

# Noah's Wife

# Prologue

## 5521 BCE

My name, Na'amah, means pleasant or beautiful. I am not always pleasant, but I am beautiful. Perhaps that is why I am trundled atop this beast like a roll of hides for market and surrounded by grim-faced men.

If my captors had bothered to ask me, I would have told them that their prize is of questionable value because my mind is damaged. But they did not, and I lie draped, belly down, across the back of an auroch, a large black ox with an eel stripe that runs down his spine and a stench worse than a rutting goat. My mouth is parched and swollen with dried blood, and every step the animal takes sends a jolt of pain into my chest. Snatches of ground appear between the cloven hooves—a succession of earth, grass, and rock obscured by the dark tangle of my hair—all I have to measure the growing distance from the life I have known.

Savta, my grandmother, believes a narrow birth passage pinched my head. A skilled midwife, she convinced the Elders that my disfigurement would right itself, and they allowed me to live. Tubal-Cain, my brother, would prefer it otherwise. He claims I tore our mother from inside and killed her. I did not intend to do such a thing, but if I did it, we are even, since she squeezed my head. Well, perhaps not even, as she is dead, and I am not.

The auroch stumbles and I grunt from the jerk. The tall man with fiery hair who leads the auroch looks back at me. My village sees many traders, so the strangeness of these men's dress and speech means they are from a distant land. Where are they taking me?

As much as I hate the days, I dread the nights. The tall man pulls me off when it becomes too dark to travel, and I can barely stand. It is a chance for food and water, but I am

fifteen summers, and I know the intent of men who steal a woman. So far, they have not tried, perhaps because I smell like the auroch, but when they do, I will fight. I am small, but my teeth are strong and my legs have climbed the hills since I was very young. *My hills. How I miss my hills.*

To distract me from the aches in my body and my heart, I will put together the words of my story. I remember everything. Memories appear as images in my mind. Each word-sound I hear has its own color and shape and fits together with the others in patterns that I can recall as easily as I can name every sheep on my hillside.

This story will be truth. I speak only truth, unwise as it may be, since lies distress me. And it will be for my own ears, as my words and manner seem odd to other people. I am more comfortable with animals, who do not expect me to be any way than the way I am.

I will start with the day three summers ago when Savta told me I had a secret.

Part I  
Chapter One  
5524 BCE

It was my twelfth summer, and Savta and I sought refuge from the sun in my father's house, which sat on the outer edge of the village, near Deer River. We tied the door skins aside for the breeze. The sounds I knew so well were a comforting presence around me—the brown patter of children's bare feet on ground worn free of grass, women's silvery chatter as they prepared food or sang to the Goddess, the *chip-chip* of stone knapping stone to shape it. I heard those things even through the plaster-mud walls. My hearing was very good.

Savta coaxed thread from the pile of soft, cleaned wool, while I gnawed my lower lip at my clumsy sewing, frustrated with the thin copper needle that seemed determined to prick my fingers. We had dug out cool places to sit in the floor of the house, and the smell of earth mingled with the sweet odor of cedar chips soaking in heated oil. The smell soothed me, and I let my mind float to my favorite place on the hills where I could see Deer River twisting like thread to the north, into the Black Lake. Behind me, clustered mountains rose into the sky, their slopes painted the eternal green of conifers, their tops capped white like old women. Below, grey-brown sheep speckled the grazing slopes.

From my perch, I could watch the Black Lake's moods. Winter winds stirred her surface with such violence that she swallowed any boatman foolish enough to try and fish. That was why her name was "Black," but in summer, she was smooth enough to catch the sun when he melted into her.

"What are you seeing?" Savta asked me. She knew that

sometimes I saw images of what I was thinking, and then it took me longer to speak, because I had to translate what I saw into words. Often, this was good, because there were things in my mind that I should not reveal, even to Savta.

“My sheep,” I said, as though they belonged to me.

In the distance, a dog barked. The rusty sound identified her as Dawn, the aging bitch whose puppies had supplied our tribe with so many good shepherd dogs, she now wandered the village, fed anywhere she decided to linger. Dawn saved her voice for important announcements, usually a stranger’s arrival or perhaps returning hunters.

Annoyed at my needle’s obstinacy, I dropped the sewing into my lap. “Why do I have to learn spinning and cooking? I am too clumsy. I am much better at herding.”

“Beauty may tempt a man,” Savta said predictably, “but a full stomach and warm blankets keep him. Grown women do not watch sheep. When your blood flows, you must marry and start a family.”

This was not the first time I had heard these words. I pouted. “If my father and brother are typical of men, I prefer the sheep as company.”

Savta snorted.

“Besides, I practice with my sling almost every day, and Yanner says I have ears as good as the dogs, and he would take me hunting if Hunter Clan did not forbid it.”

Yanner was my only friend. We were born two days apart. On evening watches, we shared shepherd duties. Like me, he was beautiful, but his eyes were green as spring grass and his hair the color of honey held to the sun.

