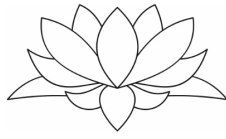


# IMAGINING JESUS PREVIEW CHAPTERS

NATASHA RENDELL



RENWULF CREATIONS



## CHAPTER 1

The bard entered the forest and warily made his way along the meandering track worn into the earth by the passing of man and beast. Briefly pausing to study the passage of the lengthening shadows, he realised that eventide was fast approaching. Indeed, even though the light of day still filtered through the dense canopy, casting shafts of sunlight that danced upon the ground cover, it would seem there were only a few hours left to complete the journey. And as much as he loved the companionship of the woodland and its inhabitants, the bard had little wish to spend another night in the bitter cold of the autumn air. It had never bothered him when he was younger, but now he was forced to admit that he longed for the sight of hearth and home in the distant valley.

To his great relief, he sighted the stone marker that delineated the boundary of his clan's territory. The sight of familiar landmarks warmed his heart; it would be wonderful to be reunited with his family. As he had begun the final leg of his homeward journey, he had been aware that his departure was far later in the day than he had hoped, but the villagers had been reluctant to part from him. Although not a word had been spoken about his intention, they had somehow sensed that, more than likely, this visit would be the last time he called on their humble community.

Accordingly, they had thrust upon him a cloth sack brimming with goods, a few parting gifts, he was told by Bryok, their headman, who seemed a little embarrassed when it was handed over. Bryok had hesitated for a moment staring down at his feet before saying they only wished it could have been more, for the service that had been granted to them over the years was immeasurable and would never be forgotten by a single soul.

And even the little ones had gained from the vast repertoire of verse, song and storytelling.

The villagers looked on in expectant silence as he intently inspected each offering. There was a beautiful woven cloak, a pair of doe-skin boots he noticed was his size (someone must have checked his old well-worn ones), some fur-lined mittens and provisions for his journey. The bard made to protest at the finery and abundance of gifts, for he knew that these folk could ill afford it. But as he opened his mouth to speak, the words of protestation fled from his tongue. He was well aware of how fiercely proud these people were, and to refuse any gift, especially those so fine that were given with love and respect, would be an insult. Despite not having the way and means of the nobility, they still wished to show their appreciation for the many years he had made the arduous journey to their settlement.

Keitha, the headman's wife, wept at their parting. Indeed, she had wrung her hands in grief whilst everyone had spoken sincere words of leave-taking, shaken the bard's hand, or quickly hugged him. The children had silently waited, intent solemn expressions on their faces as they watched the emotional, rather noisy proceedings around them. Then, when there was a lull, they tentatively approached, and when prompted by Keitha, they managed to recite, word for word, a poem he had previously taken the time to teach them. Finally, when they lapsed into silence, a little girl stepped forward and handed him a gift, a small but perfectly carved representation of a crouching wolf.

Words of gratitude seemed inadequate, but they were all he had, so after a heartfelt show of appreciation, the bard shouldered his laden pack and carefully hung his precious lyre across his back. Then, finally managing to extricate himself from the gathering of well-wishers, he began his trek and, before vanishing from their sight, turned to wave his final farewell. By now, he was feeling emotional. His eyes were bleary with unshed tears, and despite the lump in his throat, he somehow managed to call out his last goodbye. Then, entering the forest with their proclamation of appreciation and best wishes for his future still ringing in his ears, he began walking as briskly as he could whilst being mindful to avoid tripping over any exposed roots or broken branches. His feet noisily crunched on the

dried bracken and fallen autumn foliage, leaving evidence of passing by in his wake.

He had been away from his home village for nigh on two full seasons and then some, having left on his travels as soon as the worst of the winter weather had passed by and the days had become less inclement. As with the last village, each settlement he visited had unexpectedly presented him with gifts. He had hoped to avoid such attention, knowing that times were hard and they could ill afford such offerings. Now his pack was bulging and seemed to grow heavier with each step he took. Thus, he soon began to tire, for the years had caught up on him, seemingly unannounced, and he was not as sprightly as he once had been. If not for his staff, he would have found the rough, oftentimes slippery terrain challenging to negotiate safely. One of his sons had carved it from a branch of an ancient oak tree that had fallen in a storm, and to carry it reminded him of home.

Indeed, what had previously seemed a relatively easy trek was now a tiring expedition. And although the bard's mind and spirit were ever willing to seek new adventures, his body persistently told him a completely different story. But, as he began to grumble about his aches, pains and stiff joints, he admonished himself, for who was he to complain. He had lived a fulfilling life and, over the years, had experienced far more than one could ever have hoped for. Thus, it was of little matter, especially since this was likely to be his last trek to the outlying settlements.

With each step, his thoughts turned back to mulling over the many years he had spent entertaining the people of his homeland. Indeed, as a bard, he had traversed his beloved isle of Albion from one end to the other. There was not one clan he had not encountered, though some were more friendly and hospitable than others. Still, being a bard granted him a surety of safety and, thus, never had any harm befall. Nevertheless, he was still intrigued by how varied the different clans were in their mannerisms and appearance. He had only ever travelled a handful of times to the land of the Pechts, for they dwelled in the furthestmost regions of the north, even though he often visited with their neighbours in the Brigantia region.

Sadly, during his long lifetime, he had borne witness to the devastation caused by the gradual spread of the Roman Empire. Especially so where

they had seen fit to burn vast swathes of woodland whilst pursuing anyone who refused to bend to their will. Indeed, the invading troops had made travel difficult, at times severely restricting his movement. Still, he had refused to be daunted by the Roman presence and, by keeping alert to the dangers, always managed to somehow skirt around strife and thus avoid the conflict.

All the while, as he had cautiously traversed Albion, he was forever grateful that his clan, the Dumnonii, had somehow gained enough wisdom to safely negotiate their way through the troubles. Indeed, they retained many freedoms and customs to this day rather than adopting the Roman influences forced upon other clans. Fortuitously, very few garrisons had been established to control the Dumnonii. Then over time, the soldiers who manned them had become more like the locals with their mannerisms and way of life. Also, many who chose to retire from the army married local girls. Of course, these men were always adopted into the clan, never to return to their homeland, but they seemed content. Indeed, the bard knew there was much to be thankful for.

The clusters of trees grew less dense at long last, making his passage easier. When he finally emerged from the forest, even though it was almost twilight, it seemed to him that the remnants of the day were overbright after the gloomy haven he had just left behind. Upon reaching a grassy meadow, the bard could see that his journey's end was in sight. He paused momentarily to catch his breath, then carefully lowered himself to the ground in the clearing. After divesting himself from his lyre and heavy pack, he sat awhile, taking in the vista as the sun slowly descended towards the far horizon.

In the distant settlement, there was activity galore. Animals were being herded towards the safety of barns and corrals. Dogs were loudly barking as they worked with the children. Even from his vantage point, the bard could hear the laughter and revelry of the youngsters as they called out to each other or cajoled the animals whilst completing their chores. Their voices rang out, echoing in the dank air of the gloaming. Smoke could be seen rising from the fire-pits in the closely packed homes. It was drifting sluggishly in the dampness of the approaching eventide, and the enticing

smell of food cooking was wafting on the chilly breeze that had just sprung up, causing the sun's warmth to fade.

*Ah, well*, he thought to himself and grasping his staff to aid him, he slowly climbed to his feet. It was time to continue onward, to take his weary old bones out of the biting cold air. He had foolishly not worn his new mittens, thinking to keep them in pristine condition, and by now, they had probably made their way to the bottom of his pack. So, after rubbing his hands briskly together to warm them, he hoisted his belongings. Then, picking up his lyre from where he had lain it, he slung it across his aching back, ensuring it was secure. He always handled it with great care. After all, it was even older than he was, having once belonged to his grandfather.

Even though his family did not know the exact day of his return, he hoped there would be plenty to share of the hearty meal that his wife prepared every evening, and a heated mug of mead to warm his weary bones would be welcome. If fortune favoured him and he was in luck, one of the sentries would give his wife, Elisheva, ample warning of his imminent arrival. As he drew nearer the settlement, a voice rang out as one of the boys spotted him, and a gaggle of children, with dogs in tow, ran towards him. Their visible excitement at seeing him return warmed his heart.

"You are finally home," shouted an enthusiastic youngster, whom, on closer inspection, he realised was Davan, the youngest of his grandsons. In his absence, the lad seemed to have grown even taller. Young Davan gave his grandfather an eager hug in greeting, then looked somewhat embarrassed over this show of emotion in front of his friends. "I will tell Grandmother you have returned. She will be pleased you are finally home," Davan yelled over his shoulder as he quickly ran back the way they had come.

The remaining children seemed to speak at once as they clustered around the bard, vying for his attention. "Are you home to stay? Where have you been? We sorely missed you; who did you see?" On and on, they chattered. "Will you tell us a tale tonight?"

The elderly bard laughingly extracted himself. "Come on then, we had better be moving. I will say that it is good to be home. First, I need to rest my weary bones, but I am sure you will all hear everything I have to impart soon enough."

Though his mind and spirit may have been willing, a weariness overtook him after supper, so he retired early at his family's urging. He disliked disappointing the youngsters on this eventide of his return, but on the morrow, he would have more energy to appease their demands. Indeed, he slept till well past first light, and after breaking his fast, the bard basked in the warmth cast upon the Earth by the sun and dozed when the need for rest overtook him. It was good to spend time with his family and hear their tidings. And in the meantime, the villagers merely glanced his way as they went about their daily tasks, holding back their questions for later whilst ensuring that the children also left him in peace.

The sun had begun to set when everyone gathered in the meeting hall for a communal feast, as was the custom once a week, and his return just happened to coincide with this happy event. It was pleasant to catch up with everyone, to hear of all that had occurred in his absence. After all, he had been gone for many months whilst journeying from one settlement to the next. Thus, there was a great deal to hear about; additions to their clan and sad departures.

