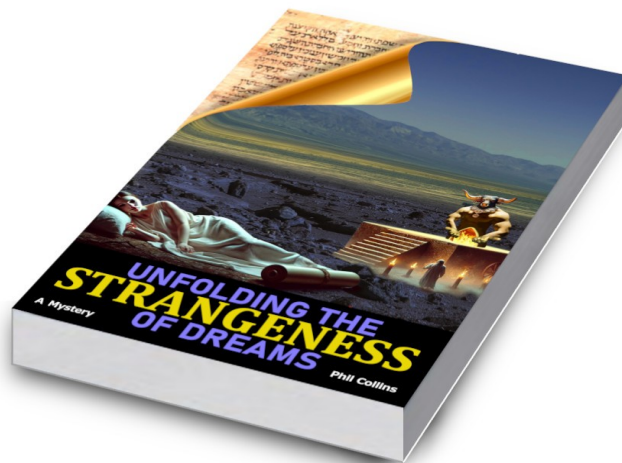


Gentle Reader,

This is a thriller. And sorry, but you may have to grit your teeth in places. But you know what Augustine said. “Sine dolore, nihil proficitur.” Or maybe that was someone else.

Phil



The Palm Tree *by William Hayley*

Is Heaven so high that pity cannot breathe its air?

Its happy eyes for ever dry, its holy lips without a prayer?

My God! My God! If thither led,

By Thy free grace unmerited,

No palm or crown be mine,

but let me keep

a heart that still can feel,

and eyes that still can weep!

-----oOo-----

The Calendar Year Of Jebus In The Early Iron Age

Spring - Moon of Hope (29 days - Temperature rising)

Spring - Moon of Green Shoots (30 days - Early crops begin to sprout)

Spring - Moon of Birds (29 days - Migration patterns signal seasonal change)

Spring - Moon of Days (30 days - Noticeably longer daylight)

Hadu Nurim (The Festival of Returning Light - Held on day 3 of 'Days')

Summer - Moon of Grain (29 days - Barley and wheat approach harvest)

Summer - Moon of Figs (30 days - Figs and fruit-bearing trees in season)

Summer - Moon of Dust (29 days - Heat at its peak, land dries out)

Tesem Kodesh (Worship of the gods - day 25 of 'Dust')

Autumn - Moon of Rains (30 days - Rainfall returns, reviving the land)

Autumn - Moon of Winds (29 days - Breezes signal the changing season) 48

Autumn - Moon of Darkness (30 days - Days grow shorter, the air turns cold)

Winter - Moon of Cold (29 days - Harshest part of the cold season)

Winter - Moon of Waiting (30 days - The land lies still, waiting for warmth)

Zakru Ilmun (Memorial Feast of the Silent Ones - day 15 of 'Waiting')

Winter - Moon of New Fire (29 days - First warmth returns, fires of celebration)

Chapter 1 Consolation

Freya is downstairs. She is sitting upright at the piano stool, stretching her fingers, dropping her shoulders, breathing deeply. A moment of stillness—then she begins.

Her hands caress the keys, the left a flowing undercurrent in the bass, shifting and settling, shifting and settling. Her right hand strokes the melody into life, every fragile run and every aching pause like a memory stirring.

She loves Liszt. His intensity is otherworldly, his passion terrifying, his sadness haunting. However, regretfully his compositions are fiendishly complex and prohibitively intricate. Way beyond Freya's Grade 6. But this one? This one she plays like a worshipper at prayer. At other times like a despairing lover.

"Consolation in D Flat Major" indeed consoles poets and dreamers who long to be virtuosos but cannot. She believes that Liszt was celebrating the work of Alphonse de Lamartine. She is, after all, still a girl in love with romance.

I sometimes catch her whispering Lamartine's words to herself.

Ce monde où tout change, et tout pleure, et tout passe,

Laisse dans l'homme un vide immense et froid,

Que rien ne peut remplir, que rien ne peut combler,

Que l'œil de Dieu qui voit et l'âme qui croit.

There's a void in her. Cold, vast, unfillable. She lost her brother to violence at fifteen. Lost her faith soon after. God, if he was watching, had looked away it seems.

Now she plays, not to hope again—but to console that place where hope once dwelt.

I am upstairs, listening. The left hand is tracing the flow of time with murmured arpeggios, while the right hand weaves together phrases of sadness, with the tentative hope of fulfilment. Freya is playing it beautifully. It is just under five minutes long. I know that at the three minute mark there will be a transition from minor to major which always lifts me.

This time though, the house falls silent just before reaching it. I wait.

I will never forget the sound of the crash.

Heart pounding, fearing the worst, I race down the stairs and into the conservatory. Freya is curled up on the floor, her face pale and twisted in pain. She has both hands pushing frantically into her chest, and is gasping for air.

Please understand that Freya suffered a minor attack just seven months earlier. At the time, the cardiac consultant assured me that a recurrence was unlikely with the prescribed medication.

I grab my mobile, telling myself again and again that it cannot be happening—but deep down, I know it is.

My hand shakes as I punch at the keypad, my panic turning numbers into a blur. The first attempt brings a dead silence, the second a wrong number and a startled voice. I force myself to stop, to breathe twice, then I try again. On the third attempt, the call connects, and a supremely calm voice on the other end cuts through the haze.

‘The ambulance will be with you in eleven minutes...’, the call handler says. I miss the next few words in my panic. ‘... can you do that?’

‘Do what?’ I blurt, my voice shaking.

‘Stay calm. Has she taken her nitroglycerin today?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have aspirin in the house?’

‘Yes. Should I give it to her?’

‘First, make sure she’s sitting upright and can breathe easily. Then give it to her.

Help is on the way.’

‘How long?’

‘About eleven minutes.’

I nod reflexively, though no one can see me, as I glance at Freya, pale and slumped against the piano stool. My fingernails are digging into my palms. *Still eleven minutes!* I don’t dare wonder if it will be soon enough.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 2 Emergency Room

I admit I'm terrified. Frozen. Backed against the rear wall of the emergency room in Royal Bournemouth Hospital. I'm holding myself together by sheer willpower. Freya is flat on her back on a stretcher, barely visible due to the surrounding team of nurses and doctors exchanging clipped inexplicable commands, requests and responses. A cardiac monitor displays several shifting green lines that pulse sporadically and unevenly high, accompanied by medical beeping sounds.

'BP dropping...' the nurse checks another medical machine, 'and we're on the edge of bradycardia.'

Another voice, calm and level, responds immediately. 'We'll intubate if O2 drops further.'

The medical interaction is meaningless to me. *Bradycardia? Intubate?* I only know that my beloved daughter is at the edge of the abyss. I want to ask someone what is going on, but I know that if I do, they might usher me out of the room with vague platitudes. And although this is the last place I want to be, I am desperate to stay.

Freya has been fine. She is supposed to still be fine. At the appointment last month, the cardiac consultant was confident and reassuring. *But he is obviously wrong. We trusted him! How can this be happening now?* My mind is churning with fear and rage, mocking my own naivety.

'Mrs. Turnham?' I drag myself out of a turbulent haze of dread. My eyes focus on the nurse stood next to me. 'We are doing everything we can. This is the hospital's best crash team. I need to ask you...' The nurse pauses. I realise she is waiting for me to confirm that I am present and listening.

I look at her, my eyes wide. I nod. 'What?'

'Has Freya ever had an adverse reaction to her medication—the nitroglycerin?'

‘No... no, she hasn’t.’

The nurse is gone—disappeared into the melee.

It is strange. Freya is my daughter and yet, of all those in the room, I alone am the onlooker, the passenger. No-one there loves Freya more, yet it is me who is forced to do nothing. My adrenalin fuelled energy is bound by the grip of my terror. And moment by moment, Freya is getting paler, the monitor beeps slower and the tubes and wires more intrusive.

My head pounds. I’m not sure I can take any more. I stare at Freya in despair as my mind drifts back just forty eight hours.

Freya is laughing at some TikTok post, sprawled on the couch at home, then dragging her fingers through her early morning hair. She is rolling her eyes as I fuss over her medication, and looking back over her shoulder as she leaves for a date. Smiling as she pushes her empty cereal bowl away. Sitting at the piano ...

I shake my head. Freya comes back into focus, her face pale, her lips blue, her life hanging by a thread. She appears to be like a ghastly caricature of sickness. Her face so pale. But as I cast my gaze around the room, I notice that the scene itself appears to be too bright, too sharp. The overhead fluorescents are intolerable with their buzzing and glaring. And I am almost gagging at the antiseptic sterility of the room. And the hissing sound, painfully loud, of the oxygen mask punctuated with the shriek of the cardiac monitor. I feel myself losing my balance, tottering, almost falling, before grabbing the cold metal edge of a cart for support.