“I like Yanner,” I said. “Maybe I will marry him. He would let me watch sheep. His mother can make blankets and cook.” Before Savta could object, I added, “I will take my turn in the wheat and barley fields too, of course.”

“It’s not for me to say who you will marry,” Savta said, but her mouth pinched in a funny way that always made me think she was trying not to smile. Savta rarely smiled. She

said she had too much to do, caring for me, my brother, and father, but I think it was because she had lost all her children, my mother the last. I suddenly realized that she would have no other woman in the house when I married.

“Maybe I will not wed Yanner,” I said. “Maybe I will just stay with you.”

Her mouth softened. “You are a special girl, Na’amah.” The phrase had sung in my ears so often, it calmed me, a counter to Tubal’s constant taunts.

I asked my ritual response. “How am I special, Savta?”

This time she surprised me with her answer. “In a secret way. When your blood flows, I’ll explain, but you must never speak of it.”

“Why?”

“Always with the ‘why?’ I remember when you were a tiny bit of nothing, you toddled out into a storm to see how the butterflies dodged the raindrops.” She sighed, a peculiar swishing sound, because one side of her mouth did not work right. “For once, listen. If anyone learns, you’ll be thrown in the pit.”

I took a quick breath. Two moon-cycles ago, the Elders had stripped Nigel, the potter, and cast him into the deep hole in the center of the village. For days, he called and cried, but no one could speak to him or give him food or water, because he had broken tribal law by making a clay Father God image wrong. Elder Kahor claimed it resulted in a sickness that made a bear attack his hunters.

My heart beat a faster tempo. “Why would knowing my secret make the Elders pit me?”

She lowered the weighted stick that twisted the thread between her fingers, and considered me, the left side of her mouth drooping lower than it usually did. That meant she was either very sad or thinking hard.

“What wrong have I done?” I asked.

Her stern eyes softened. “Nothing, child. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Then why?”

A great sigh. Savta sighed a lot, as if a pain in her needed escape. “Do you know the story of First-Woman?” she asked me.

“I know the pieces I have heard on washday.” On washday, the women gathered in the river to wash clothing and to gossip. I did not like washday. People avoided me because I said things they did not expect.

“Our ancestors, First Woman and First Man, lived in the Land of Eden,” Savta said, her voice taking on the soft singsong of a Teller, “where mist rose to water the land, and the earth was lush with trees and fruit. Mother Goddess spoke to First Woman in a secret language that First Man could not understand, telling her where to find nuts and seeds and all the Earth’s bounty.”

“Is that why men had to hunt animals?” I asked. “I never heard that part.”

“Of course you haven’t. You’ve only heard the man side of the story.”

I loved stories, though many of them were not truth. People pretended they were, so sometimes I did too, but I had never seen Mother Goddess or Father God. I did not understand why. Even the wind, which was hard to see, carried leaves in its arms and tickled my ears to proclaim itself. The moon never said, *I am a manifestation of Mother Goddess*. It just hovered in the night sky. I did not say these things aloud, though it was difficult not to say what I was thinking. Speaking such thoughts would get me thrown into the pit. My mind might be damaged, but I was not stupid.

At that moment, I heard footsteps and raised my knuckle to my lips to warn Savta. My hearing was sharper than anyone I knew. Savta often said I heard too much. The footfalls belonged to Tubal. My older brother’s left foot hesitated a bit, a heritage from a snake’s bite when he was seven and stepped over a rotten log without looking at the other side. The deeper thud of his stride meant he carried

something heavy.

We worked in silence until Tubal entered the hut with a dead fawn draped over his shoulder.

He dropped it in a bloody heap before me. "Clean this, Ugly One," he said with barely a glance at me, striding to the oak barrel to dip his bowl for a draught of beer.

The glazed eyes of the young creature stared at me. A spear wound opened her flesh behind the front shoulder. The smell of blood mixed with the scent of cedar chips. A piece of her ear was torn, an old injury. I wondered if she had already escaped one predator only to fall to another, and if her mother mourned her loss.

"Well done, grandson," Savta said, "but there's no need to bring a carcass into the house. Hang it in the tree, please."

He took another drink and stared at me with displeasure, his normal habit. "Don't let Ugly One wander off and leave you with the work of dressing it, Savta."

My back stiffened with anger. Tubal used to trick me into leaving my chores, telling me I was supposed to be doing something else. I believed him. I was too young to understand lies, but finally Savta explained, and Tubal could not fool me again. So, I was not confused when Tubal called me "stupid" or "ugly." I knew he said lies to hurt me.

I was not ugly. When Savta combed my hair, she said it shone like the Black Lake on a moon-full night. She rubbed olive oil into my skin to keep it soft, and Savta always told me that I was not stupid; I was special. I did not speak for the first two summers of my life, even though I understood what people were saying. The rainbow of colors that the sounds made in my mind distracted me. Perhaps that was why Tubal thought I was stupid. At two summers, I started speaking in whole thoughts, so he should have known better.

