

DAUGHTERS *of the* PROMISED LAND • 2

The
PROPHETESS

DEBORAH'S STORY

JILL EILEEN SMITH


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Jill Eileen Smith, *The Prophetess*
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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author’s imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To Randy,
Who inspires every hero in every story.
Who instills hope in me with every book
I don't think I can write.
Who sees God's purpose and good in every challenge.
And who bakes our Christmas cookies every year.
Thank you.
I love you!



PART 1

When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates.

Deborah, poet, prophetess,
and judge in Israel

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.

Judges 4:1–5

PROLOGUE

1126 BC

Early morning dew tickled Deborah's sandaled feet on the path to the village well, and palm trees waved their stout leaves as if in greeting. She tugged the donkey's reins closer to the well's open mouth and smiled into the dawn's pink rays.

Today would be a good day.

She patted the donkey's neck, then undid the ropes holding several goatskins. "You wait right here for me now." The donkey lifted its head, and she scratched its ears, laughing. "I won't be long."

She hummed a soft tune and glanced back at the beast once she reached the well. First she would fill the trough to give it drink, then fill the goatskins for her father's journey to Shiloh the next morning.

"Oh, Adonai, I wish I could go with him." The prayer came from a place deep within her, one of longing to see the tabernacle of the Lord again, to worship Him there. But she

could not go, a virgin alone with just men, even if they were her family—not without her mother’s agreement. “Why does she not see the beauty of Your holiness in that place, Adonai?”

The breeze kissed her face as if in answer, and Deborah closed her eyes, feeling the weight of the water filling the skin, while her mind sifted through memories of her past visits to that place where God had put His name. If only she had been born into a family of scribes who copied the pages of the law, or stood near enough to smell the incense and see the golden lampstand glowing through the curtained veil.

She released her longing in a heavy sigh. Perhaps next year she would be wed and could accompany her husband on the yearly journey. *Please, Adonai, let it be.* The face of her cousin Amichai flashed in her mind, accompanied by a quick flush to her cheeks. Surely he would speak to her father soon. At fifteen, Deborah should already have the promise of betrothal in hand, but still she waited. Why? Had not Amichai indicated he would call, that he wanted her to be his?

Deborah heaved the last of the water skins up the side of the well, the heaviness of change filling her heart. Perhaps she had misread his comments or had not listened with a discerning ear. But . . . was that possible? Surely his promise of “I am coming soon” meant exactly what his light kiss to her cheek indicated. She had not misread the ardent look in his eyes.

Then why? The fault could only lay with her, as her mother repeatedly said. “Save your opinions for after you are wed. Why do you argue with the young men who would speak with you? You tell them what to do! Ach! Is it any wonder they are not standing in line to speak to your father?”

Deborah’s cheeks heated and her eyes stung with the mem-

ory. Her mother's sharp words were a slap to her face, and Deborah had tried to heed the rebuke. Truly she had. But advice just slipped past her tongue, and sometimes even her father had come to seek it when her mother was not within earshot. Did that not mean that her words held worth?

The breeze tugged her headscarf, and she yanked hard as the skin reached the well's lip. She quickly tied its leather strings, carried the heavy sacks to the donkey, and draped them over the sides. She glanced heavenward, fearful that her thoughts had taken more time than she had been given. But the pinks of dawn still shivered on the edges of the horizon, just now fading to the sun's yellow glow.

"We must hurry," she said, taking the donkey's reins, knowing the animal cared not a whit what she said to it. But she had chores she must attend to before her father left the next morn, and she dare not delay.

Still, the longing to linger remained, and the wind picked up, its breeze no longer gentle as it whipped the scarf behind her head, her hair blowing with it. She stilled, gripping the donkey's reins, fear curling in her middle. One glance about told her she was alone, but even the donkey's fur bristled and it did not move.

"Is someone there?" Deborah's bold call disappeared with the rush of wind. She braced herself in the face of its battering, her heart pounding strangely as she stared into the hills around her. She should run for cover. But her feet would not obey her sluggish thoughts. What was happening to her?

She placed both hands on her knees and sought to draw breath. *Please*. Fire heated her middle and she doubled over, sinking to her knees.

Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am the Lord your God.

She gasped, the voice loud in her ear. *But I don't . . .* Her weak words fell away.

Consecrate yourselves! The command jolted her and she planted her face to the earth, her breath heaving.

Be holy, for I am the Lord your God. Keep My statutes and do them. I am the Lord who sanctifies you.

Her whole body trembled as the light of day suddenly blinded her already closed eyes.

I am the Lord your God. You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.

Deborah's breath came in great gasps even after the light faded. She remained prostrate, waiting for more, but the air around her returned to its gentle breath, and her heart slowly found its normal rhythm.

I am the Lord your God, the voice had said. Had God Himself spoken to her?

The words were those she recognized from the Law of Moses, but clearly they had not come to her from mere memory.

What do You want from me, Lord? Even her thoughts carried the remnants of fear as they asked the silent question.

But she heard no more in response.