Arthek, the headman, was in good spirits, partly from the celebration of Yosef's return but mainly from the mugs of mead he was studiously consuming. Arthek was a large man, both in height and girth, with an exuberant, friendly personality. His long flaxen hair, which he customarily wore braided down his back, was only now beginning to exhibit signs of silver, and his steely blue eyes were as vibrant and sharp as they ever were. He clapped the bard companionably on his back, almost causing Yosef to spill the mug of mead he had been sipping. Arthek was certainly still as strong as ever, something he often forgot in his enthusiasm.

"Yosef, how about a song or tale this evening? We have sorely missed your company of late. The children have constantly been pestering us for the time of your return; day and night, there has been no respite." Arthek then paused to look closely at the elderly bard with concern showing in his gaze. "Naturally, only if you are up to it. We can all wait a little longer if need be. The last thing I want is for Elisheva to berate me over my ill-treatment of you," he added good-naturedly whilst showing concern.

Yosef smiled in reply, his face expressing amusement at the possibility of such a sight, that of his diminutive wife berating the large headman. “Perhaps a tale would be appropriate, especially seeing how I have decided to cease travelling and now will be content with my feet warmed at only my own fair hearth. I do indeed have a tale to tell, one of great length. It is a tale I have only ever hinted at before on the rare occasion I thought it appropriate. But now that I am not getting any younger, it needs to be released and not left unsaid. Indeed, with so much spare time on my hands and waiting seated before me a captive audience, methinks it is time to relate it in its entirety.”

Yosef chuckled at the startled expression on Arthek’s face. “Though, to be fair,” he added, “if you wish, I will break the narrative up in segments and intersperse it with music and other less lengthy tales.”

Arthek’s eyes narrowed in speculation as he processed what Yosef had said, then an understanding slowly dawned on him as he realised what the older man was referring to. “I would be honoured to hear of all that you choose to impart, as will those who reside here. And as for the children, although they may not realise the full significance until they are older, I am sure they will enjoy and gain much from your discourse. And I believe our attention span is great enough to hear the tale without breaking it into too many segments.”

A call from across the room drew Arthek’s attention, and when he excused himself, Yosef took the opportunity to settle himself comfortably on cushions near the warmth of the fire-pit. Then, after taking several deep breaths, he began to play a few notes on his lyre to enable himself to relax and tune in to the task ahead whilst immersing himself in his memories. To draw unto himself the remembrance of a time long gone by and call upon all that had been imparted to him over the years. But curiously, the more intensely he looked, the warm glow of the embers reflected strange flickering shadows which almost seemed to take on a life of their own. And as Yosef concentrated, the images of faces long lost to him appeared to be revealed. So many years had passed. Too many people he had loved and lost, and the memories crowded amongst his thoughts. Something which seemed to be occurring of late with an ever-increasing frequency.



*Ah*, Yosef sighed to himself. Indeed, it was fitting to cease roaming about the countryside, especially now before the colourful splendour of autumn succumbed to the icy breath of deep winter.

Even though he had tutored many young men and women over the years, they knew not of this tale, for it was only his to tell. And by its telling, if this meant a spoken ending of sorts to the events therein, it was meant to be. Even so, Yosef felt deep in his heart that the truth would remain intact despite the rise of opposing forces. Regrettably, things were changing in the known world. There was a movement afoot that would refute just about every word he uttered. However, instead of flailing hopelessly at this injustice, he would surrender his story to the aether, to the heavens, and trust that it would remain in its entirety until the need for truth and clarity arose.

The elderly storyteller was abruptly torn from his reverie by a silence that permeated the room. He looked up and saw that everyone was finally seated with their eyes solemnly trained upon him. Even the children and their pet dogs were unusually silent and still.

With care, Yosef placed his lyre beside him, quickly gathering his thoughts into a semblance of order. “Well,” he said ever so softly though everyone could still hear him. His bardic training ensured that every word he uttered was sharp and clear, no matter how quietly it was spoken. “I have a tale to tell. It is somewhat lengthy but, I hope, not overly tedious.”

However, before Yosef could continue, a nervous voice interrupted him, thus breaking his train of thought. “Will it have soldiers and battles?”

“Shush,” another boy nudged the speaker in the ribs with his elbow. “Do not be so rude.”

“But I like stories like that,” the stricken child wailed.

A little girl sitting near the boys clutched her doll even tighter. “I would rather hear about love and weddings. I do not like violent happenings.”

“Ugh,” scoffed the beleaguered Garyth, who had promptly wrinkled his nose in disgust. “That is girls’ stuff. Everyone knows they do not want to be warriors; they do not like weaponry.”

“That is not so,” Arthek’s daughter, Kyleigh, retorted, joining the fray. “Everyone here has seen how I always hit the target with my bow much better than you ever do.”

“Hush now, children,” Nevina, the headman’s wife, hastily interjected. “If you want to hear the story, you must be respectful.”

“It is alright, Nevina,” Yosef reassured her. “I am not so far gone in my dotage that I cannot remember how my siblings and I frequently drove our mother and grandmother to distraction.

“Now, settle yourselves down, young ones. There are indeed soldiers and things of this nature, though I am sure one day you will discover that the glory of battle, along with other warlike endeavours, is not as rewarding as anticipated. And do not worry, Aoife, there are indeed weddings and romance aplenty.

“I will not finish my story this night, the next, nor the one after. But never fear. I am not going anywhere else, so there will eventually be an ending. So, bear with me if you will, and if you ask it of me, I will intersperse my tale with songs, poetry and other shorter narratives. And if I notice the young ones drifting off into sleep, that will be my cue to cease for the evening. Even so, in the end, when it has been completed, I am sure you will have found it to have been a valuable, worthwhile experience.”

Yosef was silent for a moment before continuing. “This is the only time I will ever tell of these events in their entirety. Indeed, I may never again repeat a word of it. All I know will likely go to the grave with me, though I remain hopeful that my tale will continue to resonate evermore. Now, make yourselves comfortable.

“My narrative, which begins in a faraway land, occurred many years ago. Some elders here tonight may recall hearing talk of some of the happenings, but sadly, much has been lost to the mists of forgetfulness. Even though it involves events that unfolded in the near east, in the land known as Iudaea, there are also many other nations that I will speak of.

“This tale involves many remarkable people, particularly a young couple who, along with their families, became caught up in a power struggle between the people of a conquered land and their masters, the Roman Empire. And naturally, many stories of courage and love, friendship and

sacrifice, betrayal and loss unfold amidst the ensuing upheaval. Indeed, many different souls make up the whole drama, but I want to tell you of these two people who experienced the full gamut of these emotions and tribulations. And in the end, they survived their travail despite all those who sought their demise. For them, it became a triumph of spirit.”

The bard paused for a moment to gauge the attentiveness of his audience, then continued. “You would surely realise that I cannot relate to you every little detail, every emotion experienced or utterance made. Even if I could, it would take too long for its telling, and I wish to complete my tale by the coming spring. For my part, I liken my words to a single musical instrument being played when there are meant to be four others in accompaniment. It is up to the listener to let their imagination take flight and fill in the sounds and words that are surely there but unheard by the mortal ear. Much like with a tapestry where the edge has been completed, and the picture is yet to be woven. Indeed, the tale is already there. It is up to you to feel my words and then form the images into something that can be grasped. Then if I have completed my task correctly, each of you will have gained an understanding of what occurred. Even if your impressions differ slightly from what others perceive, it will still add up to a whole picture, for behind each word I utter, there is much to be garnered by the listener.”

As Yosef opened his mouth to begin his narrative, he was distracted from his undertaking. “Yes, what is it, Garyth? You seem puzzled,” he said to the young boy, who was desperately trying to attract his attention.

“I am not exactly sure of what you mean,” Garyth mumbled, casting a nervous glance toward his father seated nearby.

“Well,” Yosef answered with a smile to show that he was in no way offended by the boy’s question. “When I am telling a tale, perhaps one about a hero heading into battle, I might say something like, ‘Fynbar rode his horse down the hill towards his enemy, his sword raised in defiance. All his men followed him into the fray with only death to the enemy on their minds. At day’s end, many had fallen, but victory was their reward, and at eventide, as he ate his meal, Fynbar was well satisfied with all that had transpired.’ But, Garyth, there is so much more to this event, such as where the battle took place and why it was fought. Who exactly was

this Fynbar with, and how were they attired? What were his thoughts, his beliefs or even his fears? What was his motivation? Indeed, there is so much more to the long battle and struggle, the aftermath and all its ramifications. However, if I do my task correctly, the listener will hopefully see much of this in their mind's eye.

"It is like this with my tale. I can tell only a portion of what ensued. After that, it is up to my audience to fill in the details using the emotion and feelings emanating from my words. So now, do you see what I am referring to?"

Yosef smiled at Garyth and the others in the room as they nodded in unison to show they understood.

"Ah, now where to begin? Let me think about this. In my youth, I visited the far-off land of Iudaea accompanied by my uncle before he set off further afield in his journeying. It was indeed fortuitous that I travelled with him, for he was already familiar with the lay of the land and how best to deal with its populace. If I had been left to my own devices, I might have found myself in strife with the authorities. Still, in the following weeks, we kept to ourselves to avoid drawing unwanted attention whilst traversing the countryside and experiencing as much as possible. Thankfully, we avoided any unforeseen confrontations with the Roman authorities or any locals who chose to be suspicious of strangers. Moreover, so long as any taxes were duly paid, the troops from Roma usually never bothered with foreigners. Accordingly, we managed to avoid any troubles, particularly the spates of violence, which occasionally flared up.