The nurse who spoke to me earlier looks across the room catching my eye. Holding my gaze, she speaks clearly to the doctor, ‘Blood pressure stabilizing.’ And for a couple of seconds, I can feel hope blooming like a flower opening in the sun.

The doctor’s voice, grave and even, resonates through my skull, ‘Still distress. Echo now please.’

The paralysing fear wanes somewhat, and, nearly overwhelmed, I force myself to ask, 'What's happening?' My voice is thin, almost inaudible.

The doctor in charge turns his head towards me. In the time it takes for him to take a breath and begin speaking, I have decided that I can no longer simply trust what any medical professional in a white coat might say. Still grappling with my panic, I try to match the sounds with the movements of the speaker's mouth. 'Mrs. Turnham, Freya's heart is weak. There will have been some damage and the echocardiogram will help us determine how serious that is.'

'Damage?' I repeat, my voice crackling in my own ears. 'But... but she was absolutely fine just a couple of hours ago.'

Before the doctor has a chance to respond, it seems to me...

Angels

The veil thinned as the Metafield was connected to Melissa's location. The three considered her as she watched the other humans working. Eri stood in the centre, towering above the other two. His jet black hair falling to his shoulders framed a strong wide face. His piercing eyes, almost oriental in shape, were alive with energy and perception.

To his left, Caeliel leaned forward, his gaze fixed on Melissa. He was already listening in, mindful of every nuance of her emotions. Encountering her anxiety was painful, but he was willing to experience her trauma. In the past, it had led to better decisions, more appropriate indications, more timely nudges. Caeliel, as ever in an initial encounter, struggled to understand how humans could drift so far from the ideal. *How mindless were their attitudes*, he thought, *how short term their actions*. But as usual, his compassion overcame his natural desire to back away.

‘The longer this lasts, the more she will be blinded by fear unless we act,’ he murmured.

On Eri’s right, Alariel simply watched the situation unfold. He had only recently been created, and was aware he was the apprentice. But staying silent was a struggle. There was so much to be done and he was eager to get on with it. But knowing he had to learn, he waited to hear what Eri would say.

‘Grief grinds everything down,’ Eri said quietly, ‘and the trivial drifts away in the wind.’

‘Well that’s good then, isn’t it?’ Alariel piped up.

‘Good, but not best.’ Eri’s gaze swept around the ICU, returning to Melissa’s hunched miserable form. ‘This is so sad! But there are possible consequences that will affect thousands for good, if you handle this correctly.’

Turning to Alariel, he said kindly, ‘Your first real interaction. Learn from Caeliel.’ Indicating Melissa with a tilt of his head, he continued, ‘She is at a fork. She needs guidance for her fear, and hope for her fragility.’

‘Why is she so afraid, and so weak?’ Alariel asked.

‘She’s human. Don’t be too hard on her. You cannot appreciate how it feels to be disconnected.’

Alariel shuddered, ‘Ugh! Unthinkable... ‘

‘And terrifying,’ Caeliel cut in.

‘So what do we do?’ Alariel was itching for progress.

Eri and Caeliel exchanged amused smiles.

‘What?’ Alariel demanded.

‘We can’t do anything yet.’ Caeliel replied, ‘The Metafield has connected, so Melissa will need to become sensitised to that. She will already have sensed something.’

‘Yep!’ Eri confirmed with eyes alight and eyebrows raised. ‘The tropical

rainstorm I imagine. Or maybe the warm treacle! Whatever it is for her, it is enough for now.'

Emergency Room

Before the doctor has a chance to respond, it seems to me that someone has dumped a bathful of warm water on my head and shoulders, and I am drenched in tender care. And for a second, irrationally, all the fear is gone, the panic washed away. My heart rate slows a little. It's like the crashing sea has receded, the tide has swept everything away and I'm left alone on a deserted beach with my sadness. That sorrow I have lived with since Nick died. Somehow I know that everything is okay. But the sadness remains. It has been my constant companion. I feel so calm, so still that I become statuesque, my movements, even my thoughts, slow and graceful. Almost lazily, I scan the room, searching for whoever's talking. But the team works on.

The doctor with the kind face is speaking to me, 'Sometimes these heart conditions can take a turn for the worse quite quickly. Her congenital heart defect puts her at higher risk, even given her medication. But we are of course doing everything we can.'

I nod reactively, though his words hardly registered. I don't know if Freya is going to survive this. But she will be okay. I don't know how I know, but the fear is gone, even as I note my daughter's closed eyes are framed with dark circles, and her breathing shallow.

I feel as if I am balancing perfectly on a high wire. I'm not sure how I am staying on. I wonder if this reassurance could fade like morning mist if I somehow lose concentration. My thoughts are repeatedly drawn to creating worst-case scenarios, but I dismiss each one, not as unlikely but as irrelevant. And I'm still experiencing the

hyper-sensitive perception of the whole situation.

Freya is only twenty-three. She had hardly started to live life. I start to wobble.

Just move through each moment, I tell myself. I know I have to be still, almost to be at rest.

A nurse is handing me a clipboard. ‘There are some more tests we need to run. They are only blood tests—there is no additional risk to Freya.’

I nod, hardly registering the words.

‘They need your consent on Freya’s behalf,’ the nurse adds, pointing to the pencilled cross at the bottom of the form.

When I sign, I can see my hand is still trembling. Too much adrenalin. I hand the form back then sink into one of the two chairs against the wall. Another memory surfaces and I close my eyes.

Crayoned stick figures of myself and Nick and Freya almost twenty years ago. Taking the crumpled paper from a tiny hand and putting it on the fridge door. A time when life was simpler. Before the traumas. I breathe in deeply and let out a sigh.

The doctor sits down beside me. I look into his face. He seems calm and kind. ‘The echocardiogram indicates that part of Freya’s heart has become weaker,’ he says. ‘The left ventricle. After her previous attack it has been working harder to compensate, and it is struggling.’

‘What does that mean?’

The doctor begins to explain again in simpler terms, but I cut in. ‘I mean what do you have to do to fix it?’

‘It can’t be fixed as such. It is possible for the strength to come back over time, and in the interim there is medication that can help. As a last resort, there is the possibility of surgery.’

‘Surgery?’ I repeat quietly. ‘But ... ‘

‘Right now, we are getting her stabilised. Everything depends on how the next twenty-four hours go.’

I look across at Freya, whose breathing is just perceptible in the slow rise and fall of her chest. Twenty-four hours. I will pray, I decide. All the time my beloved and only daughter is breathing, I will pray.

I am still on the high wire.

Just.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 3 Celia

The sky outside has dulled to a rainy haze, office windows darkening as rush hour ebbs away. The constant stream of headlights on the bypass is more intermittent now. I glance at my watch: almost ten hours since we arrived. Freya is still in intensive care, conscious but fragile, and I'm still waiting for answers.

'Fancy a coffee?'

I turn toward the familiar voice.

'Celia!' I rise abruptly, my legs stiff, and she envelops me in a warm embrace.

'I came straight from work,' Celia murmurs, her cheek resting against my hair.

'Oh, my love.'

Those few words is all it takes. My shoulders tremble, and my breath hitches as I cling to Celia, tears running down my cheeks. She holds me steady, one hand rubbing my back in slow, reassuring circles.

'I'll stay with you tonight,' Celia says quietly. 'But first, when did you last eat?'

I pull back, wiping my eyes with damp fingers. 'I'm not sure... a roll, maybe... at lunchtime?'

'That won't do,' she says firmly, nodding toward the door. 'Come on, let's get you fed.'

I hesitate, glancing toward the ICU. 'I can't... what if something happens?'

'Melissa.' Celia cups my elbow, her grip steady but gentle. 'Freya's in good hands. She's not going anywhere. The cafe's open until ten. Let's go, even just for a little while. You need to keep your strength up.'

I sigh, my resistance faltering. 'I don't know. It depends on how things go, I suppose.'

Celia squeezes my hand. 'Exactly. And you'll need the energy to face whatever comes next. Come on.'

Together, we move toward the door, and I cast one last glance over my shoulder as we step out.

---oOo---

The cafeteria is quiet but for the hum of distant conversation and the occasional clatter of crockery from the kitchen. Rain streaks the windows, blurring the view of the parking lot under a gray, dismal sky. I stare at the remnants of my meal: an empty soup bowl and a plate wiped clean of crumbs.

'That does feel better,' I admit softly, brushing my fingers across my napkin.

Celia smiles, leaning forward. 'Of course. You needed it.' She has been cautious with her questions, understanding the fragile state I'm in. But now, with some food in my stomach, she evidently thinks it's safe to ask.

'What have the doctors said?' she ventures gently.

My hands tighten around the edges of the table, my voice faltering as I reply, 'They're not saying much yet... but there's damage to her heart.' I take a shaky breath, I can feel my composure is on the verge of breaking.