She placed both hands in the dirt and pushed her trembling body from the ground, sweat tracing little beads down her back. She looked up at the waving palm fronds overhead and glanced about the area surrounding the well. Nothing seemed out of place, as though the day were like any other. She drew a breath, then another. But despite the normalcy of her surroundings, the sound of the voice in her ears still resonated.

The donkey nudged her hand, jolting her, reminding her of all that had yet to be done to prepare for her father's journey. *We will surely be late now.* The thought should have troubled her, for she hated to disappoint him when he counted on her for help, but home suddenly seemed like a distant country. And the memory of the words would not leave.



Lappidoth stretched his long legs from beneath the wooden stool and set his stylus on the table beside a length of parchment. Unable to sleep well, he'd started the tedious work by lamplight. He glanced at the copy of the law spread before him, written in his father's careful hand. The perfect lettering, an exact duplicate of one written by his grandfather before him, filled his gaze. This was his legacy, his calling as a Levite. A duty to continue the work of a scribe that he had faithfully fulfilled since the day his father first taught him to read and write.

A familiar ache accompanied the memory, one of longing to again share this trade with the man he had so long admired. If his father and mother had lived, he would not be stuck in this small room on his uncle Yuval's vast estate. He would reside in the respected residence of his father in Kartah with a wife and sons by now.

He shook himself, the sudden urge to escape this musty room nearly choking him. He drew a breath, begging release from the pain of loss. If he had been older, stronger, wiser . . . Somehow he should have fought off the Canaanites and protected his family. But the attack on Kartah had reduced the city to smoldering embers.

Why did You let me live? He had asked the question of

the Almighty more times than he could remember, but with every jot and tittle he copied from the law, he was reminded of a purpose. The God who made him was not the enemy. Canaan and their foreign gods and their evil ways—they were the enemy. Someday God would bring justice.

He swallowed, his throat feeling suddenly drier than the air in the stuffy room. He shoved his body from the chair, snatched the goatskin by the door, and headed to the well. Dawn had crested the horizon now, the time when the women would surround the well in their hurry to get water and head home to start the day's baking.

He blinked hard and breathed of the fresh air, realizing he should have tried longer to sleep than to work by lamplight. But if he had, he would have missed the women, and perhaps, if God were favorable to him, he would glimpse the beautiful Deborah there again.

He walked on, his step lighter at the thought, passing merchant stalls just beginning to open and mud-brick homes aligning the path in this village between Bethel and Ramah in Ephraim. Far from where Kartah once stood in Zebulun. But at least the place had been hidden from enemy forces thus far. His mother and father and sisters would have been safe here.

Anger, swift and dark, rushed in on him. The memories still clung too often to his thoughts like the sludge of a river to his feet. Seven years was time enough to move on with his life, as his uncle had frequently reminded him. "Take a wife," he had said at first weekly, now almost daily. "Raise children. Do you want to be alone the rest of your life?"

Lappidoth had simply shrugged or found some way to put him off. The woman who had captured his imagination

was too good for such as he. Beautiful, bold, fiery Deborah could have her pick of men in this town, and surely by now her father had secured her betrothal. Though Lappidoth's aunt would have spread such gossip to him quickly if his assumptions were true.

Perhaps spending his life alone was not such a bad prospect. At least then he would not feel the need to fear for his beloved's safety. He would not be guilty of helplessly watching her pain. He stopped several paces from the well, shoving the relentless thoughts aside. The past was past and there was nothing to be done about it. His uncle was right. He should find some nice woman and settle her in his home—a home he must begin to build if he expected to fill it with a wife and children.

He looked toward the well where the women had begun to gather. Surely there was an available virgin among the group. But then—there she stood, so close he could shorten the distance between them in a few easy strides. *Deborah*. His heart beat faster at the way her name sang in his thoughts. She stood tall and proud, a jar on her shoulder, beside a donkey heavy-laden with water skins. Her long dark hair blew like a wild thing, barely kept in place beneath a fiery golden-orange headscarf. Laughter spilled from her pink lips at something her friend or a cousin said, and when she turned toward him ever so slightly, he caught the shining brilliance of the rising sun reflected in her dark eyes.

His heart skipped its racing beat.

Ask for her. Ask Yuval to speak for you.

He couldn't. How could he possibly? He turned away, the sudden thought so unnerving he forgot all about the need for water until he was halfway home and had to turn back to the

well once more. Foolish man to think such thoughts. She was Deborah. Favored only daughter of one of the village elders. Outspoken at times. He had heard her grand opinions at the wine treadings while she laughed with a male cousin she seemed to favor—and put often in his place. He had nearly smiled at the chagrined look on her cousin’s face at that last gathering, until he recalled that at least that man could speak with her. Lappidoth had never been able to muster the courage to draw close, let alone say a word.

Had her cousin already asked for her hand? *You will not know if you do not ask.* Then he would not know! He chided himself as he returned to the well to find it blessedly and yet disappointingly empty of the female chatter. He quickly filled his skin and hurried back along the path he had come.