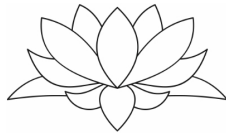
"Even though the journey with my uncle is not what this tale is about, it was an invaluable experience that enabled me to understand so much. First, I admit that I was surprised at how civilised everything appeared. I do not exactly know what I was expecting, but what I found immediately dispelled any previously-held concept. Indeed, even amidst the troubles, their way of life was comfortable, and the towns and villages were prospering and well-ordered.

"The climate in this land was warm and sunny, with just enough rainfall to ensure that the land was lush and green. The markets were full of fresh produce, fruit and vegetables and many tempting goods from other lands.

It was indeed wondrous to have the opportunity to see it all and immerse myself in the culture and atmosphere. Still, we were somewhat troubled upon learning that our kin and many members of the religious order named the Essenes had departed for an unknown destination. Nonetheless, it was rumoured that the land of Aegyptus was where they had sought refuge. Even so, despite our misgivings and the underlying air of suspicion to be felt, the people we met were, on the whole, friendly and welcoming. And besides, when I returned home after my uncle had departed for elsewhere, I did not return alone. For it was there in Iudaea that I met the love of my life, Elisheva. She who was brave enough to leave behind the land she loved and her own family once we had wed.”

Yosef smiled affectionately at his wife, who was now blushing and feigning indignation over the unwanted attention from everyone in the room. He knew she would scold him later when they were alone, but he had no regret over his words; he meant every utterance he had made. Still, her decision had proven wise, for the troubles worsened not too many years later, resulting in much bloodshed and destruction in Jerusalem and throughout the land.

Turning his thoughts back to his task, Yosef took a deep breath, and after slowly exhaling, he began the much-anticipated tale. His rich melodic voice acquired an almost hypnotic cadence and a rhythm that wove its magic to embrace all the people gathered, transporting them back in time and place to a foreign land so far away.



## CHAPTER 2

**N**o matter how peaceful everything seemed, anyone bothered enough to look beneath the calm exterior would feel a distinct undercurrent of unrest. The truth was that Iudaea was a conquered land, and the people who resided there were far from content. Despite the Roman authorities having taken what they saw as a liberal step backwards, relinquishing much of the control of the masses into the hands of the Hebrew people, there was a growing underlying mood of unrest and dissatisfaction.

That surely would not be surprising to anyone, for even if life was comfortable and secure, who truly wishes to be ruled by another nation? Indeed, although the populace may have been permitted to retain their religion, monetary system and language, and many of the resident troops were made up of their own people, it did little to quell a growing swell of unrest. Undoubtedly, the sight of soldiers from Roma was a continual reminder to the people of their actual status, while the Roman authorities, for their part, could not understand the resentment. Had they not adopted a seemingly relaxed approach, one whereby the local people were granted permission to govern themselves.

But is anyone truly free if an occupying army was ever ready to take up arms against you if the need arose? And this is what the people resented, particularly the younger men who had yet to experience the true horror that conflict inevitably brings.

All the while, the mighty Augustus Caesar ruled the empire from his lofty heights in Roma, his only wish being that everyone would share in the abundant prosperity. Indeed, from his superior vantage point, he possibly believed that the Hebrew people were grateful for having the privilege and

opportunity to live under the mantle and protection afforded them by the civilised might of the ever-expanding Roman Empire.

Unfortunately, this was far from the truth, for the local populace deemed the people from Roma to be brutal and cruel. The Romans, in turn, thought the Hebrews to be nothing but a backward, superstitious rabble that was beholden to some very unholy practices. Particularly so when women were stoned to death for committing the crime of adultery. The Romans indeed thought that the Hebrews were the brutal ones. After all, the Empire of Roma only sentenced accused criminals to death after a fair, comprehensive lengthy trial.

Many people blithely ignored the signs, but it was plain to see that the clash of cultures would surely come to a head. Indeed, it was inevitable that the anger and resentment, misunderstandings and dissatisfaction, would eventually culminate with tragic consequences.



During this unrest, an extraordinary soul chose to be born, a soul who would significantly impact future events. In the small town of Be'er Sheva, a girl-child was born in the abode of a wealthy merchant named Natan. Ana and Natan already had three adult children, a daughter and two sons, who resided elsewhere. Their daughter, Yadira, had married a tradesman in Jerusalem, and their sons, Tomlin and Aram, had joined a business venture whereby they travelled to other lands. Thus, it was greatly disconcerting when Ana realised they would soon have another addition to their family. Indeed, she and Natan had never considered the prospect of raising another child so late in life.

Ana's elderly parents were now living with them. And when Yael, her mother, was informed of the soon-to-be arrival of yet another grandchild, she could barely hide her amusement, much to her daughter's dismay.

"It is no surprise to me," her mother said. "The way you younger folk carry on, it is a wonder that there have not been even more babies. I am not so old that I do not remember how it was when I was young, and besides, I may be elderly, but I am not yet deaf."

Gershon, Ana's father, who happened upon their conversation, cleared his throat in embarrassment whilst he unsuccessfully attempted to quieten down his outspoken wife. But she would not be silenced, as was ever her way. It may have been the custom of their religion that men had absolute authority over their household, but Yael had never subscribed to what she saw as such a foolish notion. After all, women did more than their fair share of work, so why should they act subservient to their menfolk? And if she had it in her mind to say something, nothing would make her still her tongue. Fortunately, neither her husband nor son-in-law subscribed to such an archaic belief and thus allowed their wives much more freedom than was usual.

"And besides," Yael added, "I have a distinct feeling that your soon-to-be-born girl-child is an exceptional soul. So, my deepest wish is to be graced with a long enough life to see this child reach her potential. And do not worry, Ana, you will have a trouble-free pregnancy and birth despite your advanced years."

Her mother's prophetic words settled Ana's emotions; she felt much calmer and receptive to the inevitability of an addition to their family. Over the years, her mother had never been wrong with her predictions. Indeed, they had proven to be uncanny in their accuracy. Thus, when a healthy girl-child was born several months later, it was with much joy that she was welcomed into the family.

Mariam, as she was named, was indeed a winsome child. Even as a tiny baby, she was lively and alert. Her deep brown eyes would fasten upon people whilst intently studying their faces. Indeed, it was uncanny and somewhat disturbing to be watched in such a way by one so young. Mariam would follow every movement around her as if she did not want to miss anything. So naturally, everyone made a tremendous fuss over the little girl from the moment of her birth. Undoubtedly, she was raised in a house full of love. As the years passed, Mariam continued to be the centre of attention, much to the consternation of her grandfather.

"That child is being spoiled," he would be heard to grumble. "Nothing good will come of it." And all the while, Gershon secretly gave Mariam



treats when he thought no one would notice and then spent hour upon hour patiently reading her stories.

No one could resist the vibrant little girl. Her complexion was a dark olive hue like her mother's side of the family, and her luxurious black hair acquired a silky sheen when it grew longer. Mariam had an enquiring mind and remained insatiable in her curiosity about the daily happenings. Indeed, it seemed that the only time Mariam ever sat still, apart from the storytelling, was when her beloved grandmother brushed her long hair whilst telling tales of her own upbringing. What soon became apparent to everyone, from her parents and grandparents to the staff in the household and their neighbours, who all loved the chatty energetic child, was that she often seemed far older than her years. This became even more apparent when she was six, for Mariam began to perceive insights into other people's lives. Her grandmother was not surprised at this turn of events. After all, she and her mother, Mariam's great-grandmother, could also help people in this manner. However, it soon became evident that young Mariam was already far more accurate than they had ever been. Mariam was indeed a unique soul.

As she grew older, their neighbours and the other people who came into contact with the family began to seek Mariam for advice about their problems once they had gotten over their startlement at her ability. Her parents were naturally disturbed by the constant demands and vowed to ensure she was not bothered too much by their attention-seeking. Still, Mariam would listen intently before imparting all she perceived whenever anyone was permitted to approach her. To begin with, she mainly only aided people she was previously acquainted with, but as the years passed, she could help just about anyone. Then Mariam began to have prophetic dreams in which she received guidance about her life and the people connected to her and, on occasion, visions about future events. These insights would sometimes alarm her because of the enormity of what was being shown.

Yael also began teaching Mariam her knowledge of herbs and their healing properties, something her mother had long ago trained her in. So it was not surprising to anyone when it was revealed that Mariam also

possessed a gift for healing. Nothing that would be deemed a miracle. Nothing that went against the laws of the natural world, though if anyone had a raging fever, she could lay her hand upon their fevered brow, causing it to disappear. At first, Mariam was reluctant to take any recompense for healing and guidance, even from those who could afford to pay. However, in time, she saw the wisdom in accepting payment, for this enabled her to administer freely to the poorer folk.

Ana and Natan could not have been prouder of their youngest child as she grew into a beautiful, self-assured, fiercely independent young woman. However, when Gershon became ill and passed away, they began to worry about Mariam's prospects, especially as her grandmother was becoming increasingly frail.

"I know it is a distressing time for you, Mariam," Ana told her daughter one morning. "I, too, deeply feel the loss of my father, and I am aware of the deep bond of love you have shared with both of your grandparents. You brought much joy into their lives, and your grandmother has been so pleased to have been able to pass on her herbal knowledge. Indeed, it means a great deal to her that the needy continue to be catered to."

Mariam raised her head at her mother's words. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "What is it you wish to impart to me? I know you have something to say. I dreamt last night that you were holding out a woven basket towards me, the contents of which were hidden from my sight for some unexplained reason. I was reluctant to take this basket from you even though an inner prompting told me that perhaps to do so would be wise."

Ana sighed deeply. "Your grandfather's death has reminded your father and me of our mortality and how we will not always be here for you. So after much consideration and soul searching, we have agreed that it would be prudent if a suitable marriage was arranged for you before it is too late."

