



PROLOGUE

MOTHER

I am not going to tell you my name.

I stood face-to-face with an angel of God, and after that, I could not remember my own name for days. When I die, there will only be one name on my lips. It will not be my own.

I will tell you of Samson, my son. One last tale, to be my *mitzvah*, my righteous deed, a true tale in this false world. I will tell my story, and his. I will speak for the dead.

I will tell you of men and angels, of sons and sorrows. I will tell you of the courage required to wait upon a silent God. I will tell you of the strongest man to ever walk the earth, and of what proved mightier than his strength. For the strength of a man cannot save anyone, not even himself.

But come. The hour is later than you know, and even now, in death, I must share my son with others. Do not tarry with them long. Come to me as quickly as you can.

I will begin my story with a tale about breasts, where all good tales probably begin.



PART ONE



BRIDE OF FIRE





AMARA

*Late spring in the Philistine city of Timnah,
near the Mediterranean Sea*



Mother and Father sat in the doorway, drinking bowls of wine and greeting passersby. The entire Philistine city of Timnah was wandering about. No work had been done. We celebrated the first sight of the Pleiades stars in the heavens, marking the beginning of the wheat harvest season. Everyone in Timnah owned a field, whether it be large or small. Timnah was famous throughout the Valley of Sorek for our grapes, olives, and barley, but most especially our wheat. Our wheat proved so soft that when ground, little leavening was needed. We claimed that the wheat was so light, it lifted itself. Everything grown here in the valley was good. We loved the land and the land loved us, yielding herself up, giving us happy lives and full stomachs.

Many marriages had taken place today. Not proper marriages of property, like the ones my father would someday arrange for Astra and me. These were marriages of men to men, marriages that were said to be the ultimate test of manhood. I did not argue their reasoning—the belief that one man could be so virile, even another man would desire him. My people had always honored passion in

whatever form it took. We understood that men married other men for prestige. Men married women for labor and children.

Some men, like my father, had no interest in proving their manhood. He contented himself with my mother. We still loved Father a great deal. He had to prove nothing to us. I didn't even feel sorry for my mother; that's how much he loved us. She must have envied other wives, whose husbands took men in marriage and earned respect at the city gates. But whatever envy or discontent she suffered, she kept it well hidden in her heart.

Father sat in the doorway, happy to watch the festivities from a distance, laughing at the drunk jugglers and leering at the temple dancers. He drank wine and popped fat, glossy olives into his mouth while Mother rubbed his shoulders. A male servant belonging to a neighbor rushed up to us, displaying his wedding ring, a virgin's blush on his face. Mother hugged him, warning him not to be late to the market tomorrow morning. He winked and pranced off. Father rolled his eyes and plunged his hand into the olive bowl, spearing an olive on the end of his index finger. He removed it and placed it on his ring finger, with an exaggerated sigh of wistfulness. Mother punched him on the shoulder as Astra and I giggled.

Dagon's temple, which was only a two-hour walk from here, would be busy later tonight. After all the children had been put to bed and the lamps extinguished, and the newlyweds had drawn the curtains around their beds, the long-married and the still-single men would all find themselves on the same road, with the same thought in their minds.

Dagon's temple offered beautiful temple prostitutes of many ages. Men would prostrate themselves at the feet of Dagon, that

great god of the fields, and then prostitutes would descend the cold stone steps and become Dagon to those men. In Dagon's name, they would make love to the men and release them of all their fears and concerns. The Philistine men were quite devout; none of them ever wanted to miss a temple service.

Of course, I had never been allowed at the temple to see such sights. What little I knew came from Astra, who had ears that always heard the most delectable pieces of gossip and lore. She had a gift for secrets. Though two years younger than me, she knew much more. Her hair was longer than mine, and darker, and her face more alluring, with almond-shaped eyes and a full, pink mouth. She had many gifts I did not, I suppose. I was not unpleasant to look at, but I was ordinary.

I lifted my face to the moon and let her bathe my unremarkable face. A shiver of anticipation went through me. The night, illuminated by moon and fire, woke strange new desires.

While the men worshipped, the wives left at home would drink too much wine and eat all the raisins before collapsing into bed with stained tunics. Children would creep from their pallets and rush out into the streets to play until dawn. We loved the festivals, which were always dictated by the planting seasons. We celebrated when it was time to plant, and begged Dagon for a good harvest, and we celebrated when it was time to harvest, and begged Dagon for good prices at market.

My father stood to leave, and my mother kissed him good-bye before announcing she would go to bed early this evening. I begged permission, and received it, for Astra and me to flee to the rooftop and spend the evening there. We had pallets on the roof for just such

nights, but we did not sleep. As soon as we settled in, I walked to stand near the edge of the roof, raising my arms to welcome the night.