Ask for her. The thought seemed different as he passed the merchant stalls once more, and it shouted in his head when he passed her house and caught another glimpse of her handing the reins of the donkey to her brother.

He paused but a moment lest she see him and think him odd. “Deborah?”

Lappidoth startled at her mother’s voice calling from inside the house, and then other voices of her father and more brothers came from behind, the men obviously preparing to take a trip. He fairly ran back toward his uncle’s estate, slipped into his dim room, and sank onto his mat. He should continue his work until his aunt called him to the morning meal. The cool goatskin reminded him of his thirst, and he took a greedy drink. What kind of wife would Deborah be? A challenging one—of that he was certain.

Ask for her. Had God spoken to him? Or was the thought one borne of his silent desperation after living alone in this

place, far from home without the love of family, for too long? He sipped again, tied the string tight at the neck, and set the skin on the floor beside him.

He would never know if he didn't ask. He would be a fool to risk her rejection. But after sitting in darkness for too many breaths, he forced his weighted limbs to stand, opened the door once more, and strode to his uncle's house. He would give Yuval what he wanted—to seek a wife in Deborah and to silence the thoughts that begged him to ask.



Lappidoth folded his hands in front of him in a vain attempt to steady his nerves. How was it possible? And yet here he stood in Deborah's sitting room with his uncle and her father, who, though he carried a hint of anxiety to prepare to be off to Shiloh, had taken the time to hear them out and agreed to the match! The buzz of excited voices filled his ear as Deborah's mother and grandmother spoke in another room just off the sitting area, and Yuval reached into a pouch and pulled out a handful of gold to show Deborah's father he was quite willing to pay the bride-price.

"I am sure we can trust you to pay what is required," her father said, brushing away the precious metal as if it was of no consequence. Yet Lappidoth caught the quick accounting gleam in his eye, the one that showed both men that her father was more astute than he let on. "We must at least let the girl give her approval before we accept," he said, smiling amiably.

"Of course she will accept." Deborah's mother stepped into the room, hands on her hips, her round mouth pulled taut in a grim line. She whirled about and muttered something

about Deborah having few options, but Lappidoth decided he must have misunderstood the woman. Certainly Deborah had other choices. She was the most beautiful virgin in the entire village, probably in all of Israel. And those intelligent eyes! He could imagine getting lost in one look from her and, in quiet moments, holding deep conversations about the law he spent days copying letter by letter, carefully applying, leaving nothing out.

“She’s coming now,” her brother Shapur said, striding confidently from the courtyard into the house. “She filled the skins. We will be ready to leave tomorrow when you are, Father.” He left again before anyone could speak.

The house grew suddenly still, and Lappidoth’s palms moistened where he clenched them. He released both hands and rubbed them along the sides of his best robe. Deborah’s mother came to stand in the arch between the two rooms, her grandmother’s head poking behind, while her father strode to the house’s main door.

Deborah’s light footsteps seemed loud in his ear as she entered the court, and she stopped abruptly at the sight of her father. Her eyes, so expressive when he’d seen her laughing with her cousin, held an almost wild glow now.

“Is something wrong, Abba? I’m sorry I’m late. It is hard to avoid the gossips at the well.” Her words were rushed, as though she had run the whole way. Her dark brows drew down, and a slight frown dipped the corners of her mouth. Lappidoth’s breath caught and held, and he could not take his eyes from her. What would he do if she refused him? But a daughter would not refuse her father’s choice.

Why are they giving her a choice? But he knew. The precedent had been set long ago by their matriarch Rebekah when

her mother and brother allowed her to choose whether to go with a stranger to marry a cousin she had not seen.

The thought tightened his middle into a hard knot. He stood rigid, barely glancing at Yuval, who seemed completely composed. But his uncle's outward peace did not ease Lappidoth's worry when he looked once more toward the door where Deborah stood staring at him.

"Nothing is wrong, my daughter," her father said, his voice gentle and cheerier than it had been moments before. "Everything is perfectly right." He touched Deborah's shoulder. She flinched, a strange reaction. Surely Lappidoth's presence had put her on edge. "We have an offer of marriage from this young man, Lappidoth, and his uncle Yuval. You remember Lappidoth, come to us from Zebulun when his family was killed in a Canaanite raid?"

Lappidoth studied Deborah's gaze, saw a myriad of questions replace the original wild look. Her mouth tightened, much like her mother's had done moments before, and he felt suddenly at a loss for breath.

"Yes, I remember, Abba." She looked at her father then, and her expression changed to one of uncertainty, even pleading.

"They have more than enough for the bride-price," her father said, as if to reassure her that he would be well compensated. "And they have promised you many gifts." As if she would be appeased with material possessions. But wasn't that the way things were done?

And yet, Lappidoth wanted more. He wanted her to look at him the way he longed to gaze at her. He wanted her to smile into his eyes. Surely, once they were wed and she got to know him, he could coax these things from her.

“But what of Amichai?” Her voice had dropped in pitch, but Lappidoth did not miss the question.

