

A
NOVEL
of
PROPHETS
&
KINGS

ISAIAH'S LEGACY

MESU ANDREWS

AUTHOR OF ISAIAH'S DAUGHTER

SNEAK
PEEK



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This book is a work of historical fiction based closely on real people and real events. Details that cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author's imagination.

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*To my PapaPat,
Who left this earth while I wrote this story,
Who worships now at the throne—and who
I'll see again someday.*

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CHARACTER LIST

(**Bold** indicates biblical character; * indicates historical character)

<i>Adaiah</i>	<i>Manasseh's royal treasurer</i>
<i>Adnah</i>	<i>various characters: Shulle's mother, a cat, and Shulle's maid</i>
(King) Ahaz	<i>Hezekiah's father (abba)</i>
(King) Ashurbanipal*	King of Assyria (668-633 B.C.)*
<i>Assoros</i>	<i>Manasseh's prison guard</i>
<i>Aya</i>	Isaiah's wife
Azariah	High priest
(<i>King</i>) <i>Baal*</i>	<i>King of Tyre*</i>
<i>Baka</i>	<i>Manasseh's personal guard</i>
<i>Bekira</i>	<i>Manasseh's first-born child, a daughter, with Shulle</i>
<i>Belit</i>	<i>Babylonian sorceress</i>
Eliakim	<i>Hezekiah's best friend; Nasseh's tutor</i>
(King) Esarhaddon*	King of Assyria (680-669 B.C.)*
<i>Gemeti</i>	<i>Manasseh's Babylonian wife</i>
Haruz	Shulle's abba, Shebna's brother
(King) Hezekiah*	King of Judah*; Manasseh's father (abba)
Isaiah	God's prophet; Queen Zibah's father (abba)*

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Jashub (Shear-Jashub)	Isaiah's firstborn; Zibah's brother*; Kenaz's father (abba)
<i>Jericho</i>	<i>Shulle's rescued maid</i>
<i>Kenaz</i>	<i>Jashub & Yaira's son; Manasseh's cousin</i>
(King) Manasseh (<i>Nasseh</i>)	King of Judah*; Hezekiah's son
<i>Manno</i>	<i>Ashurbanipal's commander</i>
<i>(Prince) Mattaniah</i> (<i>Matti</i>)	<i>Hezekiah's brother</i>
Meshullemeth (<i>Shulle</i>)	<i>Shebna's niece; Manasseh's wife</i>
Nahum	Yahweh's prophet
<i>Onan</i>	<i>Zibah's personal guard</i>
<i>Panya</i>	<i>Manasseh's Egyptian concubine</i>
<i>Penina</i>	<i>Shulle's rescued maid</i>
Queen Abijah	Hezekiah's mother (ima)
<i>Queen Naqia*</i>	<i>Sennacherib's wife*; Esarhaddon's mother*</i>
(King) Sennacherib*	King of Assyria (705-681 B.C.)*
<i>(King) Shamash-Shumukin*</i>	<i>Assyrian King of Babylon (667-648)*; Ashurbanipal's brother*</i>
Shebna	<i>Manasseh's tutor; Shulle's uncle</i>
(King) Tiglath-Pileser*	<i>King of Assyrian (747-727 B.C.)*</i>
<i>(Pharaoh) Tirhakah*</i>	<i>King of Egypt (690-664 B.C.)*</i>
<i>Yaira</i>	<i>Zibah's friend; Kenaz's ima; Jashub's wife</i>

NOTE TO READER

King Hezekiah was Judah's most righteous king and restored the nation to Yahweh-worship after his depraved father's idolatry nearly destroyed it. Hezekiah's only son, Manasseh, became Judah's wickedest king and destroyed everything his father rebuilt. Queen Hephzibah—Hezekiah's wife and Manasseh's mother—was the woman who loved them both.

Why would I write this tragic tale? Perhaps a better question is why would you read it? Because after all the research, prayer, and study, I'm convinced Hephzibah's son is the greatest prodigal journey in Scripture.

You're about to walk with me into Manasseh's dark world. It may feel overwhelming at times, but if you remain focused on God's promises—as Queen *Zibah* does—you'll reach the indescribable Light of truth. The God who allowed Manasseh to reject Him also pursued the wayward king and guided him home. That God did the same for me. He can do it for you—and all the Manassehs in your life.

“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.”

ISAIAH 9:2

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PART I



In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, “This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”

Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, “Remember, LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: “Go and tell Hezekiah, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.’”

ISAIAH 38:1–6

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PROLOGUE

I am Shebna. Small in stature, weak in body, strong of mind. A Levite. At sixteen, I was too weak to serve in Yahweh's temple, so *Abba* begged the prophet Isaiah to teach me alongside the royal princes of Judah. Isaiah agreed though I was smaller than many, older than all, and smarter than most.

When King Ahaz persecuted the prophets, I replaced Isaiah as royal tutor. I taught royalty all day, and I endured Abba's abuse at night. But my brother, Haruz, suffered worse. He was big as an ox; timid as a mouse. Odd. Distant. Ima tried to protect him, but she died when he was five. My protection came from the love of my chambermaid, Adnah. But Abba sent her away with my dim-witted brother when my abba discovered Adnah and I planned to secretly wed.

I was powerless to stop him.

When King Ahaz died, my childhood classmate Hezekiah took the throne and made his abba-in-law, Isaiah, foreign minister.

I became his palace administrator—and powerless no longer.

Months later, news arrived that Adnah was pregnant. I bought Haruz a farm in northern Israel. Abba died a few months later, and I buried him in the pauper's grave he deserved. In less than a week, Adnah's child died as well.

Had Yahweh judged my vengeance?

Hoping to atone, I sent a maid for Adnah's care and a farmhand for Haruz. Maybe I could appease the god who let wicked Levites live too long and innocent children die too soon.

My treasury grew fat with no wife or child to spoil, so when King Hezekiah sent me as ambassador to Egypt, I spent my wealth on their gods. I worshipped Seth and Anubis, gods of chaos and death. The gods

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showed me favor with a coalition between Egypt and Judah to withstand the power-mongering Assyrians.

Isaiah, jealous of my diplomatic success, prophesied Yahweh's wrath and turned Hezekiah against me. The king demoted me to a royal secretary and made his best friend, Eliakim, palace administrator in my place. I was forced out of my luxurious palace chamber to a hovel in Jerusalem's Upper City. Bitterness bloomed into hatred when I could no longer pay Adnah's maid or Haruz's farmhand.