Had my mother ever felt as I did right then, my breath roaring in my ears like a lion, my heart racing as I stood on our roof, surveying the city? The wind moved beneath my tunic, lifting the fabric to float out between my arms like the wings of a butterfly. I was weightless and soft. I could pretend to be beautiful, fresh, powerful. Someday, perhaps, a man would notice when I walked past; I would hear his sharp intake of breath, catch the furtive second glance. In his eyes, I would see that I had truly become beautiful, and my beauty would make him afraid. Astra already had this effect on men.

Astra had warned me about what awaited us both. There would be a wedding, and sheets hung from the roof, the honorable stain of blood on display, and someday, birth cries. She heard what wives talked about as they worked.

But in this last season of our youth, before men had claim on either of us, these nights were delicious and intoxicating. We dreamed. We stretched out on the roof, staring at the stars, giggling, calling out on the winds to our friends who watched the stars too. We were cradled this way, above our parents, above our lives, under the stars.

“The incense burned out. Do we have any more?”

Astra was sitting cross-legged on her pallet, looking at the night’s stars. The incense pot was within her reach, but I returned from the roof’s edge to lift the lid and check inside. I saw the shiny sludge inside and reached for the little spoon, scooping a fresh dollop of incense from the little stone pot, ladling it into the square dish over the fire. Gray smoke grew at the edges and curled up, spinning and spiraling into the air.

I sat down next to her and took in the rich scent, holding my long black hair back with my hands at my shoulders, leaning over the fire and inhaling. Mother bought her incense from the Egyptian chemist who frequented our city, which rested between the coastal plains of the sea and the Judean Hills. He created blends of musk and florals and spices, fragrances that bottled emotions we had no names for yet.

I sighed with pleasure and poured a fresh bowl of wine for myself. Astra glanced at her own bowl, which sat next to her, empty, but I shook my head no. Too much wine gave her nightmares. She would crawl into my bed and weep, and nothing I said was of any comfort.

“Milk, then?” she asked.

“I’ll have to go below.”

“No. Don’t bother.” She straightened her legs before lying down on her pallet and grinning at me. I often served her like a slave and didn’t mind.

“What do you think of Father?”

“You should choose your words carefully, Astra. One would think you were being disrespectful.” The idea that we were permitted to form an opinion of him was sacrilege.

“I’m not. I feel sorry for him.”

I lowered my voice into a rasping whisper. Astra had to learn caution. “There is no reason on earth to pity him.”

“You’re wrong. He was born into a modest family of modest means, and he has done no better himself. Mother never gave him an heir. Even Mother, his one chance at prosperity, left him no better off than when she married him. He is doomed.”

I was shocked by her boldness. “What an awful thing to say. We will be better for him than ten sons.”

“How? Name one way he will benefit from us.”

“Our bride price. We might fetch a high price.”

“For a rug merchant’s daughter? He buys his rugs from the trade caravans and then sells them at market. He owns neither the loom nor the slave who weaves. He is only as rich as his next trade, and we both know that is not speaking of much.”

“There are the olives.”

Besides the plot of wheat we owned, which barely gave enough wheat for our own stomachs, we had a small grove of olive trees. They, too, yielded enough for our family and no more. She huffed in disgust at my suggestion.

I turned my back to her, but I was not angry. I was convicted. It was just like Astra to reveal the truth without even trying. I was so miserably selfish. Ever since I had gotten my first monthly bleed seven months ago, I had become obsessed with my next stage of life.

“I do feel sorry that he has no heir,” I offered. “But even if we’re not rich and can offer no lands or wells or camels, we are good workers. Men like hardworking wives.”

But all I could really think of, secretly, was the grief I must soon face. When I was given away, Father would lose a daughter, but I would lose my whole family, my constant comforts, the peace of the familiar. Who would comfort Astra in the middle of the night when I was gone? Who would shield her from the plainer girls with critical tongues? I would have a new mother, too, a new set of parents to win over. I would have to please my husband, and his mother, and his father, and perhaps too his siblings and business partners

and neighbors. All my energy would go toward pleasing others. And if I did it well, my only reward would be their expectations that I continue. I served my family vigorously, but I loved them, so the burden was soft. I did not know what I would feel for my husband and his family. Plus, I wasn't beautiful. Men were always nicer to beautiful girls.

My monthly bleeding came at a price. Money would exchange hands to secure my marriage, but my debt would never be cancelled. I would be in a new home, with a new mother-in-law who would squeeze my breasts to see if milk had come in, who would know when I bled and watch what I ate. I would lie under a man I did not know and had not chosen, and tend to some rotting old woman while my own mother walked into her white years all alone.