Her father released a slow breath. “Lappidoth is here and his uncle and I have made the agreement, my daughter. You need say no more.” He turned from her then and faced both Lappidoth and Yuval. “We agree,” he said, louder than he had spoken moments before.

Lappidoth caught Deborah’s sharp intake of breath. But she did not speak again, and after an awkward pause, her father and his uncle exchanged the kiss of greeting, Yuval paid the bride-price, and Deborah was quickly surrounded by her squealing womenfolk.

Lappidoth followed his uncle through the door. The wedding would take place in six months, as soon as Lappidoth could build a house and call for her.

But legally, she was his. Yuval slapped him on the shoulder and made some disparaging comment about it being time he acted like a man, then walked ahead of Lappidoth, hurrying to make his own preparations to join some of the village men for the trip to Shiloh.



Deborah awoke three days later with a start, heart racing, beads of sweat dripping down her face. She sat up. Where was she? She looked about, frantic to see her surroundings in the predawn darkness. She never slept well when Abba was away, especially when her brothers accompanied him. Her mind whirled, searching for a place to land, until at last she recalled her recent rushed betrothal. Why had Abba thought it necessary to settle the matter so quickly? Why ask her opinion and then not allow her to give it?

A sick feeling settled within her. How could she possibly marry Lappidoth? He was tall and awkward, too quiet, and he lacked confidence and the qualities she respected in a man—though she could admit he was not without a few handsome traits in that straight nose and those vivid dark eyes. Still, she had wanted Amichai. A moan escaped and she curled onto her side, longing to sink again into blessed sleep.

A loud wail pierced the air, jolting her from her trek toward self-pity. What was that? She tilted her head, this time aware of distant screaming.

“Deborah!” The voices drew closer, snapping her attention, and moments later her mother rushed into the room. “Come at once! Get dressed. Hurry!” Her mother’s normally high-pitched voice was louder than usual.

Deborah jumped up, snatched her tunic and robe, and ran barefoot as she tied the belt at her waist, completely forgetting her headscarf. “What is it?” The commotion was coming from the city gate. Women and children lined the streets, and the sounds of mourners filled the predawn air.

Her grandmother appeared at her side. “Come, child. I want to see, and I need your strength.” The old woman clutched Deborah’s arm, her grip tight, and the two hurried toward the gate. There they found her mother weeping and wailing, kneeling in the dirt over the prone body of . . .

“Abba?” Deborah tugged her grandmother forward and fell to her knees beside her father’s broken body. Her throat clogged, and she found it difficult to swallow.

“Shapur!” Her sister-in-law’s wail pierced Deborah’s ears, and she turned to see not only her father but her three brothers and several men from the village—all men who had taken the journey to Shiloh, including Lappidoth’s uncle—dead.

Deborah felt the release of her grandmother's hand as the old woman sank to the dirt, her keening carrying with that of the other women. Deborah stilled at the sight, staring at her father's bloodied face. She stood slowly, like an aged woman, and walked down the row of men, counting and trying to recognize each face.

"Deborah?" Lappidoth's voice cut through her haze.

"There are twenty-three," she said. It was a normal thing to say, wasn't it? She moved among her brothers and stood over each one without answering Lappidoth or even looking his way.

He caught up with her and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Come with me. Let the women prepare them for burial."

"We will never find enough biers or places to put them in the caves." Her voice matched the flat, lifeless feeling in her gut.

"We will find a way."

She looked at him then. "Why did you not go with them?" He was a scribe. Why had he stayed behind when so many men had gone up to worship?

"I could not leave my aunt, and my uncle did not allow it."

"But you are a man with a mind of your own. Surely you could have made the decision for yourself."

"Would you have preferred to find me here?" He pointed to the bodies even as he grasped her shoulder and turned her away.

"No." Her voice lowered and her cheeks heated. He was her husband. How strange that sounded in her mind. She could not wish him thus. But she could not look at him again. Better to have her father than him. For she had hoped to talk her father out of the agreement and still give her to Amichai.

There was no hope of such a thing now.

“There is no need to wait six months,” she said without thinking. Surely he would think it himself. “That is why you are here with me, is it not?” How bold she was. Her mother was right. She was too outspoken for her own good.

“I came to help,” he said, his tone holding neither rebuke nor censure. “But yes, it would seem prudent if we wed as soon as the time of mourning is over in order for me to care for you and your mother and grandmother. Unless you wish to wait.”

How easily he changed his mind. Infuriating! But she nodded, for no words would come past the sudden lump in her throat.

This was not real. This carnage and wailing going on around her was just one of her many visions or dreams. She would awaken and find all was right with her world.

But a week later, after the bodies of her father and brothers lay buried in the cave, she quietly entered the bridal tent and married Lappidoth.



TEN YEARS LATER
1116 BC

Deborah stood on the rise above the well, looking toward the forests that circled their village on three sides. A hill banked them on the fourth, neatly hemming them in. Except for the fields that stretched from their town walls to the edge of the trees, a man would have to walk a great length and to a great height to find them here. And yet, even here Deborah knew it was only by God's mercy that Canaan's forces and their commander, Sisera, had not discovered them.