Despite the recollection of her dream, Mariam's eyes flashed in anger, but as she opened her mouth with a retort, Ana held her hand out in entreat. "I know you have always made it apparent that you want to remain independent from the certainty of marriage restrictions. And your father and I are fully aware that you would be able to support yourself with your healing work and from those who seek guidance. We would also set

funds aside for you, and if the need arose, you could live with your sister in Jerusalem. I am sure she would make you welcome. But would you at least consider my words carefully before making up your mind? It may prove fortuitous that your father has recently been approached by a couple who originally resided in Damascus. They have a fine young son who is possibly a worthy prospective husband.”

Ana sighed in resignation. She had known this would not be easy, but Mariam’s reaction was even worse than she had feared. Perhaps in hindsight, they had all indulged her too much. Her older children were always reminding her that this was so.

“Please sleep on it, dear one. Know that your father and I would never force marriage upon you, and if you wish to remain unwed, we will ensure that you are not left destitute.”

Mariam clenched her teeth in frustration to hold back the words of anger threatening to spill forth in a torrent. It was demeaning to be forced to consider a proposal like this. She knew the only person who understood how she felt was her grandmother, but with Yael’s failing health, Mariam was reluctant to trouble her with such seemingly insignificant woes. Still, Yael always sensed her granddaughter’s moods and immediately noticed her troubled emotional state even though she tried to hide it. So, when Mariam finally admitted her dilemma, Yael carefully considered her reply before speaking.

“I know exactly how you feel. I also expressed similar desires to my parents when I was your age. But sadly, in those days, it was not to be, for the traditions of our faith were even more set in stone, and despite my misgivings and resentment, I was duly introduced to your grandfather. Being from different villages, we only met three times before our marriage, and as you can imagine, the situation did not please me in the least. I may have been a most reluctant bride, but I was fortunate that my parents had chosen a kind and considerate young man who possessed the patience of a saint. God only knows why he did not forsake me, for I was exceedingly rude and disrespectful towards him in the faint hope that he would refuse to marry me. However, Gershon later told me that he understood my true nature, and deep in his heart, he knew we were meant to be together. And

even then, despite advice to the contrary from the village elders, he fully supported my desire to be a healer. Then, after a few years, I realised that I had grown to love him dearly.

“Even now, in this time, being born a female is an onerous burden to bear. We are expected to contribute so much to society whilst living under the heel of our menfolk. From childhood, we are taught that their word is the law and must abide by it without question. You will often hear the men ranting about how the Romans have suppressed their freedom, yet this is how they treat all the females in their households. Even the despised Romans are said to grant their womenfolk more liberty than we have. Though I suppose it would not take much to be more.

“As for being independent and living by your own means, I am afraid that the likelihood of having continued benevolent patronage by folk is fickle. People change their loyalties in much the same way as the whims of the wind, and then where one was previously safe and secure, there may only be danger and perhaps even death. I do not mean to frighten you, child, but you will discover this as you grow older and wiser. You will find that many people can be two-faced and not in the least trustworthy. As for living with your sister, we both know that Yadira does not believe in or approve of your healing abilities, let alone your gift of prophecy. If I had any say in the matter, it would be to never put your life and future well-being into her charge.”

As Yael paused to catch her breath, Mariam reached out in concern. “It is alright, child. I have lived a long, satisfying life and am not afraid of the prospect of my passing. I am content, although I would have liked to have seen you grow a little older and witness what you will make of your life. You are perhaps too much like me in that I have always been outspoken and strong-willed, traits that tend to make life difficult, especially for a female. But, Mariam, stay true to yourself even if it does mean you consider this marriage. I foresee a child born of you would be a wonderful addition to the family, especially in the troublesome times ahead. I know this is not what you wanted to hear from me, but I feel that you should at least have a good look at this young man being offered up to you. You may even be surprised where life will eventually lead you both.”

As her grandmother wearily closed her eyes in sleep, Mariam sat silently, her mind in turmoil as she thought over all that had been said. It certainly was not what she had expected to hear from her grandmother. Indeed, all that Yael had spoken of troubled her deeply.

That night, Mariam tossed and turned before falling into a restless sleep. Then she began to dream. However, these dreams were elusive, for they immediately dissipated upon her awakening in the early hours, well before the sun rose. Mariam lay still for what seemed like hours before finally hearing the familiar morning sounds as their household and the neighbourhood began to stir into wakefulness. A nearby cockerel crowed, which set off several more up and down the street, and the sound of carts could be heard as people left for the market with their wares. Finally, as the cook prepared the morning meal, a clatter of pots and pans could be heard in the kitchen. These familiar sounds washed over Mariam and accentuated her growing despair. *I will not do it*, she thought stubbornly to herself. *They cannot make me. I will refuse to meet this man who is sure to be far too old for my liking, and more than likely smells like a goat.*

But as Mariam lay there, a niggling thought came upon her, prodding annoyingly at her deeper consciousness, urging her to heed what her grandmother had said. Grudgingly she accepted that she should, at the very least, consider her parents' proposal, for it had been given to her through love and caring. And because of this, Mariam realised it would be advisable to be gracious and more accommodating. Besides, she felt that her dreams had been trying to impart something to her. Indeed, something of great importance was now elusively out of reach of her waking mind.

As was to be expected, Mariam's mother was relieved to hear the decision she had reached, as was her father when he nervously approached his daughter that evening. He had stayed away from home all day to avoid a confrontation. Thus, with her compliance, the arrangements for a meeting between the two families were swiftly made. Indeed, it appeared to be done with haste to forestall Mariam from a change of mind. The following week, she and her parents would visit with the potential husband and his parents in their home, where they would partake in a meal after formal introductions. Then, if they so wished, the young couple would have an

opportunity to speak together, albeit under their parents' watchful eyes, and it was up to them to decide if they wished to pursue a relationship.

Mariam could not believe how quickly the week went by. Then when the appointed day arrived, she found that the servants' fuss was becoming quite irritating, particularly when one of the girls was assigned to wash and dry her lengthy hair and even help her dress.

"This is ridiculous," Mariam said to her grandmother. "Not since I was a small child have I needed assistance to dress myself. I feel like a sacrificial lamb going to its slaughter."

Even so, where her parents were concerned, Mariam held her tongue and vowed to, at the very least, not glower at everyone. As much as she disliked what was occurring, she did not wish to shame her parents, and undoubtedly one afternoon in her life was not too much to surrender.

Even though the home of her prospective would-be husband was not so far away, her father wanted to travel there in style, thus so they set out in his best horse-drawn cart, and by the time they arrived, Mariam had at least begun to take more interest in her surroundings. Moreover, she had decided that the whole experience might be mildly entertaining. Then upon their arrival, the entrance door was opened by a tall, well-dressed man who was noticeably much younger than her father. As Mariam covertly scrutinised him, she desperately hoped that this man was not the prospective husband as he was still far too old for her liking.

"Come this way," the man said warmly after introducing himself as Theron. He led them down a passageway that opened onto a brightly lit courtyard. And thus did Mariam and her parents enter the home of Theron, Sousanna and their only child, their son Yosef.



*Yosef, the storyteller, was abruptly torn from his tale by an enquiring child's voice as it interrupted his train of thought. "Was that you? He has the same name."*

*"No, Garyth," he replied patiently, amusement at the comment showing on his face. "I may seem ancient to you, but I assure you that I am not that*

*old. On the contrary, this tale happened many years ago, well before I was even born. So, settle down, and I will continue. And do not worry, Nevina, I am sure the children, especially Garyth, will remain suitably attentive. Now, where was I?"*



Mariam could not help but feel awkward and somewhat overwhelmed by the unusual situation. Still, they seemed agreeable people. Indeed, she saw that Theron and his wife had nothing but kindness showing in their eyes. This was telling, for a person's true nature was most often revealed in their eyes. Theron was taller than her father, paler of complexion, and his hair and beard showed how fair he was despite encroaching grey. Sousanna, his wife, seemed amicable, even though she would not stop chattering in her nervousness. And though slighter than her husband, this woman was still much taller than Mariam and her mother. Noting Mariam's quizzical appraisal, she explained that although they were from Damascus, their heritage was from the land of Graecia.

Naturally, Ana was askance that her daughter could be so forward and cast her a look of reproach. Nevertheless, Sousanna was merely amused and said it was understandable to wonder about a prospective husband's lineage, for it had a bearing on the appearance of their children. Her comment made them all laugh, and this caused Mariam to blush. Still, she knew it was not meant to be harmful or unkind. They were only nervously showing the strain they felt over the expectation of the soon-to-be meeting.

A serving woman brought everyone a drink and some delicacies to sample. However, Mariam was too nervous to eat, so instead accepted a mug of fruit juice. All that occupied her thoughts was the continued absence of their son, for he was nowhere to be seen. Had he also decided that this meeting was not to his liking and thus refused to be displayed like livestock for sale? Then, perhaps the problem of an unwanted marriage would not manifest.

While the parents conversed about the latest happenings in their district, Mariam wandered over to the fountain in the middle of the courtyard.

Sitting on the ledge, she took some deep breaths to calm her frayed nerves, for she was feeling hot and flustered, not to mention a little embarrassed. Indeed, it would seem that the prospective groom was also reluctant about the match. Even so, the thought of the ramifications and disappointment of their parents brought a smile of amusement to her lips. But then she was disturbed by a sound, and with the smile still lingering, she turned towards the doorway. And to her startlement, standing there was a young man.

Unbeknownst to Mariam, the sunlight shining onto the glistening waters of the fountain illuminated her appearance. Her long black hair reflected a hint of red in the sun's rays, enhancing her sensual beauty. And her smile and the seemingly tranquil serenity of her demeanour transformed Mariam into a vision of loveliness that dazzled the poor lad. He felt his heart lurch at the sight of the enchanting young woman who emanated such a strong dignity, and from that moment on, his heart was taken.