'Well, we must pray that Freya makes a good recovery,' Celia says earnestly.

I nod, my lips pressing together. 'I haven't stopped praying since this morning. But...' My voice cracks, and my eyes ache with unshed tears. 'I'm so afraid I'm going to lose her.'

I can see Celia hesitating. She shifts in her chair. She wants to say something comforting, but she caught the implications in the doctors' words earlier. A long silence stretches between us.

Then she speaks. I can hardly believe what she chooses to say—I suppose what she believes is the higher priority.

‘The most important thing,’ Celia says seriously, ‘is that Freya gives her life to Jesus.’ I feel a cold hardness sweeping through my body. ‘Celia, there is no chance of that,’ I say, my words clipped. ‘She’s told me over and over that she stopped “believing in Jesus”’—I do air quotes with my fingers—‘when Nick died. That destroyed something in her, and I can’t fix it. No-one can.’

But Celia can’t let it go. She says, ‘But it’s still the most important thing, isn’t it?’ I feel heavy with weariness. My voice drops. I stare across the table at her for a moment, then murmur, ‘I don’t know any more.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asks, frowning.

‘I mean...’ I try to stop my hands trembling as I crumple the napkin in my lap. ‘When Nick died, something in me broke too. And now, Freya—’ My voice wavers, and I blink the tears back, then ask the question that has been rattling around in my brain for hours. ‘Is God really taking care of me? That’s what I don’t know any more.’

Celia leans closer, her expression urgent. ‘But we have to trust Him, Melissa. Without that, what hope do we have?’

Suddenly I snap. My voice is horribly sharp as I retort. ‘Celia, listen to me! I have prayed for Freya—countless times! And she cannot see any reason to trust Jesus when she feels...’ My voice cracks again, and I know I’m going to break, so I cover my face with my hands to hide my sobbing. After a few seconds, I have regained my composure.

‘... when she feels abandoned. And now I’m not sure I can trust a God who I’m told will condemn Freya to hell for eternity just because she can’t force herself to believe!’

Celia recoils, shocked. She leans back in her chair, frowning, her lips parting in disbelief. ‘But Melissa, we’ve been taught our whole lives that we can trust what the Bible says. God’s justice is clear—those who trust Him will be saved. Surely you can

talk to her about that?’

My jaw clenches, my voice tight with emotion. It is as if I am living in a different world now! ‘Do you even hear yourself?’ I ask, my tone almost biting. ‘There’s damage to her heart!’ I take a deep breath before continuing. ‘You don’t understand what’s happened to me, to my family. I left my first husband, yes. I know that was wrong. But my second husband was a monster—a violent man who was responsible for my son’s death. And now all I have left is Freya! And this God—your God—is supposedly going to take her from me too?’

Celia reaches across the table, her hand resting on mine. ‘You’re not alone, Melissa. God has promised to be with you always. And you know, anytime, day or night, you can call me—’

‘Stop!’ I cut her off abruptly, my voice rising. I stand, my chair scraping loudly across the floor. ‘You just don’t understand anything!’

Before Celia can reply, I turn and walk quickly toward the exit, my arms wrapped tightly around myself, trying to convince myself that I’m not alone.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 4 Diagnosis

The doctor's words are clinical and precise, a stream of terms that feel foreign and heavy. 'It's a congenital weakness,' he explains, his voice calm but detached. 'The left ventricle has been under strain for years. You know, of course, that with the genetic condition she has a predisposition to the risk of cardiac arrest.'

I nod, but the phrases dissolve into fragments. *Left ventricle. Predisposition.* Each one surfaces briefly before sinking beneath a sudden surge of memory.

Freya, five years old, arms crossed, chin lifted defiantly, refusing to leave the piano stool until she can master her first piece. A cascade of wrong notes, tears, both hands slamming the keyboard in frustration. Then that fierce determination flaring, the one I've always admired and feared in equal measure. I had to coax her away for dinner that night. That stubborn streak—her strength, her way of meeting everything life has thrown at her. The thing that kept her going after Nick died. The thing I've always worried would wear her out.

And her sensitivity. How she always seemed to know how I was feeling. And she was the same with her brother. Nick was a closed book, but not to Freya.

I can feel the tears running down my face. I can't lose her. She is literally everything I have.

'We'll monitor her closely in the coming days,' the doctor continues. His tone softens, but it doesn't help. 'There's significant damage. But we stay positive. Her recovery depends on how well her heart adapts.'

Significant damage. The words linger, pressing against my chest, adding weight

to the heap of phrases that threaten to crush me. I think of Freya, twenty-three now, her slender fingers coaxing life from the piano keys as she practices Liszt's Consolation No. 3. The notes are fluid, languid, full of longing but tinged with optimism. She had been counting down the days to her music exam, nervous but excited.

What if I never hear her play it again?

The thought brings the fear back to me, leaving me gripping the edge of my chair. My mind races. Were there signs I missed? She's seemed tired lately, but nothing alarming. Now guilt gnaws at me, whispering accusations I can't shut out.

'I know you've seen the genetic marker for Williams Syndrome previously, Mrs Turnham' another doctor says, pointing to an image on the screen. His finger slides across the screen, 'This is the one that predisposes her to cardiovascular issues.'

I don't respond, merely stare at him. He's still talking but the words are just meaningless sounds. I don't want to listen any more. My vision blurs with exhaustion, and his voice fades. Images fill the silence. Freya as a toddler, tumbling into my arms after her first wobbly steps, giggling with pure, unrestrained joy. Then at eight, scraping her knees during a bike ride but refusing my help. 'I can do it myself,' she had insisted, tears streaming down her cheeks as she got back on the bike. Resilience. It's always been her defining trait.

Yet now, that strength feels brittle. Freya lies in the ICU, tethered to machines that beep relentlessly, each sound a reminder of how fragile everything is. My thoughts fracture, kaleidoscoping into ever new patterns of guilt and worry. What should I have done differently? Could a better diet, less pressure, or more rest have made a difference?

'Mrs Turnham?' The doctor's voice pulls me back to the sterile room. I blink, realizing I haven't responded.

'Yes,' I say, my voice flat. 'I understand.' But it's a lie. I don't understand anything any more.

He continues, 'I was just saying that you'll need to pop home now. There is no visiting in ICU overnight.'

It's ridiculous. I can't leave her. 'What if she wants me in the night? What if she... gets worse?'

'We have your contact details, and we'll give you a call if there is any change.' He has kind eyes. *Can I trust him?*

'Definitely?'

He nods, 'Yes. I'm on duty until 6.00am tomorrow. I'll see you're called if she needs you.'

I feel tearful, and overwhelmingly grateful. I take a taxi back home.

By the time we arrive, it's late. Gone eleven. The house is dark. My front door key won't turn in the lock. I try again, but it absolutely refuses to turn. I check to make sure it is the correct key. It is. Although I know it is illogical, I try all the other keys on the ring that fit. I can't unlock the door. *What am I going to do?*

I walk back down the front path and out the gate. I look up and down the road. The taxi has gone. And anyway, I have nowhere to go. I don't know what to do. Panic starts to rise in my throat.

Angels

Caeliel's eyes softened as he watched the woman on the doorstep, 'She's just frozen with fear—this is horrible.'

'If she knew the guard she had, she might be able to relax a bit!' Alariel mused

'Except she'd probably think she was losing her mind.'

'Really?' Alariel had yet to grasp the extent of the disconnect in humans.

Eri's eyes narrowed slightly. With a slight smile he said, 'Honestly? Yes, it's quite likely. Or more likely she'd love it, and just freewheel. Then she'd never grow!'

With growing concern, they watched her panic rising, then Caeliel said, ‘Any objections if I poke Terry?’

‘Fine.’ Eri tilted his head slightly in approval.

Diagnosis

Just then a light comes on in next door’s porch. My neighbour, Terry, leans out and says, ‘Okay? Are you alright?’

‘I can’t open the front door,’ I say, feeling stupid.

He pops round, takes the key and tries it. It won’t turn. He tries the handle. The door swings open. ‘You must have left it unlocked,’ he says sympathetically, ‘How is...’ He stops, uncertain.

‘Freya.’ I finish for him. ‘She’s in intensive care. Another heart attack.’ I’m starting to tear up, and I just want to get inside and shut out the whole world.

‘If there’s anything we can do, just say. Anything.’ Terry’s voice is gentle.

‘Thanks, Terry, but I’m okay.’ I look at him, grateful that I have Terry next door if there’s an emergency. I go in and it occurs to me that someone might be in here as the house was unlocked all day. Should I call Terry? No, it’s late. I stand very still for ages—maybe only six or seven minutes listening intently. I am shivering. The house is cold, uncaring. I spend the next ten minutes, heart beating wildly creeping into each room and snapping the light on, ready to bolt. The place is empty. I go downstairs and sit for a while in the kitchen, eating savoury biscuits, then realise I need to go to bed. It’s 11.35pm. It’s dark. Perhaps I’ll sleep with the light on. All around me I can feel the silent chilling absence of life.