How long, Adonai? The oppression of her people had been sporadic in the days when Lappidoth's family and her father and brothers had been killed. But the strength of Canaan had grown.

She glanced at her sons, Lavi and Elijah, chasing each other in the grasses, battling with sticks as though they were swords.

The smile she showed at their innocent play vanished when she heard Lavi shout, “I’m going to kill you, Sisera!”

Elior, almost ten, stopped short. “I’m not Sisera. It’s your turn to be him.”

An argument ensued, one Deborah had heard far too often. She placed a hand over the growing babe within her. *Be a girl.* At least with a daughter she would not have to fear losing her to a battle against a force they could not defeat. Women did not go to war. A girl could stay safe in her home. *With me,* she thought, knowing how selfish that seemed. But the longing would not abate.

“Come, boys,” she called to her bickering sons. “It is time to do your chores.” She glanced behind her, lifted the water jug to her head, and strode down the hill toward the gate. Moans and complaints followed her, but both boys were quick to obey.

“Why can’t we go to the fields with Abba? He’s not far.” Lavi’s lower lip stuck out in a familiar pout. At seven he had a way of wrapping his desires into words she found hard to resist. But resist she did.

“No,” she said in a tone that brooked no argument. To let them out of her sight . . . They were all she had. So she had taught them to obey her without question, something even their father seemed incapable of making them do. But she would not be manipulated, even for the sake of love.

The boys ran ahead of her and reached the gate before she could get there. Good. Time alone was a rare and blessed thing since her marriage. When had she grown so weary? Where had the spirit of the young girl gone, the one who had heard the voice of God and sang to Him as she walked along the way?

The babe moved beneath her hand, a familiar feeling from this active unborn child. “You are not going to give me a moment’s peace, are you, little one?” But the feeling of coming birth did hold an appeal nothing else could equal. How was it possible to love her offspring more than the man who had given her the chance to be the mother every woman longed to be?

If Lappidoth would just stand up for himself now and then. Speak his mind. Stop always giving in to their children’s every whim, even her every wish. Her cousins would laugh her out of the village if they could hear such thoughts. But what woman didn’t want a man of solid strength?

She paused as the gate drew near, glancing up at the tower where her uncle and some of the older men sat debating and settling legal matters for those who needed them. The men were nearly ancient, and sometimes she wondered if they even heard half of what the people asked of them, but there was no one else in the village to take up such a task. Certainly not Lappidoth, despite his knowledge of the law. He was too busy farming their land and doing scribal work for those who could not read or write.

The sound of whistling came from behind her, and she turned. She had taken too much time at the well, for there strode Lappidoth, his thin frame making her feel as though she had failed to feed him well all these years.

“There you are,” he said, smiling down at her as he approached.

“You are early.” She glanced at the sky. “The meal won’t be ready for some time. I did not expect you yet.”

He shrugged. “It is of no consequence. I have a letter to craft for one of the elders.”

She nodded, and he fell into step with her. Always the

amiable one. Never complaining. Sometimes she wished he would complain just to give her a reason to argue with him!

“I was thinking,” he said as they passed by the guards and the houses of their neighbors toward their home near the end of the main street. “Would you like me to teach you to read the law and to write the letters?”

She stopped so abruptly the water jar nearly slid from her head. She steadied it with a shaky hand and stared at him. “Why would you do that? I will have no time for such a thing when the baby comes.” She barely had time now, but oh, how desire stirred within her breast at the very thought!

“I would teach you because I thought you would find pleasure in the knowledge.” He gazed down at her, his dark eyes holding hers in that tender look he gave her when she knew she least deserved it. “You are an intelligent woman, Deborah. And God speaks to you in the dreams at night. I think He would be pleased to have you learn the law for yourself.”

She swallowed, suddenly undone by such kindness. She had never told him of the vision she’d had the day her father sealed her betrothal. Yet he believed her dreams came from God. Why did he have such faith in her? Why was he so good to her when she sometimes barely tolerated him? “I will have no time,” she said again.

“When the children are asleep, you can set aside other chores and I will teach you.”

“Then who will spin the cloth for the clothes to put on our backs?”

“I will hire a maidservant for you.”

She searched his kind face. Saw the hint of a smile tip the edges of his beard. “We can afford such a thing?”

He nodded and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “We

will make a way, beloved. Now say yes to my offer and let us go home.”

Now suddenly he was bold? But the slightest hint of respect for him surfaced as she slowly nodded. “Yes,” she whispered, afraid if she spoke too loudly she might risk revealing the sudden emotion filling her. “Thank you.”

He slipped her hand in his and walked with her the rest of the way home.



A week later, Deborah heard the loud shouts of the men at the city gate, carrying to her on the way home from the well. If they didn't learn to hold their tongues, they would give away their village's hidden place. She glanced up, catching sight of her uncle Chayim standing toe to toe with one of his brothers. A sigh and swift surge of irritation filled her.

“Go and wait for me near the gate,” she said to Elior and Lavi, “but do not go beyond the walls without me.”