Now that I was older, I knew what a lie was, and I could tell one if I wanted to, but I did not understand the rules for lying. For example, if a person interrupted what I

was doing and asked if she were interrupting, I was supposed to say “no,” even though she was. This rule, however, did not always apply. If I interrupted Savta, she told me so and scolded me. This was confusing, so things were simpler if I told truths. It was my habit, like walking the same path to the river to bathe. Changes made me uncomfortable.

I pressed my lips and pretended to study the tear I was mending. The needle's sharp prick brought a whimper to my lips and a bead of bright blood to my finger.

Shaking his head in a gesture that proclaimed my uselessness louder than any comment, Tubal grasped the fawn's legs, swung it over his shoulders, and strode out.

When he was out of hearing, I sucked my finger and returned to our conversation to take my mind from the needle's bite and Tubal's scorn.

“What happened next in the story?” I asked Savta.

She lifted the stick and set it spinning again with a deft twist.

“First Man was jealous,” she said. “He bade First Woman speak to the serpent guarding the Tree, so he could overhear and learn the secret, thinking he could gain the ability to understand Mother Goddess' language.”

“Oh.” A strange thought that a man would be jealous of a woman. Women bear the pain of childbirth, the discomfort of moon times, and the feeding of babies who pull on their breasts. I did not look forward to any of those things.

“Because of love for First Man, First Woman did so,” Savta continued without further prompting, her nimble fingers twisting the strand into a fine, even thread. “But when she spoke to the Serpent of Wisdom, First Man did not learn Mother Goddess' language.” She paused. “What he learned was fear.

“So enraged was Father God that he cast them from the land and burned it, so they could not return. The earth in Eden is scorched and no man or beast can live on it.”

“That was mean,” I said.

Savta snorted. "The gods are the gods."

Her explanation was as difficult to understand as the gods themselves. I frowned, returning to the part that dealt with me. "So, if Father God and Mother Goddess meant for woman to have this secret, and I am a woman, why should I be pitted for it?"

"Oh child, you have much to learn. The man-story lays the blame of angering Father God on First Woman's back."

"But First Woman did it at First Man's bequest."

"That is our story, passed from First Woman to her daughters to her daughter's daughters. Man's story is that First Woman forced forbidden knowledge from the serpent and that angered Father God."

"How do we know which story is truth, man's story or woman's?" I asked.

Savta looked at me as if she wanted to open my head and pour sense into it. "You are chosen by Mother Goddess. How could you have her gift if her story wasn't true?"

I did not understand why Savta thought Mother Goddess chose me. I had no idea what this secret gift was. I had no unique knowledge of foraging or planting. I was good at watching sheep.

Savta reached over and arranged the wool shawl I was mending. "You must decide yourself where the truth lies but, if you value life, you will keep the secret of Mother Goddess's gift and woman's story. Revealing either could mean death."

I also did not understand why truth should bring punishment, but it seemed linked to Father God's anger at First Man seeking women's secrets or First Woman's willingness to share them.

Savta recognized my frown of confusion and said, "You will understand better when you are older, but if people knew, especially the men, they would fear you."

"Because I would be powerful?" I asked, thinking it would not be a bad thing to have Father afraid of me for a

change.

“Because they would fear you’d find the Serpent’s Tree again and bring the gods’ wrath upon us.”

That was not likely. The Tree was somewhere very far to the south in Eden, and why would I go to a land that was a scorched, barren desert? I did not even like to wander far from our village, as I was used to what things looked like here.

“The rest I will tell you when your blood flows and not before,” Savta said in dismissal, pulling the raw wool and twisting it with fingers that seem to know their task without guidance from her eyes or mind. I had to explain everything to my hands, and they still were clumsy.

## Chapter Two

My blood would not flow for several more summers, so I had to wait for Savta's promise to tell me why I was special, but I did not care because I met Bennu, a most unusual friend. It was early spring after my thirteenth summer.

The morning of that Market Day, I watched the other children in the fields just beyond the village playing that they were hunting wild horses. I did not understand the way they played, because they kept changing the rules. I knew from experience that they did not want me to join them. It made me unhappy when I did not know how things were supposed to go, especially when they did something silly or impossible, like having a horse run in a different direction from the herd. I had watched horses many times, and they always ran together.

The fields were bright with sunlight and a clear sky. The horse herd consisted of children and the pigs that rooted in the stubble of the wheat fields, not yet burned for planting. The pigs did not cooperate. They did not understand what they were supposed to do either.

Everyone stopped at mid-day to eat and bring water to the houses around the village square, the responsibility of all the children not on shepherd duty. Yanner helped with my portion, since I was small, and he liked me to see how strong he was. In return, I shared my lunch—bread and mashed chickpeas moistened with olive oil, garlic, and honey—my favorite treat.