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Chapter 5 Iron Age

The people cheered as he stood, every eye on him. His feet were bare, as a sign of his humility, a symbol of his servanthood.

It was nonsense of course. Deep down, the entire tribe knew what kind of man Elihadad was. Conceited, power-hungry, aggressive, ruthless, lustful. But the majority had convinced themselves that none of those things mattered. After all, he was tall and strong and wise, he was wealthy and powerful, and he could speak with the gods.

He wore a robe which fell to his ankles, dyed purple and red. It was covered with a pattern of vine stems twisting through green leaves and silver lightning bolts. A wide fabric sash with a row of bright bronze disks was cinched around his waist. His ritual headdress was a green turban wrapped tightly around his head, into which were stitched an array of twenty-four long feathers, each stained black. On each side of his face, three black finger stripes ran diagonally across his cheeks down onto his neck, and painted on his forehead was a single lightning bolt symbol in white.

The tribe was grateful that Elihadad was on their side. He was to be feared, and he commanded the temple guard—a cohort of men who's merciless brutality ensured the rule of law. There was only one thing more to be feared and that was the gods themselves, El, Baal, Molech, Asherah.

The tribe had gathered to give thanks for a fruitful year. The earth and the tribe had been fertile. The grain harvest was abundant and secure, while the vines bore fruit with twice their usual vigour. They had welcomed an unusually high number of healthy male infants. It was a rare occasion to feast so richly—fine meats, fresh

vegetables, and ripe fruits had loaded the boards. The air was alive with music and dancing, a celebration of their shared prosperity.

The sticks had been laid, the fire had been stoked, the altar had run with blood, and the sacrifices had been made for another year. The gods were pleased. Now they would look favourably on the year to come.

Elihadad sat at the top table, elevated so that he could see and be seen. He was flanked by his concubines, two on his left and one on his right. One on the left was visibly with child. But all were barefoot and dressed identically for the feast, in a plain white full length linen robe, with a protective lapis lazuli amulet bracelet on the left wrist. The young woman who sat at Elihadad's right hand—she whose child had been selected—she alone wore a gold headband studded with precious stones. Her right wrist was encircled by a matching gold bracelet.

Elihadad watched the dancers intently as around twenty young women moved in harmony to the intricate rhythms of the drums. The “Revel of Plenty” unfolded as a choreographed step dance, blending precision with fluidity. Their movements shifted seamlessly—groups dissolved into couples, couples wove into interlacing lines—each formation echoing the spirit of ancient traditions.

As the dance neared its conclusion, the pounding rhythm softened, and the dancers' movements matched the slowing beat, becoming deliberate and statuesque. Each step required extraordinary balance, yet their poise never faltered, as if they drew grace from the unravelling of time itself. The slowing rhythm carried them into a vignette of near silence, their motions so fluid and delicate that they seemed to drift like smoke carried on gentle air. At last, the final beat resonated, and the dancers were suspended in perfect stillness, a living sculpture of harmony and discipline. For a moment, time seemed to hold its breath, before they surrendered to the earth, their bodies relaxing onto the ground.

Elihadad's face bore a satisfied smile that never reached his narrowed eyes.
He had chosen.

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Chapter 6 Pastor

The pastor's front lounge is warm and tidy, softly lit by a single table lamp. I'm sitting in a fairly worn but comfy armchair, upholstered in a floral-patterned fabric that might have been de rigueur for a vicarage in the 70's. With the inevitable cup of tea. It's Tuesday evening. The clock on the mantelpiece ticks softly, like your grandad's used to.

Ryan is sitting across from me, legs crossed, leaning slightly forward in his chair. He's a kind man—gentle, thoughtful, intelligent. He's done well for himself, given that the salary of an independent church pastor probably isn't much more than minimum wage. His wife, always smiling and sweet, works too. If she has any fault, it's being a bit too protective of Ryan, guarding his time like a hawk. Together, they make a lovely couple, raising three children—a girl and twin boys, eight and four.

I had a family once. A husband, two little ones. I let it fall apart. Then I tried so hard to rebuild it. Gave up everything for family. But I couldn't hold it together. I don't think I've really been happy for years. At least I was on an even keel though. Now I'm drowning, and there's no-one can rescue me. *She's got to be okay*, I tell myself.

I frown. Ryan is saying something. I nod and try to look as if I've been listening. He's been with us for four years now, the best leader our church has had for as long as I can remember.

I've been here for twenty minutes, listening to his sympathy and offers of help with transport. Yet, I haven't been able to bring myself to ask my real question. The tea has gone tepid in my cup, so I set it back on the saucer. It rattles faintly. I'm not sure if it's from my nerves or just sheer exhaustion. Probably both.

Ryan glances at his watch, a small, offhand motion, but I catch it. He likely budgeted half an hour for this conversation, and I'm running out of time. 'I've got someone else arriving unfortunately. In about forty minutes,' he says apologetically.

I am desperate to ask my question, but instinctively I say, ‘That’s fine. I think we’re done here really.’

‘Really? I had a feeling that there was something else... ‘

I don’t want to be a nuisance, so I cut in, ‘No, it’s fine really. You need to have a break between... ‘

Ryan smiles. ‘That’s really considerate, but we have at least another half an hour. It’s no trouble.’

‘Well, if you’re sure?’ I still feel a bit awkward about taking up his time.

Ryan nods encouragingly. So I take a deep breath and dive in, my words tumbling out awkwardly.

‘Do you believe that Freya is going to hell?’

The room temperature dips a degree or two! Ryan’s smile vanishes, and he leans back slightly, his hands clasping together on his knee. His eyes search mine, but before he can answer, I rush to clarify. I don’t want to waste either of our time. I’m already tired, and in a couple of hours, I’m hoping to be in bed.

I continue, ‘I mean, she told me—plainly—that she doesn’t trust God any more., not after what happened to Nick.’

Ryan puts his head in his hands for a few moments. Then he looks up, shifts in his chair, grateful for the extra seconds to think. ‘You know,’ he says carefully, his voice calm, ‘we’re told not to judge others. And there’s the verse, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”’

It is all completely familiar. I’ve heard a hundred verses like this, but it feels like we are avoiding the question. I don’t want to be brushed off this time. ‘So does that mean you believe God will send her to hell? Because... she’s not going to change her mind.’

Ryan exhales slowly, his gaze steady but troubled. ‘Well,’ he begins, ‘as I always

say, God isn't just loving; He is love. His very essence is—'

'Moreover,' I cut him off, my voice a bit sharper than I intended, 'she said he can't be trusted. Her exact words were, "If God is love, why did he let Nick be assaulted so badly that he died from the injuries?" She's bitter, Ryan. Bitter and heartbroken. She loved him—depended on him. They were soulmates.'

Ryan is silent, his lips pressed together in thought. I'm worrying now that I've offended him, interrupting him like that.

'And I don't know the answer to that,' I add, 'whether He can be trusted I mean!'

Ryan is starts to say something, but I don't want another platitude, so I press on, my voice rising. 'So if she stays that way—bitter, defiant, and determined to have nothing to do with God until her last breath—does she go to hell?'

I've done it again! What is it with me tonight? I'm never like this! Interrupting people when they're speaking. 'I'm really sorry for chopping you off like that... I'm just so stressed about it.' I say, hoping he understands.

He nods, acknowledging my apology, then sighs deeply, leaning forward now, elbows on his knees. For a long, quiet moment, he studies me. 'God is love,' he says at last, 'but God is just. Jesus took the punishment for her sins. But if Freya doesn't accept that... then she can't live with God.'

A desolation sweeps over me. Previously discussions about hell have been academic, impersonal. I have managed to convince myself that Nick would have repented in his final moments, because he was so keen when he was just a kid. But Freya ...

I have walked away from this terrifying question all my life, but now it's following me around, hard on my heels. 'So she's tortured forever? Is that what you're saying?'

Ryan winces at the word. 'Not tortured. Scripture says... tormented.'

'Tormented, agonized, excruciated, what's the difference?' I blurt out. Even to me, my words sound barbed, ripping through the sanitised picture he's trying to paint. I stop. I can feel myself colouring up.

Ryan shifts uncomfortably, his face pale. 'Scripture describes hell as separation from God, yes, and a place of torment. But—'

This is such an awful conversation. I never speak to people like this. But the words just come. 'It describes people being burned alive forever,' I say, unable to hold back any more.

Then I realise again what we are discussing. In a heartbeat my embarrassment and my anger are swept away as terror washes over me. I can feel my heart pounding, echoing in the cold void inside me. Horror cramps my chest. I try to breathe but the air is too heavy. Pain blooms in me and finally emerges as a gagging sob. 'It doesn't matter... what... you call it!' I take another breath, easier this time. 'Is that what a God of love... really what a God of love will do to my daughter?'