They ran off, fairly eager to play in the side room where unwanted visitors or those who would be questioned were held. Her sons loved to pretend they were prisoners when the room was empty, a choice of play that often left Deborah more worried than she should rightly feel.

The voices grew louder, interrupting her last glimpse of her sons entering the room. Her irritation mounted as she climbed the steps to the area where the men met above the gates. They abruptly quieted at the sight of her.

“Deborah, whatever are you doing here, and in your condition?” Her uncle's thin brows narrowed, his concern for her welfare comforting, though it did not ease her worries. Did the man have no sense?

“Uncle Chayim, you must keep your voice down,” she said, her gaze stern. She glanced from this man who could have given his son Amichai to her to wed, to his younger brother who seemed ready to continue the argument. “God has graciously protected us from Sisera until now, but if you do not keep your speech to a normal tone, you will awaken the entire forest and anyone who might be spying within it.”

Her uncle nodded, his smile too assuring. “Of course, my dear child. You are right, as always.”

Deborah walked to the parapet and looked down on the fields and forest below. The babe kicked harder than usual, and sudden pain in her back caused her to grip the edge until her knuckles whitened. She drew a sharp breath.

“Are you all right, my child?” Uncle Chayim drew close and placed a hand on her arm. “Shall I send for Ilana to help you?” He spoke of Amichai’s wife and distant cousin to Deborah, who had recently birthed a son, Shet, but who was also a woman trained in the art of midwifery. She had replaced Deborah’s mother as the town’s midwife soon after her mother rested in Sheol.

Deborah rubbed her back, longing in that moment for a sister or a different female cousin on which to rely. Ilana was not her favorite person, but there were few other choices.

“Yes, send for her.” Deborah made her way slowly to the stairs, Uncle Chayim walking with her, unwilling to release his grip on her arm. “And send Elijah and Lavi home.” She stopped short as another pain ripped through her. This child would not wait long to make his or her entrance into the world. “And send for Lappidoth.” He should be near, just in case . . . She did not finish the thought. She would live through this. She would.



Hours later, much longer than Deborah first expected, the cry of a newborn filled the house. “A girl!” Ilana said, the gleam of triumph in her eyes. “With two sons already, how blessed you are, Deborah.”

Deborah took the baby from the woman’s arms and held her close while Ilana and another woman from the village brought in fresh bedding and settled Deborah among the soft cushions. She watched Ilana work, chiding herself for feeling curt and cross with this cousin. It was only right for Amichai to marry once she and Lappidoth had wed. What did she expect of him? To pine away after her or wait until some distant day when she may have become a widow?

A shudder swept through her, along with the familiar distant ache that seemed to come every time she thought of Amichai’s inaction. Such thoughts were foolish and it did no good to think them.

The mewling sounds of her new daughter drew her attention to the perfect child in her arms. She guided the babe to her breast and closed her eyes. How familiar and sweet the joy of a nursing babe. And suddenly the ordeal of birth brought a wave of exhaustion over her.

“What will you name her?” Lappidoth’s quiet words invaded her sleepy thoughts, but she looked at him and smiled just the same.

“Talya,” she said, knowing he would not suggest any other name he might prefer. He had allowed her to name their sons without a single protest, as though he found such decisions impossible to make. Like all of the rest of the decisions they had faced in their marriage.

“It is a beautiful name.” He lifted the blanket to peek at his daughter. “For a beautiful daughter.” His smile brought out the handsome qualities in his face, and light twinkled in his eyes. He touched Deborah’s cheek. “Thank you.”

She nodded but said nothing.

“I will let you rest.” He stood, his head nearly touching the ceiling in this room they normally shared. But he would sleep elsewhere until she could complete her sixty-six days of purification, a full twenty-six days more than when she had borne her boys. The thought did not displease her as she knew it should. What kind of a wife wanted time away from her husband? If she had married Amichai, would she have felt the same?

But the question held no worth, for what was done was done. God must have had a reason that she was forced to marry so quickly and to a man she barely knew. Even now, after ten years together, she did not really know him. He was elusive, wrapped in his work either in the fields or at the scribal table. His attempts to discuss the law had always ended in Deborah feeling like she had won an argument with him, which made her feel worse than before the discussion began. Shouldn’t a wife respect and obey her husband? Why must she always feel the need to prove that her opinion had value to the one person who seemed to value her above all?

And still she resisted him. Did he know it? Surely he sensed her reticence.

At least he was kind to her. And if she judged honestly, she sensed he might actually love her. She kissed Talya’s dark head, wishing with all of her heart that she felt the same.



Sixty-six days flew faster than Deborah expected they could, but between caring for Talya and her boys, and even with the help of the maid Lappidoth had provided, she'd had little time to sit with him to study the letters of the law or make more than a cursory attempt to read them. "I'm too tired tonight," she'd said on many occasions, and in truth, she was. She ached for something she could not define and missed something she could not see. Why was she not satisfied with her role as wife and mother? What more was a woman to do in Israel?