Later that day, Savta called me in. "Go to Market. I need a bundle of this." She held up a dried herb sprig. She did not put it in the basket, because she knew I would remember which one. "Your father and Tubal are not back from the hunt, so bring home a fish for dinner and a jar of the yellow powder I use for healing salves."

I smiled. Father hated fish, so it was a treat for Savta and me. I placed a pouch made of fig leaves for the fish and two clay jars for the powder and herbs in the market basket. I always paid careful attention to what herbs Savta used and in what amounts. Perhaps because at four summers of age, I came near death when Tubal coaxed me into eating a handful of dried mushrooms that Savta thought she had kept out of reach. I was terribly sick for many days and probably lived only because of Savta's skill, and the fact that she forced from Tubal what he had done.

Yanner joined me on the way to Market. In spite of the heat, he wore a deerskin over his linen under-tunic to show his sincerity at seeking adoption into Hunter Clan. Enticed by the weapons displays, he took my arm and started to drag me toward one. When I hung back, he stopped. "Na'amah, you have that look on your face."

"What look?"

"The ox-stubborn one."

"I do not want to look at weapons."

"Come on, Na'amah, I need to see how other tribes shape their blades and whether they use antler bone or flint.

Yanner's father was a shepherd, but Yanner wanted nothing to do with guarding sheep. All the children took shifts watching the sheep, answering to the adult shepherds who made decisions about which rams to use for breeding and which to castrate. Yanner said my company on the hills was the only thing that kept him from dying of boredom.

"Fine," I replied. "When you are an adult of Hunter Clan, come visit me in the hills. That is where I will be."

"I've never heard of a grown woman becoming a shepherd."

"Yes, you have. You just did," I said. "You go look at weapons. I want to see what animals are here."

Yanner threw up his arms in disgust. Those of Hunter Clan were scornful of the tending of the earth or even herding, though they did not mind eating goat meat or lamb

or bread cakes, and they wore wool or linen beneath the animal skins that gave them status. They kept many of the old ways, except they worshiped only Father God. My own father was of Hunter Clan, as was my brother, which was a good thing, as it kept them away from the house for long periods. Father said it was important not to hunt big game near the settlement or we would not have the meat nearby in lean times.

“Fine,” Yanner said with a dark tone of voice that meant it was not fine. I was not confused because it was Yanner, and I had asked him enough times to understand it meant he was not happy, but accepted my decision.

We went our separate ways.

That day, like all Market Days, people brought goods to sell in the village center, a large, square area. They traded with sheep, goats, raw copper, and turquoise. I fingered the three brightly marked cowrie shells in my pouch. The shells came from the south near the Middle Salt Sea and our tribe accepted them for trade. It took many shells to equal the value of a ewe.

I went first to the west end of the square, to Mother Goddess' temple, where her tapestry hung, and where a little stone image of her watched from the wall's alcove. With some reluctance, I placed one of the cowrie shells next to her. Savta said they went to the Goddess, but I believed Elder Mariah took them on the Goddess' behalf.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Yanner had managed to temper his enthusiasm for looking at weapons long enough to leave an offering at Father God's temple, which presided on the square's east end, where the oil pot always burned.

The remaining sides of the central square housed workshops where artisans shaped pottery, stone, wood, or copper for tools or pots. They were all open so people could see the work and wares. Village houses, including my father's, formed the outer ring around the square. Beyond the

houses, Deer River meandered along its course into the Black Lake.

I stopped to speak with Aunt Adah. She was my father's first wife, so she was not really my aunt, but a wife-sister to my dead mother. She did not live with us. Father had put her out before I was born. Aunt Adah always had a smile for me.

"Greetings, Na'amah," she said, looking up from punching the first indentions into a ball of clay. She swiped at a lock of escaped hair with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of wet clay on her cheek.

"Greetings, Aunt Adah." My eyes lifted briefly to her face for courtesy and then down to the pot, watching her deft fingers shape the clay with the same familiarity as Savta spun wool into thread.

"Before you leave," she said, "I want you to take something to Savta." She nodded at a cup with a funny face on it. "If that doesn't make her smile, nothing will."

The cup made me smile. "I will remember."

She gestured toward the square. "Go on then. Have fun."

I turned and stepped into the marvelous smell of roasting mutton seasoned with garlic and leeks that permeated the air, masking the subtle tang of animal urine, dyes, and human sweat. Food, jewelry, pottery, and wools, both raw and dyed, lay on hides or woolen blankets throughout the center square. Strangers came on Market Day to buy the fine wools that were our tribe's pride.

The pit was covered and no one was in it screaming to get out, which made the day more pleasant. I could not ignore it, as others seemed to do. I also did not like the press and jostle of people or the loud market noises, which jumbled together in a confusion of images and colors, and I always made sure to stuff bits of sheep wool in my ears, which helped.