Years passed and the Yahwists grew in power and arrogance. They condemned any god but their own and tolerance became a sin. But when Assyria's threats increased, King Hezekiah's trust in Isaiah waned, and he sent me on secret diplomatic journeys. This time, however, my efforts were in vain.. Assyria's army descended like locusts—at the same time King Hezekiah fell deathly ill. Had all the gods failed us?

One morning at dawn, Jerusalem woke to find 185,000 dead Assyrians outside the city gates and Hezekiah's health suddenly improved. Isaiah convinced Queen Zibah that Yahweh had worked both miracles and regained royal favor.

Gossiping traders took news of the supposed miracles to Merodach-Baladan, Babylon's dethroned king. He came bearing gifts to honor the only nation to defy the indomitable Assyrians. Since I'd met him in my travels, Hezekiah chose me to greet the displaced king and his envoys. They arrived with Babylon's chief sorceress—expert in dark arts.

Belit, a stunning woman, was tall and muscular with black eyes that looked through me.

"You, little man, are to be my master," she said in Merodach's hearing.

The Babylonian royal studied me before speaking. "I've learned never to argue with Belit," he said. "I'll give her to you—if you'll use her skills to destroy the Assyrians."

I saw something spark in Belit's piercing eyes. She would not be easily *used* by any one. Three days later Babylon's chief sorceress became my house slave and delivered a scroll from Haruz that my beloved Adnah had died giving birth to a daughter. The baby lived, but I had no desire to see

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a child that should have been mine. I sent money for a wet nurse and every year provided seed for crops. That much I must do for Adnah's daughter and a brother I no longer knew.

When visits from foreign dignitaries ebbed, I was relegated again to royal secretary. But now I had a partner who hated Yahweh as much as I hated Isaiah and Eliakim. Belit brought me great pleasure as a priestess of Babylon's starry hosts. Though Belit and I never married, and she never taught me her dark arts, we began carefully including a group of disgruntled noblemen into our worship at a secluded grove outside the city wall. We introduced Babylon's gods to Judah's highest officials—and my power subtly returned.

When Isaiah prophesied his daughter would bear Hezekiah's heir in her old age, I asked Belit to induce another miscarriage for the queen. Imagine my disappointment when Zibah delivered a healthy boy, Manasseh.

"Be patient," she insisted and then proved her skill on another Yahwist. Since Isaiah was my prime target, Belit's first victim was his wife, Aya. I delivered a drop of potion in a cup of mint tea under the guise of a friendly visit. Aya fell ill later that day, and Belit's midnight curse stole her breath by dawn.

My patience was rewarded when Queen Zibah's only son still hadn't spoken a word by his third Passover. Belit's magic had worked. The boy was sensitive to noise, recoiled at physical touch, and ignored everyone and everything except his favorite toy—the exact childhood oddities that had plagued my brother Haruz. Prince Manasseh's birth may have been a miracle, but Belit's dark arts had gutted Yahweh's promise of a worthy heir.

Today when I arrived at the palace, the chief secretary announced our day's writing task: invitations to foreign dignitaries for Manasseh's coronation as Judah's co-ruler, two months hence. Pondering the royal humiliation that would come with the prince's first public event, I was buoyed through the day's tedium.

But on my way home, merchants' gossip darkened my hopes for disaster. King Hezekiah had chosen not me but Isaiah and Eliakim to teach his son.

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“When will the king and queen realize that I’m just as good—no, *better*, than Isaiah and Eliakim . . .” I began ranting the moment I saw Belit, but she silenced me with one finger against my lips.

“You will join Manasseh’s teachers,” she said, “and the daughter of your beloved Adnah will help you destroy the Yahwists.” Drawing my chin upward, she stared down at me; flecks of yellow appearing in her eyes—pulsating, mesmerizing. “Your brother’s daughter is key, Shebna. Promise Queen Zibah that only you and the girl can prepare her son to rule.”

I couldn’t look away, lured into the darkness she used to woo me. Her plan was brilliant, and I willingly agreed. Gripping the back of her neck, I pulled her into an impassioned kiss. We would set the plan in motion—after I took pleasure in Belit, my greatest weapon against the Yahwists.

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I

Meshullemeth daughter of Haruz . . .
was from Jotbah.

2 KINGS 21:19

Jotbah, Judah

693 BC, Seven Years Before Hezekiah's Prophesied Death

I hated weeding the garden alone, but I'd rather Abba copy his scrolls inside than bear our neighbor's cutting remarks. Why did others ridicule what they couldn't understand? Abba couldn't tolerate wool against his skin, and linen cost too much for him to own more than one robe. Garden work would ruin it, so one day he worked bare chested—and earned the wrath of the village elders. They had treated him with suspicion ever since. Though it happened three years ago when I was only five, I still remembered the shame on Abba's face. We held each other that afternoon and wept, prisoners in our own home.

Fury strengthened my grip on a wayward green sprout. "Ouch!" Dropping the thistle, I sucked on my finger and removed the barb with my teeth.

"Are you all right, Meshullemeth?" Our neighbor's singsong voice rubbed at my raw mood. I spit on the ground and returned to my work. Of course I was all right. It was just a thistle.

"Haruz works that poor little girl like a mule," the neighbor woman said to her maid. "I don't know why the elders don't take her away from him. She should be with a *real* family."

I pretended not to hear and kept my back bent, head down. Abba and

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I were a real family. What did she know about our lives? How many eight-year-old girls could write? I could. How many could read the Torah? Perhaps I should write a complaint to the elders about *her*. I sighed. Abba would never allow it. He would quote King Solomon, *Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up*.

Abba was too nice.

The ground under my feet began to tremble, and I looked at the neighbor woman to see if she noticed. She was too busy talking. By the time she looked to the southeast, I knew it was the pounding of many horses.

“Shulle, get in the house!” Abba shouted from the threshold of our little house. Tucking my robe into my belt, I ran fast as a deer. Maybe someday Abba and I would follow one of those pretty creatures into the forest. Live alone. Away from the wagging tongues of Jotbah. He always made me hide when travelers passed by. I once asked why, and he said because I was his only treasure.

I dashed through our curtained doorway and closed it behind me. Abba knelt beside it, gathering me in his arms so we could peek outside together as the caravan passed. A line of chariots and horses led a golden coach over the rise, followed by a cloud of dust that made our neighbor woman cough. She was too nosy to go inside and escape.

Surprisingly, the first chariot stopped in front of her house, and a little man dismounted and approached her. His driver remained in the chariot, while the little man talked with our neighbor. In a moment both began pointing our direction.