Faced with these same fears, Astra thought only to be sorry for Father. She worried over him, while I worried over myself. I kept my back to her while I struggled to stop the shaming tears that began to well in my eyes.

"Amara! Come here!"

I sat up and took a deep breath. Astra was at the edge of the roof, peering into the streets. Restless as she was, she had finished with our conversation long before I had even begun to process it.

"Look!" she said, pointing to the street below. "It's that Hebrew we heard of!"

I peered around her, down the street, and saw an enormous beast lumbering down the lane, all alone. He was a strange enough sight as he was, but because he was alone, he looked even odder. No one came to the festival alone, not even the Hebrews, who always traveled in great noisy clumps. The Hebrews hated us because this land

was ours. They hated us for our wealth, and our iron, and our power, because they wanted it all for themselves.

But he was alone, with no friends or companions. He seemed not to miss them, though, judging from the way he surveyed the city unfolding before him, stopping to buy a stick of roasted pigeon from a vendor.

Timnah only had one prostitute, an ugly old woman who sometimes picked up business from those too tired to walk all the way to the temple, and she made great efforts to stand up and address him.

“Are you new to our city? Care for a moment’s comfort?”

He laughed and fetched the vendor, a young boy, giving him a coin. The boy returned with another stick of roasted meat, which the man handed to the hag. She sneered at his big, grinning face but flopped down on her haunches and ate with ferocity. He moved on, seemingly unaware of all the eyes upon him. To him, we were the spectacle, the evil Philistines who had not departed his sacred land.

Long ago, the legends say, the Hebrews had a god they took with them out of Egypt. This god “gifted” them our land. All the Hebrews had to do, the god said, was kill us all first.

It didn’t happen, of course. We were the people of iron, the people who could forge spears and knives to fillet a Hebrew down the middle and cut through his shield, too. They had no hope of conquering us. Technology was not our god, but it did deliver us from their god. And we worshipped in better ways, embracing pleasure instead of shunning it, welcoming all gods and denying none.

Astra jumped back and ran over to the fire. I assumed she was frightened by the strange sight of this man, with his thick, braided hair pulled back into one huge mane and a red scarf wrapped around

his head. His black beard was long too, hanging down to his stomach. Despite his loose tunic, I could see that he was as broad through the shoulders as an ox's yoke, with legs of granite. The sight made my stomach contract with a feeling like excitement. He was handsome, as much as any Hebrew could be, with dark, wide eyes and lips that were soft and red, turning up at the edges in a sly smile. His hair drew my attention again, though, that mass of black fur stunning me. He looked very much like a man-lion, a miraculous, wild beast.

We had heard of him before but had thought the stories were just more Hebrew mythology.

Timnah rested between two popular trading sites, so we often saw oddities pass through our village. Men charged a small fee and lifted a veil on a cage, and we got a glimpse of a turtle with two heads or a monkey that wore a tunic and drank wine from a bowl. We were savvy customers. But this man was a shock to the system, a shock I felt all the way down into my thighs. No sight compared to him.

I retreated from the roof's edge to check on Astra. I was too late.

Astra dashed past me, clutching a stick from the edge of the fire. She ran right to the roof's edge and launched it, pegging the giant in the forehead. She fell flat against the roof, holding her breath in absolute terror as I stood there, my mouth hanging open in outright horror.

"Astra! What did you do that for?"

She giggled. "He's a Hebrew. He doesn't belong here. They have their own festivals."

I peered down into the street, my heart as still and cold as stone. The man was looking straight up at my roof. He was going to kill us.

"I'm sorry, my lord. It was an accident," I said.

A strange shimmer passed over him and was gone. A trick of the moon, perhaps. But when I looked again at his face, he was smiling at me.

“What is your name?” His voice was calm and even. I saw a red bump beginning to show itself on his forehead. I glanced back at Astra, narrowing my eyes at her. If he didn’t kill her, I would.

“I cannot answer that, my lord. I have apologized. May you have a good night.”

I stepped back out of his line of sight, my hands trembling. “He asked for my name,” I hissed at Astra, who had fled to crouch by the fire. We sat very still, our ears hoping to catch a noise from the street, wanting to know what he would do next.

Astra’s eyes were wide. “But you did not give it, did you?”

I shook my head. “I should have given him yours.”

We sat until our legs burned and cramped from holding one position so carefully. I decided I had been mistaken about his smile. It could have been an evil leer. Street torches cast unreliable shadows.

With great caution, we unfolded our legs and moved to rest on our pallets, our eyes still wide as we watched each other’s faces and listened. We heard nothing for the remainder of the night but the sound of children playing and women singing drunkards’ songs.