I did like the animals. Pheasants and ducks shifted and

squawked in wooden cages. Boar-pigs grunted, rooting for grubs in their enclosures and, of course, sheep and goats were everywhere, both to sell and to trade. Only rams and ewes, of course. The whole tribe owned the wethers—rams that the shepherds deemed unsuitable for breeding and castrated. Anyone who needed meat could slaughter a wether, but taking someone's ram or ewe earned the thief a life shortened in the pit.

The most interesting animal at the market was a large, beautiful bird like none I had ever seen. It was white like a snowy egret, but with a sweep of feathers behind its head, and eyes as dark as mine. When its owner was not looking, I stepped close to its cage, which was in a choice position near the large, flat stone the Elders stood on to make pronouncements.

When it stretched its wings, I could see that the feathers of one were clipped. Below the crinkly skin of its toes, the long curving nails of one foot grasped a half-eaten fruit. The bird tilted its head and looked right back at me. I was uncomfortable looking at people's faces; it made me anxious. I used to look aside, but learned that looking down was better. Men saw it as a demure gesture and women as submissive, and they treated me more as a normal person. Animals, however, keep their communication simple, so I did not mind looking directly at them.

After a moment, the bird dropped the food and sidled toward me on the cage floor, its talons splayed out for balance. I was not afraid, even though the large beak looked as if it could take a hunk of my flesh. Its mouth opened, exposing a thick tongue that looked like a person's. I leaned my face against the wooden bars.

With great care, the creature reached up and grasped an eyelash between its powerful upper and lower beak, gently scraping down the length of the lash. I do not know why I did not even flinch. Something about the way it moved told me it meant me no ill, but I jumped back at the owner's

shout behind me.

“Idiot! That bird’s got an ill temper. You want to lose those pretty long lashes?” He spoke awkwardly, as if his mouth and throat were not comfortable with the sounds of our language. He was a stranger, a foreigner.

“Is that bird for sale?” I asked, though I owned nothing to trade for it, and the two cowrie shells would hardly be enough for such a creature.

“You don’t want that bird,” another man commented before the stranger could answer. I did not need to look to recognize my cousin’s voice, which undulated like green hills. Jabel owned sheep and cattle that grazed on the hill behind mine.

“Yes I do,” I replied, wondering if Jabel would loan me a sheep to buy the bird. It was not likely.

“No, girl,” Jabel said, as if he did not know me, “a white animal like that is ill luck. White is the death color.”

I knew that, of course, but I did not like him saying it. “Everything dies. Why is that ill luck?”

Jabel shook his head and stroked his short black beard.

“Mind your own business!” the bird seller snapped at him. “This is a rare bird. It belonged to a chieftain of the River-People and came from a land more distant still, a dark place of jungles and people with skin the color of night. Very rare creature, this.”

“Yes?” Jabel replied with an arched eyebrow. “Why didn’t this chieftain keep it? Bet the bird bit him.” He laughed.

At that moment, a large rat scuttled at our feet, burrowing under the stack of cages and followed by several dogs in pursuit. Catching the scent of their prey, the lead dog dug wildly at the ground before the cages. Others jumped around. Even old Dawn had joined the chase, her tail wagging with excitement. I did not think she could see what she was after, but she could still smell.

When the dogs’ antics knocked over several cages,

including the white bird's, the stranger added to the confusion by waving his arms and shouting. He kicked at the dogs, just missing Dawn. One of the clay jars under my arm slipped from my grip and fell, knocking loose the peg that secured the white bird's cage before shattering on the ground.

Released, the bird took to the air, but the clipped wing forced it to trace awkward circles over us.

"See what you've done!" the stranger accused, railing at Jabel and me.

It did not seem fair that he placed the blame on our backs. Neither of us had caused the rat to hide there or the dogs to chase it and knock over the cages, so I paid no attention to him. My gaze remained on the white bird, hoping it would make it to freedom, despite its wing. I would not like to live in a cage, and imagined it would not either.

To my surprise, it gave a screech of frustration, dove toward us and landed on my shoulder. Strong talons dug into my flesh, but I tried not to move, amazed at such an exotic creature so close. The bird's wide sweeping tail brushed my back, almost as long as my hair.

In the same moment, I realized another man was looking at me. I do not know why, because many people were watching, and I was stunned that the bird had settled on my shoulder, but I felt the man's gaze and turned.

Blue eyes above a large, hooked nose and full lips—I saw all of that, including the scar along the ridge of his jawbone; the wild bramble of hair and beard; the rough weave of the sleeveless linen tunic; the worn ox hide wrapping his feet and calves; and the polished stone pendant hanging on a cord from his neck. I saw many more details, but Savta said it was distracting to relate everything I noticed.

It was distracting to notice everything.

The blue-eyed man was Noah, the boat-maker. I knew him more from people's talk than anything else. He lived

apart from the village. He approached without taking his gaze from me, or perhaps the bird on my shoulder held his attention. Closer, I saw the stone necklace was a piece of blue-green malachite, a charm that brought health to its wearer.