“What are they saying, Abba?” He was tugging absently on his beard, so I captured his hand between mine. “Fear, surprise, excitement, or joy?” It was our game to decide why he tugged at his beard. Abba couldn’t always tell me how he felt.

He kissed my hands and explained. “That man with the soldiers is my older brother, your *dohd* Shebna. I haven’t seen him since your *ima* and I left Jerusalem many years ago. I don’t know why he’s come.”

The little man bowed to our neighbor, and two soldiers followed him

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as he walked toward our house. That's when I noticed his face looked just like Abba's. Smaller, but the same hooked nose and close-set black eyes.

Abba nudged me toward the ladder in our one-room home. "Hide in the loft."

I hurried and hid under my tattered blanket. It was warmer than the bread oven, but I thought my father was afraid, so I obeyed.

I peeked from beneath my blanket to see abba grab his linen robe from the wall peg. Forgoing his sandals, he stood barefoot beside my ladder, tugging harder at his beard. "Done nothing wrong," he whispered. "Done nothing wrong. Done nothing wrong. Done nothing wrong . . ."

A bony hand drew back our curtain. Dohd Shebna and two soldiers stepped across the threshold without an invitation. The little man's lips curved into a smile, but his eyes squinted, studying every object in our home—and then landed on Abba.

"You're even bigger than you were when you left Jerusalem."

Abba studied the packed-dirt floor. "I was a boy, Shebna. Eighteen years old."

"You were old enough to marry my Adnah."

"The Torah says honor your parents." Abba shifted from one foot to the other now, pulling hairs from his beard. "I obeyed our abba." I didn't like the effect this little man had on him. It was our home, not his, and Abba's beard had just grown back after the elders accused him of stealing the neighbor's cow. They found the cow two days later in the forest. Why did people think they could accuse and belittle a good man just because he was different?

I threw off my blanket. "We offered you bread and wine, as the laws of hospitality command, but you are not welcome here if you disrespect my abba." The startled looks on all four men's faces lasted only a moment before Shebna and his soldiers began their mocking.

"You have the fire of your ima, little one." Dohd Shebna laughed. "What is your name?"

"Her name is Meshullemeth," Abba blocked Dohd's advance toward the ladder. "She isn't a part of the conversation."

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“On the contrary,” Dohd Shebna fixed his gaze on me. “Meshullemeth is the very reason I’ve come to Jotbah. She must return to Jerusalem with me and help the king and queen teach Prince Manasseh how to communicate—”

“Get out!” Abba shoved him into his two guards. “You can’t take her from me. Leave!”

The guards drew their swords, and I rushed down the ladder. “No!”

Shebna stepped between his men and Abba. “Put away the swords.” He fixed his eyes on me. “You look just like Adnah.” Mouth gaping, his arrogant smirk was gone.

“You knew my ima?”

He nodded. “She was my dearest”—pausing, he looked at Abba before finishing—“my dearest friend.”

Abba lifted me into his arms, and I circled one arm over his shoulder. “Dohd Shebna came a long way,” I said softly. Perhaps we should listen to what he came to say.”

Abba pecked my cheek with a kiss and whispered, “We must not let him separate us, Shulle.” He set my feet on the floor and nudged me behind him as if he were afraid Dohd would snatch me away. Then he reached for our circular leather mat and laid it on the floor, while I chose our three best cushions. “Sit down,” he said to our guests, handing them the worn pillows I’d chosen. I brought out the loaves of bread I’d saved after breaking our fast this morning. It was all we had for the rest of this day, but it was unthinkable to let visitors leave without feeding them.

“Did you bake these?” Dohd asked me as Abba offered the loaves to the men and joined them around the leather mat. Abba nodded permission for me to answer as he filled four cups with watered wine.

“Yes. I baked the bread this morning, my lord.” I called him *lord* because of his fancy purple robe.

“You’re quite grown up for an eight-year-old.” He picked up his cup and looked at Abba over the rim. After a long drink, he added, “You’ve trained her well, Haruz. I’m impressed.”

Abba stared at the bread on his plate, but I saw a faint smile. “I’ve trained her to read the Torah and write Hebrew and Aramaic, but it’s Shulle who trained me to entertain a guest.”

Dohd took a quick sip and set aside his cup. “Which is why she must come with me to Jerusalem. Prince Manasseh is soon to be made co-regent and shows many of the same signs you did at age five.”

“Why can’t you teach him?” Abba reached for his beard again.

“I plan to, but children learn best from other children who understand them.” Dohd waved me over to join them. Abba’s open arms were my safe invitation. Once I settled on Abba’s lap, Dohd spoke to us both. “When King Hezekiah was a small boy, he witnessed his older brother being sacrificed in a pagan altar fire. Hezekiah was so traumatized he lost the ability to speak until a little girl named *Ishma*—who had also been traumatized by captivity and slavery—helped restore his speech. That little girl became his best friend and was given permission to learn alongside him and the other royal boys of Judah.”

I turned a disbelieving stare on Abba. “How have you never told me of Ishma?”

He chuckled, rubbing his thumb over my hand. “I have. Ishma was taken into Isaiah’s household, adopted as his daughter, and given a new name, *Hephzibah*. You know her as Queen *Zibah*.”

“The queen was a slave?” I couldn’t imagine it. “She was the little girl who helped King Hezekiah?”

Abba nodded, and Dohd touched my arm as gently as if he were stroking a dove. “I’d like you to be that little girl for Prince Manasseh, Shulle. He hasn’t been traumatized like his abba was, but he has some of the same issues your abba dealt with at his age. I believe having the prince learn alongside a friend who loves and understands him—like little Hezi and Zibah did—will be of more benefit than the best tutors in the world.”

“What’s in it for you, brother?” Abba’s hand rested over mine, and his breathing quickened. Was he nervous or angry?

I braved a glance at Dohd. His small black eyes were piercing—but

had little effect on Abba since he seldom looked up. “I’m offering Shulle a better life in Jerusalem, Haruz, where she’ll be treated like royalty. She’ll be a companion to our future king.”

“He’ll make her a concubine.”

“No!” Dohd leaned forward, putting his pleading expression in Abba’s line of sight. “Do you think I’d let Adnah’s daughter become a concubine?”

Abba looked away. “I think you’d do anything to prove your power is bigger than your stature.”

“You’re too much like Abba.” Dohd slammed his cup on the mat. “I’ve been nothing but kind since entering your home, and you’ve done nothing but accuse and insult me. Would you rather keep your daughter here in this hovel all her life? What can you give her? Who would marry her without a dowry? Without an abba who can make the match?”