Ryan straightens in his seat, his expression sombre. He leans across and takes my hand. Quietly he shakes his head.

I recover a little. 'Well?' I still need an answer.

He releases my hand. 'God gives Freya free choice. If she chooses the wide path, it leads to destruction. God doesn't choose hell for her—she chooses it herself.'

I laugh bitterly, the sound too harsh in this quiet room. 'Choose? No one would choose to stick their hand in a candle flame for ten seconds, let alone burn alive forever.'

Ryan looks anguished, and despite my own pain, or maybe because of it, I feel a flicker of pity for him. He's a serious compassionate man, caught in the same tangled theology that I am. But now, with my daughter's name attached to those words

—‘burned alive’—there is a horrible... *no that’s not bad enough*... there is an obscene reality to it.

‘Melissa,’ Ryan says softly, his voice heavy with sadness, ‘we can’t shape theology based on what makes us comfortable. Scripture teaches that those who reject Christ will be eternally separated from God, in hell—a place of torment. I have to believe that, even though it hurts.’

I stare at him, the deadening silence jarred only by the relentless tick of the clock. My chest still feels tight, my breaths shallow. The room is stifling, and the weight of his words presses down on me.

‘You really believe that?’ I whisper. ‘That a God of love would let her burn forever? Wouldn’t even cut it short?’

Ryan doesn’t answer. He has an idea of what I am going through, and he knows that whatever he says will just be grinding salt into the wound. And he can’t do it. As I say, he’s a good man.

I stand to leave, he stays seated not wanting us to finish like this. I feel for him, but it’s no good. I’m empty. There’s a hollow ache in my chest.

‘I’m sorry Ryan, I’m done’ I say, my voice trembling. He follows me to the front door and lays his hand on my shoulder. He looks woebegone. ‘If... I mean, if we can do anything, just ask.’

I turn away. I’m too upset to speak. I can’t even say goodbye. I wish I hadn’t come.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 7 Mortality

‘Dr Pradesh will see you now.’ The receptionist pushes open the door and beckons to me.

Dr Pradesh turns out to be a diminutive Indian woman, around fifty years of age. She has a welcoming smile as she holds out her hand to me. I immediately feel that she is someone I can talk to.

‘Mrs Turnham,’ her voice is calm and low, ‘so let’s talk about Freya. I’m sure you are aware she is stable at present, which gives us a chance to consider her treatment going forward.’

I incline my head. I want to listen carefully to pick up all the nuance, because maybe last time I was in denial about the seriousness of Freya’s heart condition. Or maybe I still don’t trust consultants.

She points a slim forefinger, to the MRI scan displayed on the screen on her desk. ‘Freya’s heart. This is a horizontal cross section,’ she gestures with a flat palm moving horizontally at chest level. She begins tracing the outlines on the screen, ‘This is the right... and the left ventricles. These have the muscles that pump the blood.’ She circles the ventricle with her finger, ‘You see these brighter areas?’

It is astonishingly clear. I nod.

‘These indicate some inflammation, quite likely that is a result of the myocarditis that we are monitoring.’ Her finger moves across to the right ventricle, ‘These darker regions here... and here... show normal healthy blood flow.’ Using both hands now she points to corresponding left and right regions. ‘So you can see the left ventricle is not so

healthy. The blood flow is weaker, the muscle is thinner, and less dynamic.'

The puzzled look on my face silently requests a clarification.

'We mean that it is not able to expand and contract so readily—it's pumping action is not efficient. This is why she is getting tired easily, and why she sometimes has had shortness of breath.' Dr Pradesh raises her eyebrows with her head tilted to the left looking for confirmation that I understand now.

'So what do you think about her recovery?' I know I'm not going to get a straight answer, but it's really the only thing I care about. I know I'll ask this question many times, and hopefully there will always be a tiny bit of optimism that I can hold on to.

Dr Pradesh pauses for a moment. I suppose to prepare me for bad news. That is the way I take it anyway, and it turns out to be right.

'The thing is that the left ventricle, that part that is damaged, is the powerhouse of the heart,' she began. 'It does all the hard work of pumping so Freya's heart overall is not as effective as it should be.'

'But if it only means she gets tired easily, or gets short of breath, is that so bad?' I know I'm clutching at straws here.

'The real problem that heart failure leads to a build up of fluid in the body.' She presses her lips together in a grimace of regret. 'The knock on effect is organs not functioning so well, and lung congestion. That in itself makes Freya prone to infection.'

I can feel myself getting upset, but I know I have to stay calm. Dr Pradesh senses my rising fear, and tries to reassure me a little. 'But these are things that we can manage, provided the heart function is not too badly compromised.'

'And?' I widen my eyes and shake my head questioningly.

'And so far Freya is responding well to the medication, so we must hold on to

that.'

I nod trying to take it all in. I know I shall want to recall this conversation in the days to come. 'What does this mean for Freya? What are the chances of her recovering?' I look down and see that I am gripping the edge of the Dr Pradesh's desk. I let go and try to relax. 'Is there any hope that she can live... a normal life?'

I so desperately want her just to say yes. I can't face life alone. It's too cruel.

Please say yes.

The consultant pauses. She is choosing her words with care. 'Treatment can help stabilize the condition, and reduce the risk of further damage' she begins. Her tone is even, and soft, but authoritative. 'However, you know that Freya's heart is severely compromised. Currently she is particularly vulnerable, and will remain so for a few weeks. We will reduce that vulnerability with medication in the longer term. But I'm sorry to say that her life expectancy will most likely be shortened. Cardiac failure remains a real risk, especially over the next four weeks. Our focus, and...' she smiles encouragingly, '... your focus now must be on improving her quality of life and monitoring her condition.'

Why couldn't she just have said yes. I can feel my life closing down around me. I'm not sure I want to go on without her. My fingernails are digging into my palms and they hurt. But I welcome the physical pain—it distracts me from thinking.

Angels

So, do we need to get involved?' Alariel asked, watching Melissa's distress.

Caeliel nodded, his gaze distant, studying Melissa's emotions. 'It's always a judgment call, but she's teetering on the edge of despair.' He turned to Eri. 'What do you think?'

'It's risky,' Eri murmured, his voice soft but firm. 'If she succumbs, the longer-

term plan could be jeopardised. I would intervene.'

Caeliel hesitated, his fingers brushing his chin. 'Perhaps just some subtle encouragement, with say—'

Alariel cut in, leaning forward. 'Is *subtle* really going to work when everything looks like it's falling apart?'

Caeliel gave a small shrug. 'We can't carry her completely, can we?'

Eri's faint smile held a teasing edge as he gave an almost imperceptible head shake. 'You're right, Caeliel. She must be drawn toward trust. The timing is perfect, but you need just enough, and not too much.'

Mortality

I must look very glum, because Dr Pradesh leans forward and looks into my face and said, 'Mrs Turnham, we have many patients with this selfsame condition who are able to live well and enjoy living. We have high hopes that Freya will be one of them.'

I take that as the parting benediction. I rise, thank her and she bows her head graciously. Such a nice woman. Let's hope she knows what she's talking about!

I make my way to Freya's room. I gather she is awake now, and I'm longing to see her face.

I walk in and she looks up and smiles. My heart sings. The sunlight is filtering through the plastic blinds. The bed is a mass of tubes and wires and medical gizmos, but I see only her face. My beautiful child. I could believe she's fine. I know she's not but for now I'll enjoy the smile. I stroke her cheek with the back of my fingers. I sit down in the chair by the bed. *I mustn't be too pushy*. She tires easily.

'How do you feel?'

'So tired.'

'Are you hurting anywhere?'

‘Sometimes it hurts to breathe. In the evening yesterday.’ She makes a face, then pants and smiles again weakly.

‘Well you’d better get well soon, I need to hear the end of “Consolation No 3”!’

‘You look very worried, Mum.’ She frowns at me in concern.

Ah, dear Freya, always so perceptive of other people’s problems and feelings.

‘Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. I’ll be better when we get you home though!’

She smiles, not having the energy to reply.

‘I’ve just been to see the consultant.’

Interest sparks in Freya’s eyes.

‘She said that you’re doing fine.’

‘Really?’ Freya knows I’m editing out the lowlights. I see a trace of fear crossing her face momentarily, ‘Tell me the truth, Mum, how am I?’

‘I’ll always tell you the truth, darling. In the long term, you will have to take rather more medication to support your heart. For now though, the next four weeks are the most critical. They want to see improvement every day ideally.’

Freya looks fearful again. ‘I’m just so tired, Mum, and I can’t breathe come the end of the day. I’m not sure... ‘

I lean forward and take her hand in mine, ‘Listen my love, the consultant tells me there are many patients with your condition who are enjoying life. Don’t give up.’