The seller grabbed my bird—that was how I thought of it, since it had chosen my shoulder of all the shoulders in the village center. It protested with a loud squawk and bit his hand as he stuffed it back into a cage, one even smaller than its original prison. I wrapped my arms around my elbows to deal with the rush of sorrow that filled me.

Swearing in a language I did not understand, the seller sucked on his wound and grabbed a strip of cloth to wrap his hand. “Cursed bird. If it hadn’t cost me so much, I’d give it away.”

Noah now stood near. He towered above me, but I did not give up my position near the cage. The stink of his body was strong enough to rise above the general odor of animals and men. I decided he lived alone. A wife would have made him bathe in the river.

“Why do you wrinkle your little nose?” he boomed.

I winced at the volume of his voice, and realized he was addressing me. “Because you smell bad,” I said, keeping my gaze on the bird, which was using its beak and talons to climb in endless circle over the ceiling and walls of its cramped cage.

There was a long moment of silence, and I sensed tension in Jabel and the bird seller, as though Noah might explode with anger. Finally, Noah broke the silence with a grunt and turned to the seller. “How much?”

The look in the seller’s eyes changed at once, the tense pucker at their edges smoothing. He smiled. “Well, I can offer you a bargain, I can.”

Conflicting emotions tumbled through me. What did the boat-maker want with this bird? Yet anything would be better than it staying with this man. Perhaps Noah would

build it a big cage, and I could visit and bring it treats. Birds ate bugs, seeds, and fruit. I could do that...if he would let me. I looked up at him and found, to my surprise, his gaze was still on me, not the seller, or the bird. His eyes were a piercing blue, yet it was not an unkindly look. I dropped my gaze to his feet, noticing the hides, though worn, were finely stitched. He turned his attention to the seller, who had not stopped relating the bird's praises, claiming it could do about everything, including talk.

"I will buy it," the boat-maker said, cutting off the monologue.

The seller nearly choked.

"At half the price you named," Noah continued. He placed in the man's hand a finely shaped obsidian spearhead that had cost the knapper a full day's work. "I'll bring you a she-goat tomorrow morning to add to this."

"But sir—" the man protested, "it has been an expense to bring the bird all this way, not to mention the exorbitant purchase price."

"Probably stole it," Jabel grumbled.

The seller flushed crimson. "Absolutely not, I—"

Noah shrugged and knelt on one knee to scratch behind Dawn's ears. "This is my final offer then. You can lug that cage and ill tempered bird around to other villages."

"Yes," Jabel drawled. "The people here, you will find, don't have resources to spend on a fancy bird that wouldn't make a meal in a pot."

The seller looked horrified, as did I. "Surely," he blurted, "you wouldn't consider cooking such a rare creature?"

"Wouldn't waste a stone on a white anything, if you asked me." Jabel gave Noah a wink that the seller couldn't see, but that made me lock my mouth. "Bad luck, such an animal."

"True," Noah said, rising to his feet and turning to leave. "I don't know what I was thinking."

“No!” the seller cried, grabbing Noah’s hand. “Sold. The bird’s yours and the cage with it.”

I blinked, recognizing the familiar scenario of negotiation, but worried about the bird’s future. Surely, Noah and Jabel had been jesting about the pot. I took people’s statements plainly, though I understood the concept of joking. I did not like jokes. They were like lies. I laughed when Savta tickled me or when I ran across the fields, because it was a joy to run or jump from a tree. I did not laugh when someone tripped another and he fell, as I had seen Tubal do to younger boys. I did not understand that kind of joke.

## Chapter Three

Three days later, after a dinner of goat stew and dates, we heard a rap on our door. Father grumbled in irritation. “Probably Batan’s wife again wanting to borrow salt. Tell her to buy her own.”

Savta was mending a linen tunic and indicated with a wave that I was to go to the door. I pulled it open, my mouth gaping at the sight of Noah filling the passageway. A fine wool blanket dyed in yellows covered his broad shoulders and a bulge at his side.

“A warm night to you,” he said politely.

I could not find the words to respond and settled for a nod, moving aside to allow him entry. He stepped in with a puff of cool, spring air that still bore the stench of smoke from the burned field stubble. That smell always meant several days of hard work in the fields, so a crop could be planted and take root before winds or rain stole away the rich soil and ash. It meant days away from my hills, and so the smell always made me downcast.

I stared at Noah stupidly before remembering that I held the door skins in my hand and dropped them.

My father rose at once. Savta started to put aside her yarn, but Noah put out a hand. “No, keep your seat. Don’t let my presence disturb your work.”

“Have you eaten?” she asked. “We have a full pot of stew.”

This was not true, but it did not confuse me, because I knew Savta was being courteous in implying we had plenty of food, so our guest would feel free to eat.