Yosef had been reluctant about the arrangement even though this was the usual way with betrothals and marriages. He, too, was resentful over how his parents were organising his life. Though, be that as it may, when he first set eyes upon Mariam, all these thoughts fled from his mind. He could not quite believe his good fortune when she turned towards him with what he perceived as a smile of welcome on her lips. It even seemed she had a distinct glow around her, though he thought it was perhaps caused by the bright sunlight as it filtered through the courtyard. Their eyes met, hers quizzical and somewhat direct and challenging, his slightly puzzled and overawed. Time for Yosef seemed to stand still, but he surmised that this was also merely his imagination.

The young man's regard for her was not exactly the reaction Mariam had been striving for, especially as she had decided to make herself appear unappealing and not a good prospect for a wife. And even though she still smiled, Mariam had been less overwhelmed than the young man. Her mind had taken in his appearance in a clinical way, much like when examining a patient, noting that he was tall like his parents, and his beard and full head of hair were a light shade of gold. But then a silly thought ran through her mind that she should at least be thankful he had no resemblance to a goat. This notion almost made her utter an inappropriate giggle, but she



somehow managed to stifle her reaction and turn it into a cough. When he drew nearer, Mariam noticed his eyes which held no deceit or cruelty, were the blue of the sky on a clear summer's day.

Thus transpired the meeting of these two souls, much to the relief of their parents, who shared a silent inward sigh of relief when it appeared that everything was progressing smoothly.

The following day, Mariam's grandmother listened intently to every detail of the meeting her granddaughter related.

"I will admit that I quite liked him; he does seem nice enough," Mariam said. "But is this enough of a reason to marry someone? Mother says he seems to be taken with me, which is not what I had intended. I informed Yosef in detail about my healing work, what it means to me, and how I am shown insights into people's lives or future events in visions and dreams. At the very least, I thought all this would turn him aside from his regard, but he brushed my words aside as if being of no serious consequence. And even though I am sure he is a fine young man, I found him to be rather too concerned with things of a worldly, physical nature and somewhat narrow-minded with his vision of our future together. Thus, I do not know if he would continue to put up with me because I have no intention of becoming a subservient downtrodden wife."

Her grandmother smiled in response. "Perhaps this is the type of husband who would suit you best. One who has his feet firmly on the ground for this would enable him to take care of you in the troubled times that may come to pass. And yes, I know you do not want to be taken care of, but, my dear, I strongly feel that trouble is coming and having a steadfast husband would not be a bad thing. Indeed, if you stop railing at the injustice of the traditions that bind, you will come to your own wise decision. Still, regardless of what you decide, know I will give you my blessing."

Throughout the day, Mariam thought about all her beloved grandmother had said and decided to at least consider that this marriage might be for the best; after all, her parents always had only wanted what would ensure her well-being.

Then that night, Mariam experienced a wonderful, somewhat realistic dream, one in which she found herself surrounded by garlands of flowers,

their scent wafting around the room. While contemplating this, she heard a sound. Turning, Mariam saw a young woman approaching. In the crook of her arm was a bouquet of white blossoms, and she held a basket full of red rose petals in her hand. As the woman drew closer, Mariam realised it was a radiant, much younger aspect of her grandmother. With a beatific smile, she placed the flowers beside Mariam and handed her the woven basket. Then feeling a caress upon her cheek, Mariam looked up from her inspection of the rose petals. Her grandmother was gone. Glancing down, she realised that the flower basket had become a cradle, leaving Mariam with a wonderful feeling of contentment and peace.

At the break of the following day, Mariam calmly informed her mother that she had reached a decision; she would consider the possibility of marriage. Thus began the formal courtship of Mariam and Yosef.

If truth be told, because Yosef had been smitten at first sight of the young woman presented to him, he was determined to pursue an immediate betrothal despite initially having reservations. It mattered not that Mariam was taking longer to warm to the idea of a future that included being wed to him. Still, every time they met, Mariam slowly became more open to the possibilities their union might bring. Though, as was ever her way, she continued to inform Yosef that she did not intend to give up her healing work or become a downtrodden wife and mother. And that if he did not give credence to her prophetic dreams and visions, then there was no point in continuing their pledge to marry. Especially considering how she always spoke her mind when she thought it necessary to bother.

Naturally, Yosef was taken aback by her continued rather direct, forthright manner, with the forceful way she spoke, even though he had thought her plain-spoken behaviour was an endearing trait at their initial meeting. However, when he carefully considered the matter, he realised that even though Mariam's direct approach might prove troublesome, her nature was part of what attracted him when they met. Thus, he had no wish to impose restrictions upon her.

Yosef was indeed a down-to-earth, hard-working, honest young man, and although Mariam thought he needed to be more flexible and not so set in his ways, she decided that it should not be too much of a problem.

And she vowed, at the very least, to try and moderate her impulsive manner and curb the sharpness of her tongue. For some time, her parents had repeatedly told her that such outspoken ways could cause problems with the authorities, who believed that women had no right to rule their own households. And that in public, they should always behave in an appropriate manner, one befitting their station in life. Ana and Natan's deepest hope was that the young couple's differing personalities would blend into a compatible partnership. Indeed, his down-to-earth approach and her fiery independent nature had the potential to work well together.

And so, their betrothal was duly announced in front of witnesses. And with either their parents accompanying them or her grandmother when she was well enough, Mariam and Yosef would wander the markets and attend the picnics and festivals regularly held. Mariam always loved the celebrations when everyone in the town would gather together. Rich or poor, no matter anyone's circumstances, they all sat together to partake in feasts and musical entertainment.

Mariam and Yosef would walk ever so close together whenever they had the chance to escape from prying eyes. Hands clasped in warm comfort, their voices softened in whispers as they spoke, much like many young lovers have before them. With the passing of the months, their respective parents began to give the couple more space and accorded them privacy, for they remembered being young and their own courtships.

One evening as they reluctantly parted, Yosef reached out to clasp Mariam by the hand, and as he held her tightly to him and their lips met for the first time, a strange feeling of wonderment came over her. The depth of this young man's love and strength filled her with a deep sense of happiness like no previous experience. And thus, the thought occurred to her that their union would be great. Indeed, the power of their joining together in love and harmony was the will of spirit.

Over the next few months, Yosef and Mariam fell deeply in love. They made such a handsome couple that the townsfolk often remarked upon this whenever they walked amongst them. Mariam's dark brown eyes were so expressive that a gamut of emotions was reflected in their depths, and her heart-shaped face showed a gentle beauty and great strength and purpose.

She was small in stature with a medium build, a lovely olive complexion and long black hair, which she usually wore braided, whereas Yosef was tall and powerfully built. His deep blue eyes reflected his happiness, and his face, with its high forehead and strong bone structure, clearly showed his classical Graecian heritage. Yosef loved nothing better than to untie Mariam's hair and run his fingers through it, much to her dismay. But the people had no care over such a display of affection; they would knowingly smile and turn the other way to alleviate her embarrassment.

As their relationship progressed, Mariam became increasingly intrigued by Yosef's background and heritage. She was fascinated whenever he recounted his time in Damascus, for it seemed much more interesting than life in a small town. It was puzzling to her why the family would move here and adopt the strict Laws of Moshe. Indeed, for reasons they preferred to keep to themselves, Theron and Sousanna decided to settle in Be'er Sheva and even change their way of worship. But seeing how their move would prove crucial in the events yet to occur, perhaps they had simply followed inner guidance. Perhaps something other-worldly had drawn them to their current residence, something that seemed illogical and difficult to explain to others.



Apart from the constant reminder of their Roman occupiers, the only shadow on the horizon was the ever-failing health of Mariam's beloved grandmother, who was growing increasingly frail. One morning, only a few months before the wedding, Yael spoke seriously to her granddaughter about the probability of her imminent death. Mariam had been frantically brewing all manner of concoctions, teas, and potions to try and alleviate her grandmother's pain and invigorate her with energy. All this added attention made the elderly woman smile. She knew it was done with the motivation of love and, in turn, sought to reassure Mariam.

"It is alright, child. My present condition is perfectly normal, considering my age. However, I feel such a weariness deep in my bones that I fear I

may not be here to attend your wedding. I do not think my worn-out old heart will last until your betrothal year is completed.”

Mariam reached out to grasp her grandmother’s hand, “Then we will marry sooner, bother tradition with all its rules and regulations.”

Her grandmother sighed. “Mayhap that would be a fine idea. But Mariam, with my condition, remember that some things cannot be changed, no matter how much you wish otherwise. Still, I will rest easy in my heart, for I know you are marrying a fine young man who will always protect you, even if it is just from yourself. You have my undying love and regard, and never forget that I will still be with you in spirit when I am gone. When you need my guidance, think of me, and I will be there. Of late, I have been experiencing dreams about your grandfather. Who knew I would miss the old fool so much, and now it seems I will soon be joining him. So, Mariam, do not fret over my passing, you have done so much for me, but some things cannot be prevented.

“Even though he never spoke the words, you were always the light of your grandfather’s life; there is nothing he would not have done for you. I clearly remember those days when we would walk with him in the fields during springtime and how delighted you were to pick bouquets of wildflowers. And I will never forget how you and that rascally old goat once had an unfortunate dispute over ownership of the blooms before your grandfather came to your rescue. Then, afterwards, helped you both reach a diplomatic agreement to share them.”

Yael reached out to clasp her granddaughter’s hand. “Oh, child, I see great joy and fulfilment for you. But alas, there too will be sorrow; it is inevitable. Is that not how life works? We will always be faced with the good as well as the bad. Know that I am so proud of you. There is much to achieve in the years ahead, so trust your instincts and inner guidance. I know you do when helping others, but you must have the same faith and belief over anything regarding you and your family. I see much travel ahead for you; even in your later years, you will travel far, as will the little one you are carrying. Indeed, it would be favourable if the wedding was only a few weeks away rather than months.”