The road to Shiloh where they would normally be expected to offer a sacrifice for her purification was too dangerous to travel. "How then will we keep the law?" she asked Lappidoth one evening when the day had come when they should make the trip.

"I am a Levite. Though it isn't ideal, we will build an altar here and offer a lamb upon it. Pray that Adonai accepts us and forgives us for being unable to come to His tabernacle." Lappidoth looked at her, his smile serious. "I have already begun to search for the uncut stones for the altar."

"I am sure you will follow the law as best you can." Deborah sank onto one of the cushions in the sitting room, Talya in her arms. "So you yourself will pronounce me clean?"

"Does another priest or Levite reside within this village?" He raised a brow, but his question seemed sincere.

"No. Only the elders, but they are not Levites. Are you sure we cannot try to make it to Shiloh?" The desire to travel there had not been with her since that day her father and brothers and other men had gone up to a festival and been murdered by Canaanites, in what appeared to be a random violent act. But that was before Sisera took charge as their commander,

before he had acquired iron chariots to terrorize her people. Still, shouldn't they obey the law despite the risk?

"We did not go up for Elior or Lavi. I do not think God has been displeased with us for that, do you?" He came and knelt beside her, placing his large but gentle hand on her knee. "Trust me, beloved. I am doing the best I can to keep you safe."

She gave a slight nod. "I know." She felt his eyes on her as she nursed Talya, and one glimpse told her his desire was for her.

"How beautiful you are, my sister, my bride," he said against her ear.

Her face grew warm, the words familiar, part of a song he used to sing to her.

"Thank you, my lord." She accepted his kiss above the baby's head. "When will we be ready for the sacrifice?" For she could not deny him, no matter how ambivalent her feelings might be.

"Tomorrow." He stood then. "I will go now and finish building it. Elior and Lavi can help me."

She watched them go, a man and his sons. A surge of pride surfaced. This was her family. Whether the one she would have chosen or not, they were still hers. And she would do all in her power to protect them, and to respect the man who loved her in spite of herself.



Dawn broke through the latticed windows in her room, the room that Lappidath would share with her again this night. She glanced about at the untidy conditions and called the maid. "While we are at the sacrifice, I want you to air out this room and put everything neatly in order."

“Yes, my lady,” the woman said, quickly setting to work. That everyone obeyed her still seemed strange to Deborah. Her mother and grandmother had been the ones who commanded and gave orders, not her. No one had listened to her in her youth. But she was the mistress of the house now, and her mother and grandmother had not lived long after the loss of her father and brothers.

The thought still pained her, but Deborah shoved the memories aside as she hurried to dress and wrapped Talya in a blanket for the walk to the altar in the clearing just outside the city gates. Her family, aunts, uncles, cousins, and their children joined in the solemn procession. Normally, she and Lappidoth would have traveled to Shiloh alone with their children, not half the town, but with the threat of terror on every side, the people needed distractions, and this sacrifice would remind them all of their need of a deliverer.

Forgive me, Adonai. She knew this sacrifice was meant to atone for any sin she had committed during her pregnancy and giving birth, any law she may have broken during the time of her outflowing. Why birth itself needed atonement, she did not quite understand, but perhaps it came from the father passing his sin through her on to their child. She did not hold the responsibility alone.

The gate drew near now, and she made her way up a slight incline to where a perfectly built altar stood. A lamb without blemish was tied to a nearby tree, bleating softly. Deborah handed Talya to Ilana and knelt at the lamb’s side, burying her face into its neck, unable to stop the tears. *Why must it suffer on my account?*

Lappidoth knelt beside her and placed one hand on the lamb, the other on her shoulder. Neither spoke, and even the

crowd waited in silence. At last Lappidoth stood, released her fingers from gripping the lamb's wool, untied the animal from the tree, and led it to the place of slaughter. In one swift motion, he slit its throat. Elijah caught the blood in a basin, as he had been taught, while Deborah knelt in the grass, weeping.



Lappidoth heard his wife's cries, their soft sorrow gripping his heart. How small she seemed where he glimpsed her in the dirt. He hefted the lamb's broken body onto the altar and lit the fire, its smoke rising to the heavens.

Oh Adonai, send us a deliverer.

How often had they both prayed thus? Surely God had a plan for Deborah to fulfill in freeing Israel. Somehow he knew it deep in his heart where he discerned truth. Why could she not see it, despite his efforts to teach her? Despite her dreams?

The breeze blew the smoke upward, but moments later the fire flamed higher than the smoke, rising, rising, swirling above their heads until Lappidoth feared it would catch hold of the trees. He quickly glanced at his sons and then at the crowd, whose wide eyes told him they saw the same. He left the altar to join Deborah.

He found her on her knees, bewildered, looking about. Darkness fell around them except for the fire that burned bright from the altar.

"Is someone there?" Deborah called out.

Did she see something they could not?

"Who's there? Where is everyone? Lappidoth?"

The fire leapt from the altar and swirled about her, engulfing her.

A scream burst from within him. “Deborah!” The crowd fell to their knees, and a heavy fear forced him to do the same.