“My thanks, but my belly is full,” he said.

Her shoulders relaxed. “Very well, but at least something to drink? Barley beer?”

He nodded curtly. “That would be welcome.” He moved from one large foot to another, as if not sure what to

do with them. I noticed he smelled better.

“Na’amah,” Savta said, startling me out of my trance.

I brought it to him in our best mug, the only one without chips. Savta made fine beer. “Good,” he pronounced with a smack of tongue that put a satisfied smile on Savta’s weathered face. The slight droop at one end of her mouth made her rare smiles a slanted line.

It was only after awkward talk of boat making and the status of game that Noah finally made his way to the topic he had come to discuss—me.

“Lamach, of the tribe of First Man,” he said formally, looking only at my father, “I wish to make a request for your daughter, Na’amah.”

My heart sank to my knees. I knew I would marry at some point, but not yet! I did not wish to be trapped, subject to the whims of an old man, for Noah was at least twenty-five summers or more. As a married woman, I would have to give up my job as herder to care for a household. I loved the hills, loved how the sun nested in my hair; the wind whispered secrets in my ears; and the night sky dazzled me with its spread of stars. I knew every one of the stars, their place in the sky for that season and moon phase, just as I knew all the sheep in my herd, their favorite grazing partners, and whether they preferred the center of the herd or the edges. I could tell at once if one was missing or hurt or if the herd was frightened or merely restless. How could being wife to a man compare with such things?

My father regarded Noah with a keen eye. “I see,” he said and his lower jaw tightened, which meant he was not pleased. “I am Hunter Clan,” he added, establishing that he had a high status. Hunters, at least in his mind, were the favorites of Father God.

“I am a wood shaper and a boat-maker,” Noah said, placing his calloused hands palm up on his knees. In his mouth, these words did not seem a humble comparison to a hunter, but a quiet declaration of who he was. “My father,”

he continued, “was a direct descendent of First Man through his son, Seth. We are of the same tribe and my ancestry is honorable.”

Father’s jaw stubbornly protruded farther, a hopeful sign for me. I wondered if he took offense at Noah’s claim of honorable ancestry, as father’s side of the family was descended from Cain. Cain’s name linked us all to shame when he killed his own brother, Abel. I did not know Noah, but his rough-featured face seemed open, and it would not gain him to anger my father.

“Also,” Noah added, as if he might have realized his blunder, “I am well able to care for a woman and children,” meaning he had sheep and goats. I knew which ewes were his on the north hills. They were healthy with good coats.

“Boat-making is honorable work,” Savta said quietly, her fingers back to her sewing.

My heart leapt. Savta’s interference would only solidify my father’s stance.

Noah spoke again. “I live apart from the village so I can be near a supply of wood, but my house is sturdy and well made. I know she is young for marriage. I only seek betrothal and will provide a share of my wheat and barley for your family as though you were my own father and grandmother.” Before Father could draw a breath to reply, Noah added, “And with this understanding—that I will wait three summers for her and, if at that time, you or she does not wish the marriage to consummate, I will withdraw.” He sat back, as if he had recited a long-practiced speech and had no more words left.

Father’s jaw twitched. It was an excellent offer, one in which he could profit without risk. Even I was mollified, as he offered an escape after three summers. Still, I was edgy. I did not like change. I knew where everything was in our hut. I knew the paths from here to the river, the pastures and the forest, and the way to the Black Lake. I did not want to be married and live in another place with a stranger.

After a few moments thought, father said. "It is a fair offer."

"A generous offer," Savta said, pulling a thread tight and biting it off with her front teeth. She was proud that she still had several teeth, despite her age.

"Quiet, woman," Father instructed gruffly.

"Then I have your blessing?" Noah asked, his body tense as an elk that has scented a wolf...or, I amended, a mate. I knew men married women to have their children. Savta rubbing oil into my skin was one thing—she was careful to move slowly and allow me to adjust to her touch—but the thought of Noah scraping his huge, rough hands over my body made me shiver. The older girls' stories often included graphic details, and I had heard the virgin cries of newlywed women. Also, I had no desire for smelly babies to clean and wash who would pull at my nipples.

Father rose and spit into his hand. Noah did the same and they clasped hands in an oath bond. My belly twisted in anxiety.

"I brought my betrothed gifts," Noah said.

Father nodded and Noah turned, looking at me for the first time. "Please accept my gifts, Na'amah." Before I could tell him I did not want anything from him, he produced a bone knife in a deerskin casing. I took it without a word. Then he raised the blanket from the object at his side. I felt like an idiot for not realizing what it must be, but I drew a quick breath. The white bird! It picked up one foot and scratched its head with a claw, one eye on me.

"Mother Goddess," Savta breathed.