Abba’s hand grew tighter around mine, and I nearly cried out—as much from despair at my future as the moment of pain. Who could I marry in this awful little village?

“We’ll go with you.” Abba’s voice was reedy and weak.

“What?” I whispered as his hand released mine.

Before he could answer, Dohd Shebna said, “I didn’t invite you, Haruz.”

Abba looked directly into his brother’s eyes. “If she goes, I go.” I’d never before seen him stare boldly into another human face. The courage my abba showed in that moment was like that of a warrior in battle. I’d always known I was his treasure, but now I realized he was giving up his life for me—willingly leaving everything familiar so I could embrace the unknown.

“I won’t go, Abba.” I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I don’t need a husband. I love you, and I don’t ever want to—”

“All right, Haruz,” Dohd said, sighing. “You may come to Jerusalem as well.”

My sorrow turned to joy as Abba’s arms slid around me like a shield. He buried his whispers against my ear, “We must never forget, Shulle,

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'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.' Jerusalem will try to steal your heart, but we must not let it."

He kissed the top of my head and released me. I turned to thank Dohd Shebna who waited with a bright smile and a small folded bundle in his hand. He unwrapped it, revealing something brown and sticky. Candied dates! My stomach rumbled so loud both of his soldiers laughed. "Take one," Dohd said, "before the monster in your stomach attacks us all."

I shoved a whole date in my mouth and lolled it to the side so I could talk. "You must be important to require so many of the king's guards."

His smile disappeared as he wiped dripping syrup from my chin. "I was important—until two arrogant men took away everything I'd worked for." His breath smelled like spices, and those piercing black eyes drilled into mine. "I'll be important again someday, Shulle, and you will be too. I'll make sure you have candied dates every day of your life."

Hezekiah had very great wealth and honor . . . He also made buildings to store the harvest of grain, new wine and olive oil; . . . He built villages and acquired great numbers of flocks and herds, for God had given him very great riches.

2 CHRONICLES 32:27–29

*Jerusalem, Judah
Two Months Later*

Queen Hephzibah's five-year-old son sat on a miniature version of Judah's throne, ignoring the gold scepter in his lap to play with his favorite wooden toy. If her husband would look at their son instead of the audience, he'd see the irony. She studied the broad shoulders and muscled back of King Hezekiah while he addressed the gathering. Why couldn't he give their boy more time to be a child? *Because you are a king first and abba second*, she answered silently. And her husband must prepare Judah for his death—prophesied to come in seven years

Zibah closed her eyes, trying to block out life's worries and the effects of the chaotic courtroom. How much more would the noise affect her five-year-old son? Inhaling a sustaining breath, she peeked at Manasseh, who sat quietly on his throne beside her stool. The pieces of cloth she'd stuffed in his ears dulled the noise and kept him calm—at least for the moment.

"He's fine." Hezi's whisper startled her. "You worried for nothing. He's perfectly peaceful in front of all these people." He kissed her head and re-

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turned to the front of the dais, instructing those still streaming into the crowded courtroom to move all the way to the side walls. Even the balconies were filled to capacity, the day Judah would name their son coheir and king.

But why must the council rush Manasseh into a public coronation, when he spoke only two words to his parents in private. Ma and Ba, his attempt at Ima and Abba. Yet he was brilliant when given blocks to build with or when asked to add and subtract with those same blocks. He was currently enamored with the simple spinning wheel on top of a stick, but how would Hezi respond when his son wasn't the model of peace and decorum? Was her husband really oblivious to the weight he was placing on Nasseh's shoulders today? Or was he in denial—simply because they couldn't change Abba Isaiah's prophecy?

Nasseh's ridiculous jeweled crown pressed his little brow into a frown. Actually, she'd seldom seen him smile. He spent hours intently slapping that wooden wheel to watch it twirl. Sighing, she had to admit that even if she snatched him away to his chamber, he'd likely be spinning and frowning in his own little world. Would he ever become a part of theirs?

She'd tried preparing him for his coronation years ago, whispering while he nursed at her breast, "You'll be king someday, my son. King like your abba." She hadn't thought he was listening. But when this morning's schedule was disrupted, his nurse sent for Zibah to calm him. "You must wear a purple robe and crown today, love, so you can be like Abba."

He looked at his mother with wide brown eyes, so innocent and clear. "I king today."

Why couldn't his first sentence have been something simple about a cow or a goat?

The noisy throne room hushed, drawing Zibah's attention to her regal husband. "Today, Queen Hephzibah and I introduce our son and my heir, Prince Manasseh, on whom I confer all the rights and privileges of Judah's co-regent." He stepped aside, sweeping his hand toward their beloved boy.

Nasseh twirled his toy, blissfully unaware that he was the center of attention.

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Eliakim, the palace administrator and king's best friend, stood on the other side of his small throne and whispered. "Would you like to look up and greet your guests, my king?" Nasseh turned away, sending the scepter rolling off his lap. The crowd gasped, but Eliakim lunged and caught the priceless heirloom.

Zibah pressed a hand against her racing heart while Hezi calmed the audience. "A five-year-old co-regent will require a bit more training than I needed as co-regent at twenty." A flutter of laughter eased the tension.

Like an ivory comb, Hezi's wit had smoothed many tangles in Judah's politics. She'd loved Hezekiah ben Ahaz from their first touch, when she was five and Hezi, eight. Her voice had vanished after witnessing her parents' murder, his mind lost after watching his brother sacrificed in the fire. They were two broken children, brought together by sheer chance—or more aptly Yahweh's design—and restored by each other's touch. Infuriating as her husband could be, he would always be the life in her veins.

As if knowing her thoughts, he turned and winked, nodding his invitation to escort their son forward. Wavering between indignation and trepidation, she leaned over to speak softly to their boy. "Nasseh, it's time for you to be king now. Will you follow Ima to where Abba is standing? He'd like to hold your hand."

Nothing.

How did Hezi expect him to spend one day a week in court listening to foreign emissaries and domestic disputes when he couldn't even follow simple instructions?

She placed her hand beside his toy. An offering only, not daring to touch the toy or take it away. "Perhaps you could hold Ima's hand and help me walk to Abba so I don't get lost?" He took her hand and scooted off the small throne. A victory. He usually complied if he believed he was helping her.