Mariam blushed as her grandmother fondly patted her hand. “Your child will be the harbinger of great change in the world whilst experiencing much joy and sorrow, but never forget that, in the end, life has a way of working itself out. Now let me rest. I am so weary. I will do my best to stay for you, but if it proves to be beyond my frail human capabilities, never forget that I will always be nearby.”

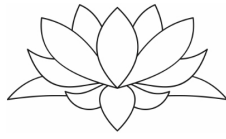


Thankfully, Mariam’s parents readily agreed to bring the wedding date forward, though it took longer to convince the local priest. And whilst the preparations were finalised, Yael stoically held onto life. She was determined to, at the very least, attend her beloved granddaughter’s wedding, and to Mariam’s delight, her wish came true. When Mariam, dressed in her beautifully embroidered wedding attire, twirled about in front of her grandmother, they both had tears welling in their eyes. There was also much merriment and laughter when the bridegroom and his friends arrived at the door. Then the wedding party set off in a jubilant procession through the streets to the town square, where the ceremony and wedding feast would take place.

The ensuing festivity was a joyous affair with much laughter, music, singing and dancing, warm embraces, and good wishes for Yosef and Mariam’s future. Indeed, the townsfolk were content, for the harvest this year was on course to be particularly abundant. Thus, the wine flowed freely, and stories were regaled by the elders about their courtships so many years ago when they were young. Many of the young women who had known Mariam all their life could not help but be a little envious of her attractive husband as he shyly thanked all the guests. And the young men wondered how they had missed such an opportunity as they looked upon the alluring bride who radiated such confidence in her chosen husband and their greater destiny.

And all the while, Mariam’s grandmother smiled knowingly as she quietly watched the proceedings. She would wave aside anyone who expressed concern and refused to be taken home early to rest. “Bah!” she told her

worried daughter, “I will soon have more than enough rest. Just let me be. I did not think I would live long enough to see this day, and I have no intention of missing one single moment of it.”



## CHAPTER 3

Yael had achieved almost the impossible by being there for her beloved young granddaughter on such a wonderful day. Thus, it was not unexpected when she did not awaken from her afternoon rest several days later. Even though Mariam was devastated over Yael's passing, she knew that the last thing her grandmother would have wanted would be for her to spend her days wallowing in misery. So, Mariam stoically pushed her grief aside and embraced her new life.

However, residing with her husband's parents did not sit well with Mariam. Indeed, it was hard enough having to maintain the appearance of a well-behaved wife, and as much as she liked them, Miriam felt uncomfortable living with these strangers. So, whilst the young couple's life settled into a steady pattern, and Mariam was content to at least be able to continue with her healing work, she could not help longing for a home of her own.

Mariam often had dreams in which she conversed with her grandmother. This always brought much comfort to her, though she was somewhat perplexed when she awoke one morning with words of a prophecy still resounding clearly in her mind. In the dream, she was conversing with Yael when a small boy-child shyly approached them, reaching out to hold her hand. Mariam remembered looking down at the child and then at the smiling countenance of her grandmother. Next, a man unknown to her appeared and, laying his hands upon the boy's head, he spoke to Mariam of how this soul who would soon be born to her was of great importance. For he would wield significant influence over the known world and many other lands that were as yet unknown.



The following day, Mariam found herself constantly smiling whilst pondering her dream. Even though a baby would be a welcome addition to their family, she thought every child born was unique and thus did not give much credence to her and Yosef being chosen as parents for such a soul. But then Mariam felt a sense of wonderment when she realised that she was indeed expecting. Her grandmother had been right.

Yosef was overjoyed at the news and immediately began to make alternate plans for his family's future. Notwithstanding, of late, he had been feeling increasingly restless, with an underlying wish to be independent of his parents. Perhaps even move to a larger town or city to further their careers in a more dynamic, wealthier community. But Mariam had not entirely realised the extent of his ambition. Indeed, she had been unaware that he often sought out the many tradespeople and merchants who passed through their town while travelling to Bethlehem or even further afield to Jerusalem. When Mariam finally noticed his restlessness, she pressed him about its cause, forcing him to confess that he found Be'er Sheva too restrictive. And how he considered Bethlehem a possible option, for even though it was not as large as Jerusalem, it was currently experiencing a boom in trade and prosperity due to the influence of Augustus Caesar. Indeed, the Emperor of Roma wished all wealth to be shared with the provinces.

Thus, Bethlehem was where Yosef had his sight set. At this revelation, Mariam was taken aback, for even with all her abilities, she had not seen this coming. And if truth be told, she felt rather indignant and demanded of Yosef as to why he had not thought to, at the very least, mention this before they were betrothed. As much as they would like to set up their own household, he should have realised that she wanted to stay near her mother. Yosef was somewhat disturbed by how adamant Mariam was, but he was not defeated; he stubbornly would not give up on his dream of a better, more prosperous future.

The eighth month of Mariam's pregnancy was fast approaching, so it seemed she would have her way despite Yosef's continued enthusiasm for such an undertaking. But then, a strange intervention occurred. She retired to bed one evening, citing fatigue. The baby had been particularly restless,

and she was finding the pregnancy trying. However, Mariam woke early feeling strangely invigorated. She had been experiencing unusual dreams for several weeks. Ones in which she had been shown that this child would be a prophet, a person of influence. However, she had not taken these visions seriously. But now a knowing came over her due to another night full of these prophetic dreams. Mariam made her way to the kitchen, where her husband was busy preparing the morning meal.

“Yosef,” she said more sharply than she had intended, causing him to drop a cooking pot on the floor in his startlement. “Yosef, we have to leave for Bethlehem as soon as possible. We must reach there before the baby is born.”

Thinking it was perhaps merely a passing fancy of an expectant woman, Yosef questioned her about this rather abrupt decision. Sighing deeply, Mariam grasped his hand before explaining the sudden reason for her change of mind.

“I know it sounds irrational, Yosef, but I have just awoken from a dream that foretold a disastrous outcome for us if we do not leave for Bethlehem as soon as arrangements can be made. I was clearly shown that circumstances will conspire to prevent us from leaving this town once the child is born. Therein danger awaits us. Thus, it is imperative to heed this warning.”

Even though they knew of Yosef’s wish to leave, their parents were naturally upset at what they saw as a reckless, rather ill-conceived plan. But surprisingly, despite her reservations, Mariam’s mother relented. Ana knew how hard Mariam had been resisting moving to another town and realised that her daughter must have a genuine reason for her change of heart. Indeed, her daughter’s prophetic dreams had never come from a fanciful imagination, so with everyone else’s somewhat reluctant help, Mariam and Yosef hastily prepared for their departure. A cart was hastily purchased along with a placid, older horse still capable of hauling them and their possessions.

Although her dream showed that time was of the essence, Mariam still dreaded the move, for their child’s birth was growing ever nearer. She had

desperately hoped that they could have waited a little longer, for what did a few months really matter.

"This is all very well," Mariam grumbled as she contemplated packing their possessions. "It is not as if I can move about easily. It would be much better if the child were born before we left. Would it really make a difference?"

But life does not always go along as one would wish, and Mariam remembered her grandmother's advice that she should always heed the visions regarding her own future. Indeed, Mariam sensed the underlying urgency despite her misgivings, so she surrendered to the will of Heaven and left everything to Yosef, who grasped the task with vigour and enthusiasm. Barely one week after her announcement, all was ready. On the morning of their parting, her mother, Ana, could not hide her tears from the pain of their separation.

Still, now that all the preparations were in place, Mariam felt much calmer, for she was resolute with her decision. "I do not know exactly why this is necessary. Indeed, it seems irrational, but we have to do this; I have no choice. Do not worry, I am sure that we will be fine. And besides, the baby is not due for at least another three weeks."

Wiping the tears from her face, Ana hugged Yosef before looking deeply into Mariam's eyes. "Daughter," she spoke gently but firmly, her voice full of emotion. "Thy path I cannot change, nor would I wish to. But I beg you to pledge that when your firstborn reaches an age when he can travel safely, let us behold him. And I believe your child will be a boy. Your grandmother told me so before she passed."

Mariam's eyes filled with tears. She understood deep within herself that their parting would likely not be for a short time, that events might conspire to keep them apart. She looked long into her mother's eyes before replying. "Surely your request, Yosef and I will honour, if spirit and circumstances give us grace."

With these words spoken, Yosef helped Mariam onto the cart, and once she was as comfortable as she could be, they bade their family farewell. Mariam's parents were deeply saddened at their leave-taking, whereas

Yosef's were proud to see their son and new daughter on their way to bettering themselves.

The route to Bethlehem was not overly long. Indeed, the town was only about thirty miles distant, and there was a well-maintained narrow roadway wide enough for their cart. Yosef estimated that even with breaks in the journey to allow Mariam and the horse to rest awhile, they would reach there with plenty of time to find accommodation. Unfortunately, however, one thing after another seemed to go wrong. First, the day was uncomfortably hot even though summer was nearly over, and Yosef soon realised that he had to slow the pace due to Mariam's condition. They also constantly encountered people coming from the direction they were heading, along with others who impatiently wanted to pass from behind. Thus, they had to continually halt or pull slightly off the roadway to let them by. Then with only a short distance to go, one of the wheels became dangerously wobbly, forcing Yosef to call a halt.

As he made Mariam comfortable by the roadside under a shady tree, she smiled and said, "I am alright, just a little hot and tired. I am sure I will feel better after a rest. Perhaps my extra weight proved too much for the poor old cart."

But her attempt to lighten Yosef's mood of self-recrimination did not prove effective, so she sighed and settled herself as best she could. The baby had become increasingly restless over the past few hours, something she thought best to keep to herself.

