanted Pudu here at home, safe.

Kikkuli entered, followed by Nuzi and Samar. “Rae, I hope you made a big kettle of stew. Nuzi and Samar helped us pick grapes so I invited them for supper.”

Samar greeted Rachav, sat down by Issus and spoke in quiet tones about the harvest—as if Issus could understand every word—and blotted her face with a handkerchief.

“How’s your mother?” Nuzi asked.

“The same.” Rachav stepped around him to finish her conversation with Zaron. “Pudu belongs at home, with us.”

Kikkuli opened the dried fruit box. “What are you girls arguing about?” He stuffed a shriveled winter fig in his mouth.

“Adah asked Pudu to spend the night,” Zaron said defensively.

“Zaron doesn’t want to take care of Pudu, so she tossed her off to Adah like a used rag,” Rachav said. “Mother would want her here.”

Zaron stared at her coldly. “As far as the Queen of the Night is concerned, Mother’s already dead.”

Rachav pulled her hand back to slap the side of Zaron’s head, but Kikkuli blocked her. “I give the orders, seeing as I am the oldest,” he said around a mouthful of fruit, “and there’ll be no arguing in the house.”

“Technically, Halatya is the oldest,” Zaron said.

“But he has his own family, in the valley, so I’m in charge here.”

Rachav gestured impatiently at Kikkuli. “Then *you* bring Pudu home.”

“How about if I go get her?” Nuzi said.

Kikkuli washed his fruit down with a swig of kefir. “No, Nuzi, this is a family matter.”

Rachav started walking toward the door. The light was fading and she wanted Pudu home before dark.

“Don’t leave,” Kikkuli said. “Zaron will fetch her.”

“I will not.” Zaron settled more deeply into her cushions.

“If you refuse, I’ll tell Halatya about your trip to the temple priestesses last night.”

Rachav walked over to the cushions and sized up her twin. “You went to the priestesses’ quarters after dark?”

“Litva invited me.”

“And that’s not the first time you went.” Kikkuli folded his arms across his bare chest.

“So what if I go? Queen Supoket has established a new precinct for Our Lady of Heaven, the Queen of the Night. She invited us to survey the new silver-paneled chambers for supplicants.” Zaron casually twirled a lock of her hair.

Rachav leaned over Zaron and sniffed. Her twin’s hair smelled like incense. “You went today, too, didn’t you?”

Zaron lifted her shoulder and picked at her fingernails. “Mother never stopped me from visiting Litva.”

“Only in daylight. After sundown the temple is off limits and you know it.”

“Why not? Queen Supoket takes her daughter. She even gave gifts to all the children.”

“Look at me.” Rachav pulled Zaron to her feet. “Tell me you did not take Pudu to the temple.”

Zaron jerked her arm out of Rachav’s grasp. “And what if I did?”

“Children have disappeared in there.” Rachav pressed her hand to her forehead, where a ferocious pounding was making it hard to concentrate.

Zaron held her head high, tears brightening her eyes. “You think you’re so smart, sister. Just wait!”

Kikkuli stepped between them again, looking firm and suddenly

much older. “Go back to Halatya and Adah’s house and get Pudu.”

“But—” Zaron closed her mouth as quickly as she had opened it. She put on her sandals and plucked a scarf off the cloak hook. “You’ll all be sorry.”

Kikkuli grabbed another handful of figs. “I’m going to light a fire in the courtyard before I report for night shift.”

Rachav threw a handful of plantain seeds in with the boiling meat and pulled a leek and small braids of dried garlic down from the rafters above the fireplace.

Nuzi leaned against the wall and watched her. “They’ll be back soon.”

Rachav grabbed a blade from the cabinet and starting chopping. “Why would Zaron do that?”

“Big day in the city yesterday. You were too busy with Issus to notice. Queen Supoket sacrificed a bull. She gave meat and gifts to every woman who attended.”

“How do you know all this?” Rachav laid down the blade when she realized she had mutilated the garlic into a paste.

“My flock is grazing on the barley stubble near the oasis,” he said, wagging his eyebrows with exaggeration. “You’d be surprised at the gossip you can overhear as folks go back and forth between the village and the city.”

His goofy expressions always lightened her heart, but not tonight. “And you say she’s taken Pudu?”

He nodded.

Rachav wiped her face with the corner of her sleeve. “Zaron gave in too quickly to Kikkuli’s demand. Maybe she’s not bringing her home. What if she’s going back to the temple?” Rachav pushed away from the table, scattering vegetables onto the floor.

Nuzi stepped away from the wall and blocked her way. “She’ll bring Pudu back. You saw Kikkuli’s face. He meant what he said, and she knows it.”

“I don’t understand you. Why didn’t you tell me she’d taken my little sister to the temple?”

“I didn’t—”

“You should have told me.” Rachav could hear her heart thundering in her ears and she raised her voice. “I’m going to Halatya’s house before Zaron does it again.”

“Just wait, Rae. It’s getting dark. Zaron will be back with Pudu any moment.”

Nuzi’s cool-headedness fueled her agitation and she suddenly didn’t want him in her house. “Go home.”

“Come on, Rae. Don’t you think you’re over-reacting?”

“I don’t want you here.”

“I’m sorry. I should have told you. I didn’t know you would—”

Rachav covered her eyes with her hands. She couldn’t bear to look at him. “Go home.”

When she heard the soft sound of Nuzi’s sandals fade across the courtyard, she glanced back at her mother’s pallet where Samar was now massaging Issus’s limp hands.

“I’ll be back.” Rachav pulled a long scarf off the cloak hook and walked through the fire-lit courtyard. Just as she reached the gate, her twin walked in. Pudu’s legs were wrapped around Zaron’s waist, and her head rested on Zaron’s shoulder.

Breathing hard, Zaron staggered into the lobby and practically dumped Pudu on one of the plump cushions in the common room. “Satisfied? She was already sleeping at Adah and Halatya’s house. I pulled her out of a soft warm bed and carried her all the way up Barley Avenue.”

Rachav knelt down. She lightly brushed Pudu’s soft cheek and tucked a long strand of ebony hair behind the child’s delicate ear.

Pudu moaned and Rachav bolstered two tapestried cushions around her to keep her from rolling. Puzzled, she touched the small linen strips wrapped around her little sister’s upper arms. Each one bore the goddess’s symbol. She turned her attention to Zaron. “You’re copying the wraps Queen Supoket puts on her daughter’s arms?”

“If you say so.” Zaron hovered over Pudu, hands on her hips.

Rachav lifted a corner of one of the wraps. Silkweed poultice. For bleeding. Pudu opened her eyes and scuttled closer to Issus. “Don’t touch me,” she whimpered.

Rachav stared open-mouthed as Pudu curled up at her mother’s feet. She frowned at her twin. “What’s wrong with Pudu?”

“Queen Supoket’s cat scratched her.” Zaron flicked her hair over her shoulder and walked away. “I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

Samar laid a blanket over Pudu and stood up to stretch. “I need to go home, unless you want me to spend the night.”

“No, go home. Thanks. Sorry I’m not good company tonight.”