Wearing a lopsided grin, Hezi watched them approach, utterly at ease with the packed courtroom. "My friends, many of you have traveled from far and wide to witness my son's historic ascension to Judah's throne. Manasseh will be educated by the finest minds in our nation. Eliakim ben

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Hilkiah, the brilliant engineer of our city's water tunnel, will be our son's hands-on instructor in Solomon's writings about wisdom, animals, building, science, and the stars." Hezi pointed to our childhood friend, who, at the moment, held our son's scepter. Eliakim's cheeks flushed to match his hair.

"Isaiah ben Amoz," Hezi called. "Will you join us on the dais please?" As the prophet rose from the royal advisors' gallery, Hezi recounted his credentials for the audience. "Of King David's lineage, Lord Isaiah has faithfully served every king of Judah since my great-grand-*saba* Uzziah. Most importantly, however, he serves as Yahweh's prophet to this generation."

Zibah watched as Eliakim helped the elderly prophet up the dais stairs. Abba Isaiah and his wife Aya had adopted Zibah after her parents were killed and she'd been rescued from captivity. He'd been a loving abba to Hezi when King Ahaz abandoned faith in Yahweh.

Abba embraced Eliakim and Hezi, their fondness for each other evident, even though his prophecies had been a thorn in their sides. Perhaps eight years of prosperity had healed the wounds. Still, Zibah hesitated when Hezi suggested Eliakim and Abba teach their only son. What if they didn't understand Manasseh's unique challenges? Nasseh was bright and could learn anything, but could these two well-intentioned men provide the patient guidance he needed?

"Lord Isaiah will instruct King Manasseh in the law of Moses and prophetic interpretation," Hezi was saying, "and will add foreign policy as the boy grows older."

Abba bowed to uproarious applause.

The sudden commotion startled the five-year-old, hurtling him toward Zibah and sending his toy to the floor. Trying to climb her as if she were a tree, he clutched at her neck, eyes bulging with terror. He snatched glances at the onlookers as if noticing them for the first time.

"Shh, my love," Zibah soothed. "It's just a little noise."

"He's unaccustomed to large gatherings," Hezi said to the crowd. He stepped in front of his wife and child to block the source of Nasseh's fear.

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Eliakim picked up the toy, held it close to the prince's face, and spun the wheel to distract him.

The familiar object settled him long enough for Zibah to glance around her husband at the crowd. She wished she hadn't. Some sneered. Some shook their heads as if her son's distress disqualified him to rule. They didn't know the power of her love. Zibah absently combed Nasseh's dark curls and watched him disappear again into his world with the spinning toy. When her nephew Kenaz was five, he ran and played with other children in the garden, chattering like a hoopoe bird.

She kissed Nasseh's forehead and tried to press down her rising panic. "When Yahweh takes your abba to paradise," she whispered, "you'll be a mighty king, but for now, you are Nasseh, Ma's precious boy."

His lips curved into a slight smile, proving he'd heard her.

She ruffled his hair and placed him between her and Hezekiah. Nasseh continued spinning the wheel, and Hezi looked at her as if expecting her to remove the toy from his hands. If he'd spent any time alone with their son, he'd know what a poor decision that would be. "Make your announcement," she whispered to her husband.

After a disapproving sigh, King Hezekiah turned to the coronation gathered. "Visiting emissaries and citizens of Judah, I present to you my son and co-ruler, King Manasseh, the fourteenth heir of David to sit on Judah's throne. Praise be to Yahweh!"

"Praise be to Yahweh!" the crowd responded, and though Hezi modeled modest applause, the sudden noise startled Nasseh again. This time his fear turned into tears.

Zibah gripped her son's hand as if it were a sword, then marched off the dais and out of the court like a soldier to battle. Blinded by her own tears and spurred by men's judgment, she hurried their pace through the crowded halls. If we can just get to his chamber. He'll be calmer. We'll both be calmer.

"My queen!" someone called from behind. "My queen, wait!"

She kept going, dragging her son through the overcrowded palace on

a day that should have been a celebration. A hand grabbed her arm and whirled her around.

“Shebna?”

He seemed as shocked as she by his lack of decorum. “Forgive me, my queen.” He bowed. A young girl stood beside him. She knelt before Nasseh, bowing her head as she extended her hand. Timid at first, Nasseh touched her hand with one finger. The girl giggled, and Nasseh glanced up at Zibah with a tentative smile. Before she could reprimand Shebna or his little companion, the girl turned up her palm, and Nasseh placed one finger in the center. The little girl didn’t move or try to hold his hand, but within moments he gripped her hand in his and offered her a toothy grin.

“I’m Shulle, my king,” the girl said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Zibah shoved away the girl. “Shebna, what sort of trickery are you playing at?” Nasseh hid his face against her.

The girl stepped back, clinging to a man standing behind Shebna—a man covering his ears with both hands. “Come, Abba. Come with me.” She gently guided him to a quiet corner near the harem stairway.

“Forgive me, my queen,” Shebna said. “That was my niece, Meshullemeth, and if you’ll follow me to the stairs, I believe she and my brother, Haruz, can help King Manasseh.”

“I don’t trust your help, Shebna.” Zibah placed Nasseh behind her, shielding him from the self-seeking man she’d known since childhood. Early in Hezi’s reign, Shebna’s arrogance and deceit had earned a personal censure from Yahweh through Abba Isaiah. According to all reports, he hadn’t changed.

Shebna nodded to Nasseh’s treasured toy. “Haruz liked to twirl the tassels on our abba’s robe when he was a toddler. Abba thought it cute until he tried to break the habit.” He sniffed and nodded toward the giant of a man who now faced the wall and tugged at his patchy beard, obviously struggling with the noise and chaos of the crowded main hall. “When the ‘habit’ couldn’t be broken, our abba broke Haruz instead. As you can see, he’s struggling now because it’s out of his routine, but he can learn to be

content in any *familiar* environment. King Manasseh can learn to cope with anything if we teach him, my queen.” Without waiting for her answer, he rejoined his brother and niece, leaving Zibah drowning in turmoil—around her and inside her.

Pulling Nasseh closer, she joined Shebna’s family. The girl looked to be a few years older than Nasseh, perhaps closer in age to Kenaz. Zibah stepped behind a stone pillar and large planter full of ivy to provide a sufficient barrier for them to speak without shouting.

“I’m sorry I was rude,” Zibah said to the girl before Shebna began spewing lies or blaming Abba and Eliakim for all his troubles—as he was known to do.

She bowed respectfully. “I’m sorry I approached the king without asking your permission, my queen.” Nasseh had released Zibah’s waist when he heard the girl’s voice. “May I offer him my hand again?”

“You may offer,” Zibah cautioned, “but he seldom even allows his cousin Kenaz to hold his hand.”