The weary horse was grateful for the respite, and after Yosef had given it a drink of water, he unbuckled the harness and led it to the side of the road where it could graze out of the way of travellers. Then wiping his brow after unloading the heaviest items, Yosef set about the task. However, as the repair progressed, he was clearly growing impatient, and Mariam chose to ignore when he would cuss under his breath every so often. Finally, satisfied that it was safe, Yosef hitched the rested horse to the cart and packed his tools before reloading their possessions. After helping Mariam onto the seat, he again closely inspected the wheel before deciding it was not worth the risk of adding his weight. Thus, when they finally went on their way, Yosef walked beside the horse as it ponderously navigated the roadway.

Even though this would inevitably extend the duration of their journey, nothing else could be done.

Naturally, they were both feeling rather anxious when the outskirts of Bethlehem were finally sighted, for the illumination from the sun was fading, and dusk was almost upon them. Indeed, eventide was fast approaching, and the faint sound of night insects could already be heard with the atmosphere turning colder, so Yosef gently wrapped Mariam in a warm woollen blanket. When they left, he had been confident they would find suitable accommodation on their arrival, but his hopes were soon dashed. It became apparent that Bethlehem had experienced an unexpected influx of travellers.

Time and time again, they were informed that no rooms were available, having all been taken by merchants passing through to Jerusalem to pay their due taxes. Mariam began to feel more tearful as they traversed from one inn to the next. She had not wanted to increase Yosef's anxiety, but her uncomfortable feeling had become severe contractions as the night wore on. And even though it was a lovely clear night, it became increasingly colder due to the turn of the season; autumn was only a few weeks away. She wearily sighed whilst gazing at the night sky. It was so clear that the multitude of stars seemed brighter than usual. And even though Mariam was seriously beginning to question the wisdom of her decision, she did not give voice to her misgivings.

"The next hostelry will surely have accommodation," Yosef assured her. "Do not worry, Mariam. You will soon be warm and comfortable." However, a deep frown creased his brow as he turned aside with a sigh. Despite his words of comfort, he was beginning to lose hope. He had sworn to protect his wife and their unborn child, but instead, he had placed them in grave danger. After telling Yosef again that there were no rooms at the next inn, the hotelier began apologising profusely, for he noticed the despair etched on the young man's face. Upon hearing the commotion, his wife joined them to see what the problem was. She was holding a lantern aloft and turned to her husband upon sighting Mariam.

"Husband, let not your heart be cold. Take pity on the young couple. She is with child, and if my eyes do not deceive me, she is near her time."

Hearing her words, Yosef cast a startled glance toward Mariam. He could hardly conceive that he had not noticed her worsening condition.

The innkeeper sighed deeply, a chastised expression on his face. "Yes, rightly so, my dear. I apologise for not considering the small unoccupied room attached to the stable. Shepherds or stable hands often use it. It is clean and dry, a warm place to rest your travel-weary souls, and tomorrow there will surely be a vacated room available. Then if you wish, we can even help you locate more permanent accommodation if you consider remaining in Bethlehem. Please follow me with the cart."

While he showed the weary couple where to go, the innkeeper's wife roused one of her staff to help swiftly gather some spare mattresses and blankets.

"Come, my dear," the hotelier's wife, Martla, kindly spoke to Mariam as Yosef gently helped her down from the cart. "I will aid you in whatever way I can if that is acceptable to you both."

Yosef nodded in noticeable relief, and Mariam was only too happy to let the kindly woman fuss around her, plumping a mattress to her satisfaction and arranging the blankets. It was a relief that the journey had finally ended, to be off the uncomfortable cart. Perhaps in retrospect, it had indeed been somewhat foolish to travel to Bethlehem near the due time of birth. She only had herself to blame that the baby was coming early. Still, it was done, and there was no point in recriminations against herself or Yosef for any over-eagerness. And besides, the room was perfectly acceptable. It was free from draughts and warm and cosy, and strangely the sound of the nearby animals, as they snuffled and moved about, was comforting. After storing the cart, Yosef led the grateful horse to the stable, and once it was seen to and settled with ample food and water, he joined his wife.

As soon as Martla had arranged everything to her liking and made sure that Mariam was comfortable, she hastened to the inn and, upon returning, presented the exhausted young couple with a basket full of food. As well as a warm stew, there was fresh bread and several carafes, one full of wine and the other with water, and a jug containing a steaming hot herbal drink. She left an extra lamp with them and said she would soon return. Yosef set upon the food with great relish, for they had not eaten for hours,

while Mariam was not hungry and was content to sip the warm drink. But then she grimaced, clutching at Yosef's proffered hand, and quietly confirmed that even though she was not due for at least another three weeks, she had been experiencing labour pains for the past few hours, and now they were worsening.

Martla bustled into the room moments later to see how they were faring. She hugged Mariam, and when the younger woman clung to her, she said, "I feel for you, my dear, especially as you are far from your mother. But have no fear. I will keep my maid from her rest, and we will care for you." She glanced at Yosef. "If that is what you wish?"

Yosef, who had a mouth full of food, nodded his assent; the relieved look on his face spoke so many unspoken words.

Turning to Mariam with a reassuring tone to her voice, she continued, "I am not a midwife as such, but I have birthed five of my own and delivered many other babies. And nearby is a healer we can fetch if the need arises."

The hours passed, and it was not until the early morning hours that their baby was safely delivered, everything proceeding so well that no extra help was needed. Mariam's face was flushed and showed signs of exhaustion, yet like all new mothers, she was overcome by the sheer enormity of giving birth. Indeed, she had experienced the most intense feeling of reality with the advent of her first child, and now she could only gaze upon his beautiful little face with a sense of wonderment. Moreover, their child had been born in the month of Av, under the sign of Aryeh, the lion, a vital astrological sign which would surely bode well for him in his future.

Yosef was relieved that his wife and child were well and could barely contain his emotions, so Martla, who needed to tend to Mariam and the baby, bustled the men on their way. The innkeeper, who went by the name of Tomasz, guided Yosef towards the inn, where he poured the stunned younger man a drink to fortify him. And when Martla announced they could return, Yosef was only too pleased to celebrate the birth with them and their maid, along with several other workers. When the men heard the commotion, they thought there was a problem with the animals in the stable. Thus, there was a feeling of great excitement in the atmosphere as they all gathered around Mariam, Yosef, and the little one with words of

welcome and goodwill for their future well-being. Even the sleepy animals became caught up in the festivity. Mariam glanced up to see a donkey and several horses, including their own, eyeing them from the open doorway between the rooms, and the thought crossed her mind that even they seemed to be smiling.

Mariam had been shown in a vision that their child was a wonderful soul, perfect in heart, soul, and mind. A soul who had already lived many lifetimes whereby gaining an understanding of humanity and the world. And now he had chosen to come into incarnation for a specific task. That of teaching, healing and uplifting humanity. To bring awareness of the desperate need for love, tenderness, humility, and compassion.

All this Mariam had seen, yet as she gazed down at her tiny baby, she wondered how it could be possible that her child would one day have such an enormous responsibility thrust upon him. How was it possible, for surely such a task would be too much for one person to bear. And why had she and Yosef been chosen as his parents? As she held her child close to her chest, Mariam was overcome by such an intense feeling of love and protectiveness that it threatened to overwhelm her senses. All she wanted to do was protect the vulnerable baby from any harm that might come his way.

Even so, Mariam knew deep down that try as she may, he would all too soon be taken from her, that she and Yosef would only have their precious child for a short time. And one day, he would belong to the many, not the few. She had once tried to explain things of this nature to Yosef but soon realised that it was beyond his comprehension, so she had desisted from further dialogue on such matters.

Still, for now, Mariam knew that she would always cherish this moment in time, cherish this respite in the security of their cosy surroundings. And so, Mariam and Yosef made themselves comfortable for what little remained of the night, warm in the glow of the love of their small family, their son already asleep in the cradle that Yosef had made as soon as he found out he was to be a father. Then, all too soon, Mariam was awakened when the first rays of the sun illuminated the room, and she was startled to see some curious faces peering at them from the doorway.



“Morning, ma’am,” a gruff-looking man spoke into the silence. “Did not mean to disturb you. We just came to saddle our master’s horses. It looks like you have a healthy baby, and we wanted to wish you and your family luck and good fortune in your life.”

Similar occurrences happened all morning as curious merchants approached them, a few giving gifts. Finally, the attention began to overwhelm Mariam, and it was a great relief when the innkeeper bustled in and informed them there was now a room available. And seeing how he had only been able to offer them such humble surroundings, the lodging would be free of charge for as long as it took them to find more permanent accommodation.

After they had rested and partaken of a meal, Tomasz approached them, and the men duly set off together to find suitable lodgings. Meanwhile, Martla set about organising hot water for bathing, for which Mariam was grateful. To her surprise, the men were only gone for a few hours before returning with some welcome news. They had first fruitlessly searched in the business district for a suitable dwelling; then, on their way back to the inn, a neighbour had approached them. His son, who lived nearby, was due to depart with his family to find work in Jerusalem, thus leaving their home vacant. If it suited Yosef and Mariam, they were welcome to lease it for as long as needed. This dwelling would be available in a few days and rented partly furnished; all it needed was a little cleaning.

Upon inspection, the newly vacated house seemed perfect. It may have been small, but it was built around a courtyard. What pleased Yosef was an attached stable for their horse and cart and a large shed by the roadside suitable for him to use for a carpentry business. Furthermore, it had an external entrance for the customers. He had intended to sell the horse and cart, but when Mariam insisted they be kept, he deferred to his wife’s wisdom and insight without even a query as to why.

With the help of the amicable innkeeper and his kind-hearted wife, it did not take long for the home to be ready for occupancy, and the workshop was quickly set up with workbenches and Yosef’s tools. Mariam was overjoyed for them to finally be in their own home. Yosef immediately busied himself in his workshop, for he was determined to succeed with his

new venture, especially now that he had a family to support. Naturally, many orders came by way of Tomasz and Martla, for they were acquainted with many people in Bethlehem.