A bright light invaded the space around her, swirling, warm, strange . . . comforting. The light shone even beneath her closed eyes, and in a moment she was no longer kneeling in the grass before the altar but standing on a mountain surrounded by the men and women of Israel, all bowed with their faces to the earth.

Adonai Elohim, forgive us. Their cries pierced her, a blade to her soul, bringing the sting of shame, remorse. *Forgive me.* Her knees gave way and she sank to the earth again, tasting dirt. *Forgive us.* The words came from the tongues of the men and women of tribes from Dan to Beersheba. And in a blinding moment, she saw all the oppression of the Canaanites flash in her mind’s eye. The people were weeping and crying out to God for relief, for deliverance.

Send us a deliverer, a redeemer, Lord God.

The prayer moved past the people and wedged itself like fire in her soul. And then the vision faded and the leaves waved above her head, and Lappidoth, the altar, and the people of her town on their knees came into view. Deborah stood, shaking, afraid to breathe, but did so for the air that had been sucked from her lungs in that fleeting moment.

What had she witnessed? Was she ill? Her heart pounded as she staggered toward Ilana, who knelt, shaking, as Deborah took Talya into her trembling arms.

“What did you see?” Lappidoth was suddenly at her side and grasped her elbow. The crowd of men and women rose

and quickly surrounded her. “Tell me, beloved, for we know God has spoken to you.”

His words brought the vision into clearer focus, and words grew heavy on Deborah’s tongue. “We must pray,” she said at last, addressing the crowd. “Each one of us must seek Adonai’s help and cry out to Him to free us from Sisera, from Jabin, our tormentors.”

Silence descended as though the darkness had returned. She caught the curious glances of her sons and the quizzical brow of Lappidoth.

“And with our praying, we must repent,” she added. Could they not see the urgency? “All of us—our neighbors, our kinsmen—we will not find relief until we put away the foreign gods from among us.”

The silence deepened as men and women exchanged guilty looks. She felt Lavi’s touch on her arm, caught the awe in his gaze. She looked around at these familiar faces, her own face heating as though someone had scorched her. “You know I speak the truth.” She set her jaw, her tone pleading. “Our men have taken Canaanite wives and given their daughters to Canaanite men. Is it any wonder that our God has sold us into such bondage to these people? We are no better off than we were in Egypt, for we have sinned against the Lord.”

She released a deep sigh and held Talya closer, a shield against their disapproval. They must understand. She could not bear it if her family did not support the vision.

Throats cleared in the prevailing silence.

All eyes looked to her. Deborah swallowed the disquiet. “I saw a vision of our people today, every tribe from Dan to Beersheba gathered on a mountain, begging God for a deliverer.”

“If we are to pray, we must send messages to the rest of the villages to do the same,” Lappidoth said.

Suddenly everyone began to speak at once, and Deborah could not take the noise, this onslaught of words. She slipped away with Talya, making the excuse of the need to nurse her, her heart thumping with fear.

Who am I that You should entrust me with such a vision? I am a simple woman, a mother of small children. What do You want of me?

Send us a deliverer, the people in the vision had said.

She entered her courtyard and sank onto a low stone bench, but one glance told her Lappidoth and her boys had followed. Thankfully, blissfully, they were alone. The boys went into the house as Lappidoth knelt beside her.

“God has called you to lead us, beloved. The men all agreed that the vision gives you the right to speak for us, to pray to God for us. You are a prophetess, Deborah.”

“I am a wife and a mother. Nothing more.”

He shook his head, his hand softly cupping her cheek. A stirring filled her at his touch, and suddenly she wanted to be simply what she had said. A wife to him in a truer way than she had been all these years, and a mother to their three children.

“You are much more, beloved, though it almost pains me to share you. I dare not go against the will of our God.” He took her hand in his and stroked Talya’s head with the other. “The men will listen to you because you hear the voice of God, Deborah. You are called out for such a time as this, to help us during this awful oppression. God is going to use you, perhaps both of us, to bring about that deliverance.”

She shook her head even as tears slipped down her cheeks. “I cannot. I am a simple woman with fanciful dreams.”

“Who used to sing to the Lord songs that rivaled the trill of the birds, a woman who has lost too much joy since we wed.” He traced a line along her jaw. “You lost much when you lost your family, beloved. But I am here to tell you that we saw the fire of God surround you. God gave you that vision because He takes delight in you, and you must heed it.”

I cannot. But she did not say the words, for she could not look into those dark intelligent eyes and deny him what he believed to be true.

Forgive me, Elohim. Surely I am a woman of unclean lips, a woman who speaks words without thought. I am not a man to lead my family, worse yet Your people.

She turned to face the bright sky, caught by the brilliance of the sun overhead. Music swirled in and around her, and a voice, soft as a whisper, filled her ear.

Hear My words: if there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make Myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream.

In a heartbeat, she knew Lappidoth was right. The vision had truly come to her from the Lord. “If I am to be God’s prophet,” she said softly, “I think it is time I let you teach me to read.”