The girl knelt before Nasseh again, head bowed. “Do you remember my name, my king?” She offered her hand, palm up, once more.

“Shua,” he said, placing one finger in her palm again.

Zibah covered a gasp, restraining both joy and wonder.

“That’s *almost* right. My name is Shu-*lle*. Can you pronounce the *l*’s?”

“Shu-l-l-l-l-l,” he said with a silly grin, squeezing her hand in his.

She laughed with him and then pressed his hand to her forehead with a bow. “It’s my deepest honor to meet you, King Manasseh. I’m sure you’ll be a wonderful king.”

Tears flowed freely down Zibah’s cheeks while the children continued their interchange. Glancing up at Shulle’s abba, she guessed him to be twice the size of Shebna. He’d grown calmer in the quieter space, now combing his beard with his fingers rather than tugging violently at it. Still averting his eyes, however, he seemed far more interested in the stone pillar than in Judah’s queen.

Shebna leaned close and whispered, “Our abba sent Haruz away with a young wife to Jotbah, considering him too much of an embarrassment.

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Haruz's wife died in childbirth, so he raised Shulle alone. I believe he's done a fine job—though he shares many of King Manasseh's unique challenges."

Curiosity loosened Zibah's tongue. "What brings you to Jerusalem, Haruz ben Joseph?"

"My brother believes his teaching methods and my daughter's influence can help King Manasseh in the classroom as you helped King Hezekiah when you were children."

Zibah choked out a derisive laugh. "Your brother presumes too much, Haruz ben Joseph." She glared at Shebna. "My son will learn all he needs to know from Abba and Eliakim. Neither Hezi nor I would trust you to teach our son, Shebna, when you've repeatedly placed personal gain above Judah's best interest."

"It's your son's interest I'm thinking of now," Shebna said with his familiar rancor. "Haruz and I lived with a Levite abba who didn't understand my brother's needs. Isaiah's rigid demands and Eliakim's mousy methods will discourage your son from learning. I am a skilled teacher, and I don't need to prove Shulle's ability to connect with your son, my queen." Shebna closed his eyes and exhaled before speaking more calmly. "I'm asking you to speak with King Hezekiah on your son's behalf. Shulle and I can help Nasseh absorb whatever Isaiah and Eliakim teach him." He held her gaze and waited.

Shebna seemed sincere. Zibah remembered the years he'd replaced Abba as royal tutor. He had been both passionate and proficient in the role. "How will you help Nassah *absorb* his lessons better?"

"May I demonstrate?"

Zibah didn't stop him, so he knelt beside Nasseh and Shulle. They were taking turns twirling the wooden wheel on the stick. "Greetings, my king, I'm Shulle's dohd Shebna, and I'd like to ask you a question or two. Is that all right?"

Nasseh ignored him, continuing his fascination with the spinning toy.

"I like to sing," Shebna went on. "Shulle taught me a silly song about a fish and a frog. Would you like to hear it?"

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A smile curved the young king's lips, but he offered no reply.

"Hmm. That's too bad. I can't sing it for you unless you say, 'Yes, please.'"

"Shebna, he can't—" Zibah's protest was cut off by her son's voice.

"Yef, peez."

Too stunned to even blink, the boy's ima gaped while Shulle and Shebna began singing the silliest lyrics Zibah had ever heard. Haruz joined them with his deep bass voice. Once again moved to tears, Zibah quickly picked up the simple words and sang along. Nasseh mouthed unintelligible words and brightened the hall with a brilliant smile.

Yahweh, thank You for this breakthrough. Thank You for creating a path when all I saw for my son were stone walls and unscalable mountains.

For the first time, Zibah believed her son could be truly happy in life and rule Judah with the strength of his abba's character. As they belted out the third chorus of the fish song, guards and palace visitors began to point and laugh. Zibah didn't mind. But the Shebna of old would have cared very much. She marveled at the man singing beside his giant brother and precious niece. Perhaps bringing his family to Jerusalem had truly changed him.

Yahweh, can I trust Shebna to teach my son? Zibah closed her eyes and listened but heard nothing but singing. She'd learned not to expect a burning bush like the one Moses saw, but sometimes she at least felt a sense of divine direction. Not this time. This time, she must decide to walk a path Yahweh let her choose.

Zibah interrupted Shebna's song. "Bring Shulle to our schoolroom tomorrow. I'll speak with Hezi about the matter, but I can't promise—"

"We'll be there, my queen. Just after dawn."

Nasseh let go of Shulle's hand only after Zibah promised he'd see her tomorrow.

Then Shebna bowed to her son. "You will be a mighty king, and I would be honored to be among those who might shape your mind and heart."

Keep on, then, with your magic spells
 and with your many sorceries,
 which you have labored at since childhood.
 Perhaps you will succeed,
 perhaps you will cause terror.

ISAIAH 47:12

Evening, Same Day

Moving to Jerusalem's Upper City two months ago was hard for Abba, a man who needed space and quiet. Dohd's five-room house was more spacious, but his maid, Belit, was as friendly as a mountain lion with a thorn in its paw. The walled courtyard was the size of our small garden, and houses surrounded us on all sides. Dogs barked. Couples argued. Children squealed. And the smell of our street's drainage trench grew rancid in summer's heat. Abba retreated to his private chamber when we returned from the palace this morning and hadn't emerged. Dohd said to let him rest.

"Belit, Shulle must wear her blue linen robe tomorrow." Dohd Sheb-na's voice sounded high-pitched, a sign he was tense.

"It's stained." Belit slopped gruel into bowls and placed them on a round leather mat in the center of the gathering room.

I'd grown more nervous as the day wore on. "Perhaps I shouldn't go, Dohd. I don't want to embarrass you."

He wagged his head. "You could never embarrass me. You'll wear

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your cream-colored robe and red belt.” He kissed the tip of his finger and placed it on my nose. “This evening you begin special lessons with Belit.”

“So I can help Nasseh better?”

Belit clanked a wooden spoon on a copper pot. “Not exactly.”

Dohd shot her an angry look. “What Belit meant was that she’ll teach you how to save Nasseh from terrible, terrible danger.”

Belit placed spoons beside our bowls and set a pitcher of fresh goat’s milk on the table. Then she added a basket of warm bread. She still hadn’t looked at me.

“Everything smells wonderful, Belit.”

“Here.” She shoved a bowl of raisins and pistachios at me so I could add them to my gruel.