She looks irritated. ‘I’m not giving up. But it is what it is. I’m just saying don’t expect miracles.’

I am really not sure how to lift her spirits. The consultant has only just told me to focus on her quality of life, and now I’ve got her worrying about me secretly thinking about how I’m going to cope with her dying. In my anxiety, my mind is getting addled. Consequently, tact deserts me.

‘I don’t expect miracles, but we are all praying for you.’

‘That’s a waste of time.’ She sees the upset on my face and back-pedals immediately. ‘No, not a waste of time if it makes you feel better.’

‘I know you don’t believe prayer works, Freya, but I do and so I pray. It’s not just about feelings.’

Freya sits up a little and in a tone which brooks no discussion she says, ‘I’ll just say one thing... Nick.’

Instantly I know I’m completely mishandling this. I have to lighten the conversation. ‘I’m sorry, darling. Let’s not talk about that. Let’s talk about something much better...’ I pause to get the timing right, then I say, ‘Hospital food!’

She smiles again, just as weakly, looks steadily right into my eyes for a couple of seconds, then reaches out her hand and puts it in mine.

I’m on the edge of tears. I love her so much. She is incredible. Here she is facing death, and I’m upsetting her, and she gets past all that and realises that I’m struggling. And reaches out to comfort me. *O God whatever will I do without her?*

I can see she is tiring now. She rests her head back and closes her eyes. Her hand is still in mine. She means so much to me. No mother could love a daughter more.

Yet Ryan would say that God’s love surpasses mine.

And he’s going to burn her in hell.

No.

I stand and reach across to straighten her covers. She is fast asleep. I lean across and kiss her on the cheek, holding my face against her hair for a few seconds. I whisper in her ear. ‘I love you, darling. God bless.’

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Chapter 8 Iron Age

There were three sharp raps on the door—someone striking it with a stick. Kana-Il bridled, shaking his head in irritation. It was unnecessary. It had to be a stranger. And an impatient one! Friends or neighbours would simply knock with their knuckles.

Kana-Il stopped kneading the dough. His wife, Naamah, could no longer prepare the day's bread since her accident. A few weeks earlier, she had tripped while carrying out the embers, badly burning both hands. Neither sacrifices to the gods nor the priest's incantations had stopped infection from taking hold. Kana-Il was just thankful she was slowly improving.

'I'll get it,' he murmured, dusting the flour from his hands. Opening the door, he found himself facing a temple guard—a barrel-chested man of average height with legs thick as tree trunks. He stood unsmiling, holding a small scroll.

Kana-Il glanced around at the five neighbouring huts. In such close quarters, everyone knew most of each other's affairs. They shared each other's lives, the marriages, the babies born, the celebrations as well as the accidents and the tragedies. Eavesdropping at doors and peering through windows weren't just bad habits—they were the surest way to keep up with the latest happenings in their little community. And if you went uninformed, then you couldn't help, could you. And neither could you gossip!

And sure enough, he spotted one or two hastily withdraw into the darkness of their huts.

‘Kana-Il?’ the man asked.

‘That’s me.’

‘The high priest requires your presence.’ It wasn’t a request. The guard handed Kana-Il the scroll, bearing the temple seal, then turned and walked away.

Kana-Il stared at it. He had never seen one before, though he’d heard about them. He was relieved the guard had spoken the message aloud—no one in the family could read. Quietly, he closed the door and turned to his wife. Naamah looked worried.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘It’s a summons from the high priest.’

Without further discussion, he turned back to the dough, though his thoughts churned. What could the high priest possibly want with him?

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Kana-Il’s feet sank into the raked sand at the temple entrance. The air reeked of incense mingled with the fetid stench of yesterday’s spilled blood. He hadn’t gone more than two steps before a command rang out.

‘Halt!’

He froze as a guard approached. Explaining his summons, he showed the man the scroll. The guard scanned the script.

‘Tomorrow,’ he barked, ‘at the sixth hour.’ He handed the scroll back.

Kana-Il nodded and turned away. He had barely taken three steps when Elihadad’s voice rang across the courtyard.

‘You! Yes, you! Come!’

Kana-Il followed the high priest into a temple anteroom. There, he casually took his seat in an elaborately carved chair, leaving Kana-Il standing. Elihadad’s gaze swept over Kana-Il’s simple attire with disdain.

‘So you are Kana-Il. We will deal with the matter immediately since you are

here.'

Kana-Il bowed his head in deference. 'Your summons was clear, my lord.'

Elihadad eyed him, savouring his authority. 'I hear you are a pious man, Kana-Il.'

Kana-Il said nothing, nodding as he wondered where this was leading.

'A man who understands the importance of appeasing the gods to avoid disaster—their wrath can make our crops fail, our women barren, and our enemies strong.'

Kana-Il shifted uncomfortably, wishing Elihadad would get to the point. Sensing this, the priest spoke bluntly. 'Your daughter, Ahlai, has been chosen to serve the gods for the coming year.'

He paused, then added with calculated cruelty, 'Yes, as one of the high priest's concubines. She pleases me.'

The words hit Kana-Il like a blow to the chest. His breath caught as if he were winded. 'Chosen?' he managed to say.

'Yes, your daughter—your family—chosen by the gods,' Elihadad replied, his voice laced with mockery. 'Few families receive such an honour.'

Kana-Il felt dread tighten in his stomach. Chosen to serve the gods. She would live at the temple for the year, supposedly an honour. But he didn't trust Elihadad, and there had been rumours...

Elihadad's face hardened as he leaned forward, eyes boring into Kana-Il. 'Of course, you can refuse. But denying the gods' choice can lead to... unthinkable consequences.' His voice trailed off, heavy with threat.

Kana-Il's mind raced. 'I need to think... I need guidance.'

'From whom?' Elihadad sneered. 'Your wife? The girl? Be assured, the gods guide the people through the priesthood. So, from whom then?'

He lifted his chin, looking down his nose at Kana-Il. 'You stand at a crossroads, Kana-Il. Will you choose honour, wealth, and security—or shame, exile, and ruin?'

Kana-Il tried to speak, but his mouth was dry.

‘Decide, man! The whole tribe will know your decision.’

The weight of the temple’s power crushed Kana-Il’s will. Maybe the rumours were just that—rumours. The temple was only ten minutes from home. What harm could come to Ahlai? And what would become of the family if he defied the gods?

‘I accept the... honour,’ he said haltingly. ‘But she must agree. My daughter must agree.’

Elihadad’s eyes glittered with triumph. ‘She will agree. Her mother will understand the gifts that come with honour, and together they will see what is within their grasp.’

---oOo---

Later, looking back, Kana-Il could not recall his desperate walk home. Guilt gnawed at him as his mind argued with itself. Suspicion, pessimism, and cynicism clashed with a flimsily fabricated hope.

Naamah saw him in the distance and ran to meet him. Her smile faltered as she took in the heaviness in his step and his grim expression.

‘What was that about?’ she asked, her tone uneven with anxiety.

‘Wait until we are inside,’ he murmured, head down, as they passed close by the huts of their friends and neighbours.

‘Well?’ she demanded, once they were away from listening ears.

‘Ahlai... has been chosen...’ Kana-Il said hollowly. ‘She is to serve the gods.’

Naamah’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes widening with delight. ‘Our daughter? Chosen to serve the gods? Kana-Il, do you know what this means? This is such an honour!’

He forced a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. ‘Yes. An honour,’ he echoed dully.

Naamah’s excitement bubbled over as she began to imagine the possibilities—

wealth, envy, prestige. Kana-Il, meanwhile, kept his growing unease to himself. His distrust of Elihadad, though unsupported by evidence, loomed large. He resolved to watch over his little girl, even from afar.

As dusk deepened, Ahlai returned home, arms full of herbs collected from the wayside. Naamah beamed at her, relieved her of the bundle, and swept her into a tight hug. ‘Well done, my sweet.’

Ahlai pulled back, her face puzzled. ‘Why? What have I done?’

‘You’ve brought honour and grace—and wealth!—to the family, Ahlai!’ Naamah exclaimed, barely pausing for breath. ‘The gods have chosen you to serve at the temple this year. You must have danced beautifully for them!’

Ahlai’s dark eyes narrowed. She turned to Kana-Il, who stood watching her intently. ‘Is this true?’

‘Yes, it is,’ he replied carefully. ‘Apparently you are to serve the gods.’

‘Do I get a choice?’ she asked, her chin lifting in defiance. She was, after all, a fifteen-year-old girl.

‘No, of course not, you will—’

‘Yes.’ Kana-Il cut Naamah off. ‘You can decline. But I need to explain the consequences.’

Naamah’s face darkened with disapproval but, to her credit, she stayed silent.