Father glared at her. He did not like mention of the Goddess in his house, as he was Hunter Clan and followed only Father God. Savta sniffed and concentrated on her next stitch. She said Father God was useless without the Goddess. What purpose was the bee without nectar? Man had honored the Goddess from the time he realized woman held the power of creation in their bellies. Besides, did not all the

animals belong to her? This rejection of the Goddess by Hunter Clan was nonsense and the reason game was scarce. She said these things to me when Father was not around.

Father coughed. "A strange betrothal gift. Not much meat to it."

"He's not for the pot," Noah said quickly. "He's a companion."

"How do you know the bird is a male?" I asked, my fears forgotten for the moment.

"His name is Bennu. The seller claims it is a name for a sky god in bird form. He wasn't clear, but he said Bennu comes from a land far to the south and needs to be protected from cold weather."

I crossed the room and squatted before the cage, not believing my fortune. Bennu was mine and not even Father could protest a betrothal gift.

"Does he make you happy, Na'amah?" Noah asked softly.

I glanced up at him, unable to alter my beaming smile, despite my fears. He seemed to drink my smile like a thirsty man drinks water. Then he said, "He likes to be up high, so I brought a little something I made." He hesitated. "If I may?" This time he directed his question at Savta, which was appropriate. Women had status over home matters.

Savta nodded, her eyes bright, as though, after such a long life full of knowing what the next day and even the next moment would bring, she welcomed surprises.

Noah left and returned with a wooden structure as tall as my chest though half as wide. It had two sections with doors. Fitted tightly through a hole in its top was a forked branch. Noah had obviously made this for Bennu. He opened the bird's cage door and presented his second and third fingers pressed together as a perch. I watched carefully.

Bennu tilted his head and studied the fingers for a moment before wrapping one talon around them, followed by the other. Noah pressed his thumb against them as he

drew his hand through the cage door. Bennu fluttered his wings, but did not try to fly, perhaps realizing his talons were anchored.

Gently, Noah presented him to the branch, releasing his thumb. Bennu bent forward and touched the smoothed wood with his beak. Satisfied, he stepped onto it, turned himself around to face us, fluffed his feathers, and dropped a little turd.

Savta grunted. "It will be your task, Na'amah to keep it clean. One of those in my soup and that thing is out of this house, betrothal or no."

"Yes, Savta," I breathed, afraid now that Father would speak up and negate the whole arrangement.

At that moment, my brother, Tubal, entered, reeking of stale beer. "What's this?" he cried, eying Bennu.

"He is mine," I said, moving between him and Bennu.

Tubal raised a hand to strike me for my insolence, but the hand froze in mid-air as Noah stepped into his view. Noah was a large man. He moved with calm deliberateness between Tubal and me. "I'll not have my betrothed struck by any man save her father." This was right according to Hunter Clan law, not because Lamech was my father, but because he was head of my clan and house. By Hunter Clan law, he would always own my allegiance, even if I married. Savta said it was not like that in some of the other tribes who gave the most honor to Mother Goddess. Then the husband came to the wife's tribe and followed their ways. I wished we were of those tribes.

Tubal's cheek twitched in surprise and agitation, and he blinked reddened eyes. He had the same dark hair and eyes as I, but a sour disposition. "Betrothed?" he said.

"Yes," Noah replied. "By oath agreement."

After a stunned moment, Tubal laughed loudly, but his hand dropped. "You're a fool, boat-maker. Her face has turned your head backwards. Don't you know she's an injured little runt? We should have put her outside when she

was born.” He swayed a bit.

My toes curled in anxiety. Would Noah snatch away his gift at this news?

Noah looked at my father, who tried to meet his eyes, but found something of interest in the deerskin warming his feet.

“Have you something to say, hunter?” Noah asked. Tension had returned to his shoulders.

My father cleared his throat. “I thought you knew of her deformity,” he said. “Or I would never have agreed.”

“What deformity is that?” Noah asked calmly.

“She’s different, is all. Says strange things sometimes.”

“Ha!” Tubal interrupted. “Different? Yes, my friend, she is different, indeed. Her mind is injured, squeezed at birth. She came out looking like a smashed gourd.”

Noah frowned. “Her head looks fine to me. Is she crazed? I’ve seen no sign of that either.”

“She’s not crazed,” Savta snapped. “Just different, as my son-in-law says. She will make a fine wife.”

She did not mention my clumsiness with spinning or cooking, probably intending to increase her efforts to teach me. I sighed quietly.

Noah turned to me. I held my breath, knowing I should keep my eyes down under his scrutiny, but I could not keep them from darting to Bennu, who sat on his branch and regarded us all in silence.

“I will keep your counsel, Tubal-Cain,” Noah said finally, “yet I stand by my oath, which has been given.” Bitterness stained his voice. He plainly regretted his hasty bargain. I should have been happy as I watched him leave. I had my white bird, and Noah no longer wanted me, but for some reason, tears leapt to my eyes, though I refused to shed them before Tubal.

**Author’s Note:** If you would like to read more, send me your email address through the “Contact” page and I will send you thru Ch 12!

I