I sprinkled a handful of the mixture into my bowl and passed it to Dohd. My tummy hadn’t growled the whole time we’d lived in Jerusalem. “What danger could threaten King Nasseh? Doesn’t he have guards to protect him?”

“He does, yes, but this kind of danger is different.” Dohd swallowed his first bite of gruel and set aside his spoon. “Belit,” he whispered, “make sure Haruz’s door is closed.” While she checked, he continued in a whisper. “The same danger threatens you I’m afraid, little Shulle. I’ve been cautiously planning your rescue since the day I met you in Jotbah.”

Belit returned and nodded at Dohd, and they looked at me like hungry hawks watching a field mouse. I wished Abba would come out of his chamber. “What I’m about to say will be hard to believe at first,” Dohd explained, “but I need you to trust me, Shulle. Simply do what I ask for tonight, and by tomorrow Belit and I will have proved what we say is true. Can you do that, little one? Can you trust us tonight and obey Belit?”

His smile looked different somehow. Forced. Like a growl without noise. A trickle of sweat ran down my back, and my tummy felt funny. I turned to Belit, and she raised her eyebrows.

“Can I ask Abba if it’s all right?”

“No, dear.” Dohd picked up his spoon and resumed his evening meal. “You see, Haruz and the other Yahwists *are* the danger. They’ve been de-

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ceiving Judah with their lies, and you must learn the truth so we can help King Manasseh realize the dangers of Yahweh.”

I couldn't believe what he was saying. It was blasphemy! “Yahweh is the only true God, Dohd. He—”

“Tonight,” he interrupted, “Belit will demonstrate a special skill in dark arts. Then in the morning, if you're still convinced Yahweh is the only god, you may tell your abba and the king and queen—anyone you like—about our activities. But if you realize that the Yahwists have deceived Judah with their strict laws and command to worship only one god, then I'll ask you to train with Belit and help us make King Nasseh the greatest king in Judah's history.”

“No. No!” I couldn't believe the son of a Levite would suggest—

“Is your faith in Yahweh so fragile that it can't stand a single night's test?” Belit's eyes narrowed in challenge, her voice like the purr of a cat.

“Your abba is sleeping,” Dohd coaxed. “He won't even know it happened.”

My faith was unshakable. I'd known of Yahweh from my earliest memory. I could recite much of the Torah and most of Solomon's proverbs. Nothing they could say or do could change my beliefs. I lifted my spoon. “Fine. One night. But you'll never convince me any other god exists.” I scooped a bit of gruel into my mouth.

Dohd removed the familiar sticky bundle from his pocket and placed my daily treat on the table beside me. “You may have as many dates as you like tonight, Shulle.”

Ignoring him, I left the dates untouched. I wouldn't betray Yahweh for a few candied dates.



My teeth chattered in the spring night air, and I could barely keep my eyes open. The sky was inky black as Belit dug up her last turmeric root. On this horrible night of lessons, I'd watched her kill and skin a snake, catch frogs and drain their blood, mix potions and fashion charms. She'd removed a

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wad of hair from her waist pouch, mixed it with the blood and wrapped it in the snake's skin, and then waved it at the sky while chanting and dancing. With each forbidden practice, my stomach twisted into tighter knots until, finally, we came to a task I could do without guilt. I helped her harvest a basket of herbs. But even that she ruined by saying harvesting under the light of moon and stars strengthened the plants' magical powers.

If Abba knew what I was doing, he'd have used his strap on me. He'd only punished me with it once before, when I refused to apologize for shouting at Jobah's elders. They'd falsely accused him of immoral behavior with a woman in town. I wasn't sure what *immoral behavior* meant, but I'd been sick on the night of the crime, and he'd been home tending my fever. "He couldn't have done it," I explained to the elders—in Hebrew and Aramaic, since they seemed too thick to understand. Still, they whipped Abba publicly, and I shouted my indignation until the beating was over.

Abba demanded I apologize for my disrespect. I refused, and he reached for his strap. "Rebellion is like the sin of divination and arrogance like the evil of idolatry."

Belit had committed all four sins tonight. Was I guilty for watching?

"Over here, Shulle." Belit waved me toward the terrifying caves near the city's Corner Gate, where paupers buried their dead. I moaned inwardly. We'd passed them on our way out of the city, but I'd given them wide berth.

"Stand here beside me," she said, pulling me close and looking to the sky. "The month of the bull has nearly past, but Enki smiles on you tonight. See his horns?" She directed my attention to the stars and drew the bull's horns with an imaginary stylus in her hand, then she drew his front legs charging forward.

"I see it!" Like a candle's glow, the starlight connected, and I saw an image of a bull in the sky. Fear quickly replaced excitement at the enormity of the moment. Had I just beheld the power of another god? Or had I imagined it, tired from a night without sleep?

"Stand by us, O gods of the night." Belit lifted her hands. "Heed my words, O gods of destinies. Prove yourselves in daylight with the power

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you've displayed in tonight's darkness. May the power of your light follow Shulle into this day and shine on her with your favor."

I didn't want the power of any gods shining on me, but when Belit turned to me, her dark eyes shone with a yellow glow. "I was a gift to Shebna," she said, "in the year King Hezekiah fell sick, the same year he was healed, the same year my Babylonian masters visited Jerusalem. It was three years before King Manasseh was born, Shulle. The same year you were born."

My whole body began to shake. "I want to go home."

She smiled, and her eyes glowed brighter. "Your birth and my arrival in Jerusalem—our destinies intertwined. The gods have shown me, Shulle, you and I will determine the future of nations. It is written in the stars."

I jerked free of her grasp, stumbled, and fell to the ground. I couldn't breathe. Too terrified to scream. Too horrified to run. What had I done? Belit was more than Dohd's maid. She was a real sorceress, and tonight I'd been her aide. If anyone discovered it, I could be executed.

I tried to crawl away, but the giant witch hoisted me over her left shoulder like a sack of grain. "It's time you realize there's more than one god, little Shulle." She grabbed the herb basket and supplies and marched back to Dohd's house.

As we entered the courtyard, she set me on my feet, and I inhaled the sweet scent of myrtle blossoms—like waking from a nightmare to the safety of dawn. "I need to sleep," I said.

"Of course, you must sleep," Belit said, nudging me toward the chamber we shared. "And when you wake, your whole life will feel new." She set aside the basket and supplies while I fell onto my mat, exhausted. A blanket fluttered over me, and Belit tucked it all around to ease my shaking. I closed my eyes, willing sleep to claim me, but saw only the dreadful glow of a horned bull in the night sky.

"Shulle, wake up." Dohd Shebna shook my shoulder. "Wake up, my girl."