Ahlai listened as Kana-Il explained that acceptance would bring honour to the family, especially to her, while refusal would mean shame. Her expression shifted from confusion to a mix of sadness and resignation. Her eyes dropped to the floor and she breathed out a long sigh. ‘If it is the will of the gods, yes... fine, I suppose,’ she said quietly.

---oOo---

The days before Ahlai’s departure were a storm of emotions. Despite Kana-Il’s

efforts to keep a low profile, the neighbours somehow caught wind of the news, and now, gossip had spread like wildfire round the market. Naamah's good fortune was the topic of every conversation, with everyone—gullible or shrewd—having an opinion. Ahlai herself became a subject of intense fascination. Kana-Il, meanwhile, retreated into silence, his guilt constantly churning his insides. He evaded Naamah's questions and avoided Ahlai's searching gaze.

On the fateful morning, the door rattled once more with the mace of the temple guard. Naamah's eyes were wet with unshed tears as she embraced her daughter.

'Mother, I'm ten minutes away. Don't be a drama queen,' Ahlai said, pulling free. She turned to Kana-Il, who regarded her with a mix of concern and thoughtfulness.

'Yes, only ten minutes,' he said. 'I know you think you're strong, but be cautious. And take care of yourself.'

He might have continued, but the guards interrupted brusquely. 'It is time.'

And then, she was gone.

Kana-Il looked at Naamah, then around the room. Suddenly it felt very empty.

A few moments later the door rattled again as two guards entered, without knocking this time.

'For the father of the honoured family.' The taller of the two held out a fine linen robe. Kana-Il narrowed his eyes. He had never seen such beautifully worked cloth. It was far beyond the means of anyone in his social class.

'When am I going to be able to wear such a garment?' he asked sharply.

The guard merely bowed his head, and then said, 'Also for the father of the chosen girl.' He passed a bronze sickle and a long razor sharp bronze knife to Kana-Il, whose eyes widened as he took the tools.

Kana-Il knew he was being bought. The gifts were substantial, honouring and

practical. It made him worry even more. What would be the price of these things?

‘For the mother of the honoured family.’ The shorter, fatter guard passed a very large basket of provisions to Naamah.

‘And there will be further blessings if your daughter stays faithful to the gods choosing until the third moon wanes,’ the taller guard added.

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes smiled as she gazed at the dried fruits, honey, and four ceramic amphorae of olive oil. ‘We are blessed by the gods,’ she murmured, ‘look, Kana-Il, we shall celebrate with our friends!’

The guards left, and Kana-Il looked at his rapturous wife, his own heart sinking.

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Chapter 9 Candle

I've been to the ICU every day for the past three days. Freya isn't improving. In fact, I have to admit, she seems to be getting worse. Yesterday, she was sleeping more during the day and was clearly struggling to breathe.

I'm worried sick, wondering if she's going to make it. Every morning I wake up at some unearthly hour and within a few seconds, despair has settled on me making it almost impossible to stand. And this unending torture business just fills me with dread. Death is hard enough to face, but adding that to everything else feels unbearable. There seems to be no way of escape.

The hospital is always bustling, even early in the morning. I've had to sit in the foyer for forty-five minutes for visiting hours to start. The waiting is the worst part. With nothing to occupy me, my mind churns through every possible way in which things can get worse, and I can't make it stop. I've started trembling, but it's 9:30 now, and I have to get moving.

I step into the lift, my head swimming with anxiety, and press the button for the fourth floor—the ICU. Halfway up, without warning, I burst into tears as a wave of panic washes over me. I can't show up at the ICU like this, so I press the Emergency Stop button. The lift lurches to a halt. Struggling for air, taking great shaky breaths, I feel dizzy and sink to the floor, putting my head between my knees. This has happened a few times in the past decade, what with Nick and the mess of my marriage to Jeffrey. Back then, the only thing that kept me from falling apart entirely was deep breathing and praying for protection.

I try that now, but a thought hits me: there's no real protection from death—it's the inevitable conclusion to whatever leads up to it. And if Ryan is right, there's no shield from endless torment or unending regret either. I've gone to church since I was a child, attended Bible studies every Wednesday. Yet here I am, utterly faithless, discovering that if I truly believe anything, then Freya burns. I use the word "burn" because I'm suddenly absolutely livid. Livid with God. He wants me to be "faithful" to his word, so that I can be sure He's going to ...

A phrase from the Old Testament comes to mind—someone prayed it, though I can't remember who: *We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you*. I cling to those words, whispering them again and again: 'I don't know what to do, but my eyes are on you.' My anger subsides, exposing my sadness. A bitter voice echoes in my head: *I don't know what to do, and I don't even know what this prayer means!* I push that thought aside and keep repeating the words until my breathing slows and steadies.

Eventually, I stand up—stiff from sitting on my shins on the floor. No one has come to check on the lift. I guess the hospital is too busy. After a moment, I press the button for the fourth floor, and the lift resumes its climb.

Freya is in bed, asleep. Her skin looks pale and waxy. She now has an oxygen tube beneath her nose. Intravenous lines deliver both medication and nutrition, so there's no need to wake her. A passing nurse tells me that Freya was awake for about forty-five minutes earlier but fell asleep again around 9:15.

I settle into the visitor's chair beside her bed. After about ten minutes, a weak voice breaks the silence.

'Mum! You're here?'

Startled, I lean forward in my chair. I must have dozed off—it's 10:35! I quickly collect myself and reply, 'Of course, darling. I'm coming in every day.'

'Sorry to ruin your day,' she says, her tone thin and high.

‘Don’t say that, Freya. Seeing you makes my day.’

She falls silent, her eyelids drooping. She looks so fragile, like spun glass—delicate, pale, and perilously breakable.

A few minutes later, her eyes half open. She side-eyes me and opens her mouth. ‘Love you, Mum,’ her lips form the words, though no sound escapes, just a faint breath.

‘I love you, darling,’ I reply. I know she hears me because a tiny, fleeting smile graces her face. Within moments, she’s asleep again, her breathing slow and steady.

I feel disappointed because I had so hoped to spend time with her awake. But she needs her rest, so I settle back into the chair and watch her. The heart monitor marks the passing moments with a steady beep. It’s not a reassuring sound. I can’t shake the fear that it might suddenly stop.

At home, there’s a photograph on the mantelpiece of her and Nick. They’re sitting on the beach, and Nick is building her a sandcastle. If only I could go back to those days. I remember being distracted, thinking I’d lost my glasses. If I could relive that moment, I’d make sure all my attention was on my children. If only I’d known then what I know now.

I shake my head in frustration. Dwelling on the past won’t help. Freya needs me to be strong—a lioness protecting her cub.

A nurse enters and begins checking the monitors and IV lines. She moves efficiently, doing things I don’t understand, before jotting notes on a clipboard at the foot of the bed. Then she takes a photo of the notes with a tablet.

‘Is everything okay?’ I ask, anxiety creeping into my voice.

She turns to me. She appears to be about sixteen, though of course she must be older than that. ‘I’ve checked her vital signs. She’s responding to the medication, but the body heals in its own time.’

‘She seems to be getting weaker,’ I say, trying to steady my voice. ‘She’s sleeping

so much.'

'Freya is in the best place,' the nurse assures me.

'Please don't miss anything,' I murmur, trying to sound strong like a lioness, but my words come out soft and pleading. A bit pathetic.

'Are you staying all day?' she asks.

I feel a flicker of defensiveness. What is she implying? Am I in the way? Do they want me to leave?

Before my thoughts can spiral further, she adds, '...because if you are staying until this afternoon, I can always fetch you from the hospital cafeteria. When she wakes up. I'll message you if you like.' She pulls a phone from her pocket.

Her kindness is unexpectedly overwhelming. Tears prick my eyes, and for a moment, I feel broken by her thoughtfulness.

---oOo---

When the message comes at 1:15, I've already had two coffees and managed half a tuna sandwich. My stomach still churns.

Freya is awake.

I hurry to the ICU ward, where I find Freya anxiously scanning the room for me.

I kiss her pale cheek, and she clings to my hand for a brief moment before her head flops back onto the pillow. Her eyes barely stay open.

'Mum,' her voice is so faint I have to lean over to hear her, 'am I dying?'

My heart pounds, but I set my jaw and say *Lioness* to myself.

'No, Freya. You're fighting. Your body is working hard to heal itself. That's why you're so tired.'

'It feels more like I'm drifting, letting go...'

'No, darling. The best doctors are taking care of you, and your body is doing the rest. Don't worry.' I squeeze her hand gently, but her eyes have already closed again.

‘You’ll get through this. We will get through this. Nothing is going to take you away from me.’

She’s asleep again, after just a single exchange. Can she really be this weak?

Further down the corridor, a monitor alarm suddenly blares, and a nurse rushes past. After thirty seconds, the shrieking stops. The nurse reappears, calling to the front desk, ‘It’s fine. He’s fine. It’s reset.’