So, there they dwelt, Yosef busy repairing and crafting furniture, Mariam with their child and the home. Yosef David, as he was named, was content and happy. He rarely cried and slept peacefully for hours after feeding, though he was noticeably alert when awake. Martla had told her that young babies did not see what was happening around them, that it was all an unfocused blur. Still, it seemed that he could already discern different people, and Mariam found herself closely scrutinising him for the first few weeks whilst looking for signs of his supposed greatness. But she soon chastised herself for her foolishness. To take each moment for what it was in reality, and for now, Yosef David was an ordinary baby.



Several months had gone by when late one afternoon, as Yosef was concentrating on carving the back of a chair, the door opened, and someone entered the workshop. Without looking up, he said, “Just one moment, please, then I will attend to you.”

When Yosef finally glanced up, the sight that greeted his eyes almost caused him to drop his chisel. Standing before him were three curious-looking strangers. He was momentarily taken aback by their close scrutiny as they patiently awaited his attention. Foreigners, he decided, by the look of their attire and general appearance. Indeed, when the tallest man spoke, it was with a thick foreign accent, and it took a moment of concentration before Yosef could even discern his words.

From what he could gather, it seemed that the three men had all separately arrived in the land of Iudaea over the past few weeks, and with their large caravans and heavily armed guards, they had been travelling about whilst trading goods. Two of them had met briefly in Jerusalem before travelling on to Bethlehem. Then by a strange but seemingly fortuitous coincidence, they had met their third companion at the same hostelry. The very inn that Mariam and Yosef often frequented. There they had discov-

ered that they had all been covertly seeking the same thing, a young family who had not long ago been joined by a child, a baby boy, to be precise. So naturally, Tomasz and Martla, after discerning that the gentlemen's motives were honest and pure, directed them to Yosef's workshop.

The spokesman politely asked if they would be permitted to speak with the mother and determine if this child was who they sought, the one they had travelled so far to regard.

Yosef was dumbfounded. His initial reaction was disbelief and suspicion as he wondered why he should allow these strangers to come anywhere near his family. He stared long and hard at them while they closely watched him in return. The minutes dragged by, and not a word was uttered. It was a most unusual situation, and Yosef was unsure what to do next. Indeed, it was perplexing because he had no wish to offend these noble-looking foreigners who were clearly of importance. Finally, still not knowing exactly what to say, he opened his mouth to refuse, but an answer to the contrary flowed into his consciousness.

"If you consent to wait a moment, I will first speak to my wife."

The men regarded each other, then nodded in unison. They at least seemed to comprehend his words. Yosef hastily exited the workshop through the courtyard and, upon entering their home, found Mariam in the kitchen preparing the evening meal. As Yosef explained his dilemma about the three men, Mariam gave him a considering look before setting aside the vegetables she was dicing. Then her demeanour subtly changed as she hurriedly removed her apron and tidied her hair.

"Trust me, Yosef. I believe we must let them see our baby, for he may well be whom they seek." Glancing over at their child blissfully asleep in his cradle near the warmth of the fire, she could not help but wonder if it was true what she had been shown in her dreams. Mariam had heard that many people were predicting the arrival of a soul who would affect the world, but surely that would be someone else, not her precious baby. Even though she continued to have unusual dreams about him, she still found it hard to comprehend even the possibility that this was so. It would be a burden for anyone to be born with such a destiny awaiting them, and it was still inconceivable that it might be their child.

The three men showed great respect as they solemnly entered their home. Then, they bowed reverently towards Mariam, which caused her to blush over their attention.

“Forgive us for our intrusion,” spoke the tallest of the men, richly attired in a beautifully embroidered maroon robe worn over a tunic made from golden cloth and loose black linen trousers. This man was very dark of hair and beard, with eyes so deep in colour that they appeared almost black. Moreover, his ebony complexion and facial features spoke of the lands southeast of Iudaea. Pausing a moment whilst Mariam assessed him, he waited patiently before continuing.

“I may be well known in my land, but titles are not needed in this room, nor are they of any use. In this, my companions agree. So here I choose to be merely known as Belshazzar. I hail from the southernmost lands in Arabia. Do not fear us; we mean you no harm. I would not have made my way here if what I have to impart was not of such great importance, and my companions also feel the same. May we see your child?”

Mariam glanced at Yosef hovering by the doorway, a nervous expression clearly showing on his face. He did not like or understand what was happening. She gestured her permission; what else could she do under the circumstances. Then one by one, the men slowly approached the sleepy baby. The second man was slighter in build and height, paler in complexion with light reddish-coloured hair, and he was also attired in a beautiful robe, deep red with depictions of animals sewn in golden thread. He was named Melichior and came from the Parthian Lands. The last man to approach seemed younger than the other men and was clothed in a deep blue robe, a tunic of gold, and black trousers. His hair and beard were a deep brown, his intense eyes a startling green, and his complexion was a copper-brown hue. He introduced himself as Gudnaphar and said he hailed from a kingdom near northern Hindustan.

The baby had by now awoken and was stirring restlessly. After intensely peering inside the cradle, the men gave a collective sigh, glancing meaningfully at each other. Finally, Gudnaphar turned to Mariam and spoke. “He is indeed the one we have been seeking. We have travelled far with gifts,

but more importantly, we have words of counsel which we must impart to you.”

One after the other, the three men withdrew their offerings from a large cloth pack that Gudnaphar had been carrying over his shoulder. The baby was now fully awake and watching the proceedings with interest. *Please do not cry*, Mariam thought as he turned his head, fixing the men with his gaze whilst studying them intently.

Gudnaphar reverently placed a golden bowl filled with coins on the table beside the baby and bowed before stepping aside. Belshazzar added more golden objects, as did Melichior. Then, many other wonderous items were drawn from the cloth bag, including priceless herbs, myrrh, and frankincense. The baby began to fret, so Yosef told Mariam he would hold him whilst she spoke with the men.

“Dear lady,” Gudnaphar said, “we have been given crucial guidance to impart to you, and it is imperative that you at least consider our words. We may all be followers of Zarathustra, but we have the utmost respect for other people’s beliefs and thus have no wish to interfere with your own guidance.”

And so they talked for what seemed hours, though it was far less in reality. It was just that they had so much to impart to Mariam regarding her child’s future, and all the while, Yosef continued to watch them with suspicion. And though he had little understanding of what was imparted, Mariam was well aware of the importance of their counsel. Then when it seemed all had been said, Gudnaphar turned to Mariam, a frown creasing his forehead.

“In Jerusalem, even though we did our best not to arouse any suspicion, I fear that we may have caused King Herod to take notice of a rumour that has spread amongst the populace, one about a saviour being born in your land. The king is said to be considering whether or not to undertake a search for any such child. And although it appears that he means no physical harm to any child, it would be best if your family escaped his notice. It would not be beneficial for your son to be under this man’s control. Indeed, it would be wise to consider leaving Bethlehem, mayhap even Iudaea, before your son reaches six months.”

Mariam gasped. Surely this could not be so. Yosef's business already showed a profit despite not trading very long. Besides, she did not want to leave their new home and the many good friends they had made.

Seeing her visible distress and conflict of emotions, Gudnaphar said kindly, "I am afraid that it is deemed necessary. Otherwise, you may have your child removed from your guardianship. As long as you leave within the next three months, you will be safe, of that we are certain. King Herod is not a man of evil intent but is misguided in his belief, for he will surely attempt to control the destiny of any gifted child who comes to his attention. Therefore, when you make your preparations, if you so wish to, it should be safe to leave by way of your hometown as long as you do so discreetly."

Mariam could not help but feel distressed that her guidance and dreams had not shown her any possible danger. Perhaps her mind had been too distracted by the bliss of domesticity.

Gudnaphar continued, his tone of voice showing concern for her distress. "We advise that you travel to a foreign land. One where you will be unknown and thus safe and do not return until the king has been long dead. Even then, be wary of his successors. No matter how many years away, be alert and ever ready for change. You will be shown the exact time for secure travel. A possible place of refuge not too far away would be the city of Alexandria."

With these troublesome words reverberating in her mind, the three men bowed and gestured for Yosef to escort them to the exit.

As he turned to go, the man known as Gudnaphar said to Mariam, "One day in the distant future, your son may wish to visit my kingdom. Indeed, by then, he will know where I reside and when it is an appropriate time. Furthermore, tell him to present the engraved golden bowl left in your care, and thus will he be known for whom he is."

With these enigmatic words spoken, the men left the room, closely followed by Yosef, who first handed their child back to the care of his mother. Feeling stunned by what had transpired, Mariam sat down after placing him in the cradle. The baby closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep despite all the attention he had just received. It seemed that they had no choice in the matter, this she felt deep in her inner self, and now she would

have the onerous task of convincing Yosef. They would have to settle their affairs quietly, and perhaps to allay any suspicion, they would be wise to leave most of their possessions behind as if planning to return.

As expected, Yosef was reluctant to consider leaving their new home and thriving business, where each new day brought more orders for furniture pieces or repairs. Finally, however, after discussing it late into the night, he grudgingly agreed to heed the warning given by their esteemed visitors. Indeed, the last thing he wanted was to come into conflict with King Herod and his troops.

Thus, they decided to take Martla and Tomasz into their confidence, for they had been loyal friends over the past few months and would often visit with the young family. Over the next few days, Tomasz made discreet enquiries with merchants who had left Jerusalem. Everything seemed peaceful, with nothing to report, and despite Mariam's growing unease, life settled into a modicum of complacency as the weeks went by. However, their peace of mind was shattered when Yosef David was just over five months old. On his way east, a merchant passing through Bethlehem had disturbing tidings to impart. Rumours were still abounding in Jerusalem regarding the birth of more than one unique child. This talk was enough to convince Yosef how necessary it was to avert the dire consequences of inaction.

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