By the hour when dawn began to glow pink on the horizon, Astra had fallen asleep, her mouth wide open, her black eyelashes fluttering against her soft cheeks. I edged closer to her and stroked her hair, which fell from her smooth forehead. I shook my head though she could not see my rebuke. She was filled with terrible mischief, true enough, but she had the pure heart of a child. I prayed Dagon would be patient with her and bring her a gentle husband.

Knowing that Astra would not wake, I slipped down the stairs and crept through the house. Its wooden floor made small groans and creaks. Father had not yet returned from the temple, but that was of no concern. Mother snored loudly, sprawled across her straw pallet. I pulled the blanket up from her feet, where it had gotten tangled, and draped it over her before sneaking toward the front door.

I peeked in our large clay jar of oil near the door. It was almost empty. We would need money, and soon, if it were to be filled again.

Babies were just awakening, and adults were just beginning to sleep. The festival changed everyone's sleeping schedule, except for the infants. Infants were unmoved by our celebration of Dagon. Their god was still milk. I loved the morning music of our streets; the newborns with their cracking cries, the donkeys that snorted and kicked at their bedding, the lambs that bleated for breakfast at the first sound of footsteps outside their pen. There was the sound of carts being wheeled through the streets, of merchants going to market to set up, of groans and sighs and angry roosters.

I sneaked into the street, gathering my tunic in my hands, lifting it away from my feet as I bent over. I wanted to see the street, to see if I could find any trace of the man's footprints.

I found them at the edge of the path just under our roof, where he must have stood to peer up at me when he was deciding whether to kill us. His footsteps were huge. I slipped my own foot out of my sandal and rested it inside one of his footprints. His footprint was twice the size of mine.

I heard my father coming, whistling the same song to Dagon that he always sang in the morning. I erased the footprints of the man with my toes, turning to greet my father.

“Darling one,” my father said, grabbing me for a little peck on the top of the head as I ran to him and fell into step beside him. “How was your night at home with Astra?”

“Fine.”

I glanced up at his face, but he did not frown or doubt me. He had big bushy eyebrows like two feral dogs that arched and lunged at each other as he talked. Long dimples ran down each cheek, deepening when he grinned, which he did often. My mother said he was a handsome man. I could not judge him as such. He was simply my father.

Other girls’ fathers treated them with strict order verging on contempt, but my father treated me with leniency, despite my gender. He did not worry or threaten as other fathers did, and he did not mind when I discussed matters such as temple politics or money. But even so, I was careful not to abuse my privilege.

“And your mother?”

“Sleeping inside. Shall I start your breakfast?”

“Let’s wait for your mother. I’d like to talk to you.” He stood in the doorway. I looked around to be sure there was no sign of more footprints.

I saw it then, and almost died of terror.

A long red scarf had been tied to the top of our doorpost. The Hebrew had marked our house. He wanted to remember where we lived.

“You know that I love you as much as any father can love a daughter.”

I could not focus on what he was saying. I only saw red.

“If you had been a son, this conversation would be different. I can’t protect you forever.”

My heart lurched up. “Why do I need protection?”

He laughed. “Don’t be so unreasonable. Any family can ask for you in marriage now. You will go and live in another house, with another father and mother, a husband to serve, children.” He wiped a tear from his eye before continuing. “If the other fathers see me do this, I’ll be ridiculed at the city gates for all time. They’ll make me grind barley with the women.”

He didn’t know that I might not live long enough to be pledged away. How had he not seen that scarf? And what did that scarf mean? If I took it down, what would that signal? Acceptance of guilt?

I decided to leave it and wait.

He cleared his throat and looked at me with a stern expression. I did not think it was a sincere one. “So if I am to accept an offer, I should know what would please you most.”

The day was only getting worse. “Nothing would please me. I don’t want to marry.”

He laughed again.

“I can just live here with you and Mother and Astra. I don’t want to marry.”

“But you will.”

“You don’t have to get rid of me. I can stay here and work. I’ll pay for myself, you’ll see.”

“Would you feel more comfortable talking to your mother? You can tell her what you want.”

“I am not being demure. I don’t want to marry.”

“The sun doesn’t ask if we want it to rise. Wind doesn’t ask if we want it to blow. Nothing in this world cares what we want. Do not live in the wasteland of thinking that what you want

matters. Especially being a woman. Now, perhaps we'll have that breakfast."

He turned to go inside and saw the scarf. I froze, waiting for him to connect its presence with Astra and me and our terrible behavior last night. He would have questions. And I was a girl who lacked all charm, even the charm of quick little lies.

He laughed and tied it around his waist. "Festivals! Madness always reigns."