I startled from a deep sleep and sat up, pulling the blanket up to my neck.

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Dohd stood over me, a single clay lamp casting haunting shadows on his face in the dim light of dawn. “Do you remember the curse Belit spoke last night under the sign of the bull?”

Still foggy from sleep, I nodded. How could I forget anything from last night?

“Do you remember the hair from her pouch?” Again, I nodded. Dohd smiled and offered his hand. “Come with me, little Shulle, and you will see proof of Belit’s skill and the power of her gods.”

I refused his hand but followed him out of my chamber. We walked a few steps down the hallway and stopped in front of Abba’s room. Dohd entered without knocking, and I heard Belit’s rhythmic chanting inside.

I stood on the threshold unable to comprehend the sight. Abba’s beard had been shaved clean, and he lay in a loin cloth on his mat—covered in festering sores. My whole body began to tremble, and I covered my mouth to silence the scream building inside. *Yahweh, please no!*

Dohd returned to kneel beside me, and in a whisper he changed my life. “It was your abba’s beard Belit used in her incantation last night. I don’t know how she did it because she won’t teach me her dark arts, but you, Shulle—you—she’s willing to show you the secrets to this marvelous power over men and gods.”

“Marvelous?” I cried, anger and despair coming out on a sob. I shoved him away. “How is this anything but cruel?”

Dohd’s eyes narrowed. “Just as Belit called on the gods to send sores, she can also restore Haruz. You need only recognize the starry hosts’ power and begin your training as Belit’s apprentice—secretly.”

My stomach rolled, and I groaned, thinking I might retch.

“When we return from our meeting with Queen Zibah and King Nasseh, you’ll see how much better your abba is, and you’ll understand why we’ve gone to such great lengths to show you the power of other gods. When Yahweh wished to prove his power at the burning bush, didn’t he make Moses’s hand leprous? Yahweh was once a powerful god, Shulle, but no longer. Now, it’s the starry hosts that are proving their power to you—to *you*, Shulle. Think of it.”

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I couldn't think of it, not with Abba lying ten paces away in such pain. "I want to talk to Abba before we go."

"Of course," Dohd squeezed my shoulder. "Though he's delirious with fever, you should still be cautious with your words. If you keep silent about the curse, Haruz will be restored by the time we return this afternoon. If you betray us . . ." Eyes cold, he led me to the mat, where Belit knelt beside Abba with a bowl of broth and a spoon. "As you can see," he said in a normal tone, "Belit shaved your abba's beard to help it grow more evenly. Now, she's feeding him bone broth so he can regain his strength. The sores came on suddenly last night, but Belit's knowledge of herbs will help him recover quickly."

Abba weakly raised his hand to me, but I could see that even the slight movement made him wince.

"Don't move, Abba. I'll come home soon to check on you."

Belit looked at me over her shoulder. "The bone broth works miracles." Her eyes met mine. They weren't glowing yellow or pulsing this time, but a shiver still ran through me.

Dohd hurried me from the room, and I wiped my tears. "Good, good," he said. "Pinch your cheeks for a little color and put on that cream-colored robe with the red belt. The sun is rising, and I promised the queen we'd be in the classroom by dawn."

I obeyed and twisted my hair into a loose braid. After grabbing a piece of bread and a handful of raisins, I walked through the gathering room and met Dohd at the courtyard gate. Jerusalem in dawn's light was magical, giving me hope that Belit could heal Abba as promised. But what if she did? Had Yahweh lost His power as Dohd said? *Yahweh, if You hear me, show me Your power so I don't have to serve other gods.*

I didn't know if Yahweh would listen to a little girl. The Torah said I had to bring an offering, but Dohd would never allow it. Lavender hues glowed around Solomon's temple, reminding me that I'd never be allowed to set foot in its sacred courts. Only the priests spoke directly to Yahweh. Had the Almighty ever heard my prayers?

We walked past the temple to the palace beside it. My legs ached by

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the time we traversed the city's hills and steps, but my aches were soon forgotten in the splendor of this new world. Though ancient, Solomon's palace was even grander than the temple. Gigantic blocks of stone fit perfectly together, creating an enormous structure. But it was the details that made it truly spectacular. Mosaic tiles. Ebony and ivory inlays. Cedar walls and doors. Everywhere I looked, my eyes guzzled the beauty like a beggar led to a banquet.

Judah's royal guards in their shiny armor left sharp weapons sheathed while Dohd and I marched past. Our sandals echoed in a maze of quiet hallways, but we weren't the first to arrive at the schoolroom.

"Good morning, Lord Shebna." The old man introduced as Lord Isaiah at the coronation walked toward us, his gnarled hand extended.

Dohd's grip on mine tensed, and his funny smile appeared—the growl with no sound—as he grasped the man's wrist in greeting. "Good morning to you, Lord Isaiah." Dohd nudged me forward. "May I present my niece, Meshullemeth."

I bowed, as Belit taught me. "Shalom, Lord Isaiah. I'm honored to meet you."

Lord Isaiah chuckled, a happy sound like water babbling in a stream. "As I'm honored to meet the girl who so quickly captured my grandson's favor. My daughter, Queen Zibah, told me you cast quite a spell over him."

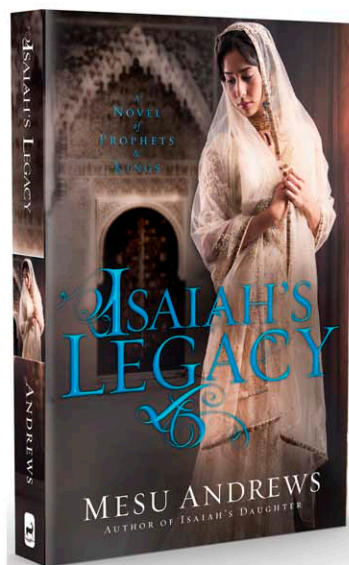
Had Yahweh already told the old prophet I'd been out with Belit last night? "I assure you, my lord, I know nothing of casting spells!"

"You see, Nasseh? There they are." The queen's voice from the doorway stole our attention. "I promised we'd see Shulle and Lord Shebna this morning." Light shone behind her, making every jewel in her plaited brown hair sparkle, but dark shadows bruised the delicate skin beneath her eyes. Her night must have been as distressing as mine. A second woman with a boy followed the queen into the classroom, and behind them—

"King Hezekiah and Lord Jashub," Dohd said, tugging me to my knees and prostrating himself on the stone floor. "It's an honor to be in your presence."

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