I glance back at Freya and see her eyes open, watching me. When our eyes meet, she smiles faintly before drifting off again. I sit with her for another thirty minutes, hoping she’ll wake up once more.

A doctor without a white coat comes into the room. I’ve seen him around the ward but never spoken to him. He picks up the clipboard at the end of the bed, flips through several pages, taps his biro on his teeth, and then glances at me. ‘Fine,’ he says simply.

‘How is she doing?’ I ask, hope stirring in my chest.

‘As well as can be expected,’ he replies. ‘The sleep is good. The medication is working for the most part. She’s having a little trouble breathing, so we’ve left the oxygen feed in place.’

I’ve learned not to press for more definite answers. These consultants, these medical experts, offer their assessments, and while they’re likely more accurate than my own instincts, they’re not always right.

He offers a brief smile and raises his eyebrows slightly—an attempt, I think, to encourage me to stay positive.

Within five minutes, a different nurse comes in and chucks me out of the ward. Not physically, but her message is clear: visiting hours are over. I want to burst into tears, but instead, I silently repeat *Lioness* to myself and treat her to a cold stare before leaving.

Now, I'm sitting in the far corner of the hospital cafeteria, by a small window, trying to distance myself from the noise and commotion. I don't know how to do this—how to stay positive while simultaneously preparing for the worst. I turn the problem over and over in my mind, but I can't find a resolution. It feels impossible, as though I can only do one or the other. Then I realize I don't even know which approach I should take, and frustration bubbles up. Then I get impatient because all this thinking is getting me nowhere.

I glance down at my coffee and find it's gone cold. Mechanically, I get up, walk to the counter, and buy another one. I feel like a machine, someone else invisible turning the handle. A cork bobbing aimlessly in the washing up bowl. No, worse—I'm the wooden spoon I was scrubbing this morning, scraping off stubborn bits of scrambled egg. Is that good for the wooden spoon?

Suddenly I snap awake. I'm so exhausted after four days of this and drifting off into rambling nonsense!

My mind shifts to Pastor Ryan and his steadfast defence of "truth." I wonder if he's another professional who might have got things wrong. I try to recall his words, searching for inconsistencies, but the effort feels futile, like I'm trapped in a pitch-black room. There could be a way out, but I can't see it—or even tell what shape the room might be.

I begin to pray again, though I notice my prayers have become more... what?.. businesslike? Transactional, almost. There's none of the customary ecclesiastical frills.

'Lord, I said I don't know what to do, but my eyes are on You. That sounds fine, but I can't actually see anything. Not a way out, not even the shape of this darkness. And I don't know what You're like, but if You're the kind of God who would torment Freya unendingly...'

I pause, startled by the thought that forms next.

I'd want to say I'm not interested in following You.

And then it hits me: God already knows that. He knows! He knows that hell was fine as an abstract, academic concept. But now that it has the name Freya etched on the guest list...

Guest list? The thought feels too flippant, and I chastise myself. But then I realize how much it hurts if I take it too seriously. I don't know what to think—or even how to think—about any of this any more.

But one thing I know for certain: I cannot hold onto the belief that Jesus Christ would watch Freya burning in hell.

And yet, I cannot let Him go either, because without Him, none of this makes sense.

I glance at my watch. It's just past seven. If Freya is awake, I might be able to see her for a few minutes more. Every minute is precious. This may be my last...

I clamp my mind shut so the thought is destroyed. Hopefully I can squeeze in another thirty minutes of visiting.

---oOo---

I find Freya awake, though too weak to open her eyes. I lean in, kiss her cheek, and hold her hand gently. Her voice comes as a faint whisper.

'You must be tired, Mum. Go home.'

'I'm exactly where I need to be, darling—right here with you,' I reply softly.

'You're stubborn, you know that?' she says, her voice gaining a touch of strength.

Her familiar wit and sharpness catch me off guard, but I manage to keep my emotions in check. 'You get that from me,' I say with a small smile.

Freya turns her head toward me and opens her eyes. They're clear and alert now, a rare and welcome moment. 'Thanks for staying,' she says.

‘No need to thank me,’ I respond, smiling back. ‘I’ll stay as long as they let me.’

The bossy nurse walks by without even glancing in our direction. As she passes, I widen my eyes dramatically and whisper, ‘Hopefully I can stay out of Agatha Trunchbull’s way!’

Freya’s lips twitch in a faint smile.

Outside, the sky has dimmed, and the ward feels quieter now, with noticeably fewer staff around. Suddenly, the harsh fluorescent lights flicker on overhead, flooding the room with their stark brightness. Both Freya and I blink against the glare.

An orderly enters, wielding a mop, meticulously cleaning the floor and paying particular attention to the corners. The sharp smell of antiseptic begins to fill the air.

‘Sorry about that, my loves,’ she says cheerfully as she passes the foot of Freya’s bed. ‘I’m nearly done.’

Noticing our discomfort in the bright light, she adds, ‘I’ll switch them off on my way out.’

True to her word, within a few minutes, the lights dim again as the orderly leaves, and the room settles into a cosy semi-darkness.

---oOo---

‘Hello, you two,’ Celia’s soft voice carries into the room as she appears at the door.

I haven’t spoken to her since our tense and distressing conversation at the café.

‘I won’t stop,’ she says gently, her voice filled with understanding. ‘I know your time together is precious.’

‘Please stay for a while, at least?’ I ask, feeling the pull of our lifelong friendship.

‘No, this is your special time. I just wanted to bring you this,’ she replies.

Celia places a small candle on the bedside table. A little card attached reads: I am the light of the world. She pulls a cigarette lighter from her handbag and lights the

wick. At first, the flame is barely more than a flicker, but within moments it grows to a steady, delicate centimetre-high glow.

It's astonishing how such a small flame can transform a room. The harsh, clinical feel of the ward softens instantly. The golden light casts a warm glow across Freya's bed, and even the shadows seem gentler, less severe.

Celia leans in to give me a quick hug and gently touches Freya's arm. Then, with a quiet smile, she slips out of the room.

I watch the little flame, mesmerized. It feels fragile—so tiny.

'Put that out!' A sharp voice shatters the tranquillity. The Trunch strides into the ward, all authority and irritation. With a practised motion, she pinches the flame between her fingers, extinguishing it.

'Why?' I ask, startled by the suddenness of her action.

The Trunch looks at me as if I am an eight year old caught playing with matches. 'This is a HOSPITAL!' she is speaking in capital letters. 'In all medical institutions, naked flames are DANGEROUS. This...' she says, shaking the plastic tube leading to Freya's nose, 'is OXYGEN!'

She marches to the wall and flicks on the fluorescent overhead lights, flooding the room with their stark brightness. 'These are the only lights that are allowed!'

To my surprise, Freya grins—her first real smile in days. Her voice, though faint, carries a hint of mischief. 'Looks like Jesus' light can't compete with the institution's fluorescents, Mum!'

I can't help but smile back, though the moment is fleeting.

'And visiting time is over!' the Trunch calls sharply from the doorway.

Freya and I share a simultaneous eye-roll. We're so close! Then there's time only for one kiss and a quick squeeze of hands. It's far too little.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 10 Iron Age

Ahlai had passed the temple many times but had never stepped inside. She walked fearfully across the courtyard, dwarfed by the three guards escorting her. As they neared the bronze gates, they swung open slowly, revealing an inner courtyard. With every step closer to the temple itself, the air grew heavier with the mingled scents of old blood and the cloying musk of incense.

The temple was overwhelmingly beautiful, a place that dazzled as much as it unsettled. Two guards peeled away, leaving the remaining one to lead her through torch-lit corridors, where flickering flames sent shadows dancing across marble floors. She had never walked on such smooth stone, nor passed beneath the imposing forms of gilded statues, nor let her fingers brush the intricate patterns of finely woven tapestries. The splendour overawed her, but the sheer strangeness of such power and wealth filled her with unease.

They stopped at an open door. A tall, elderly woman with a bitter face dismissed the guard with a curt gesture, then took Ahlai by the hand saying, 'First, cleaning and purifying.' Her tone matched her face.

She led Ahlai through the doorway into a secluded courtyard enclosed by high stone walls. At its centre stood a stone basin filled with crystal-clear water. Linen curtains hung around the basin, drawn to ensure privacy. The total silence, combined with the heavy scent of incense, made it clear to Ahlai that this was a ritual, though she had never encountered anything like it before.

The woman's demeanour left no doubt that this was not to be enjoyed. The

purification was a serious act, intended to eliminate the innate uncleanness of women. It was not just the city's dust and sweat that needed to be removed, but also any lingering trace of her previous menstruation.

Intensely embarrassed, Ahlai was instructed to strip off her clothes and place them in a basket. Bitterface made it clear that her peasant rags would be discarded, and once she was pure, she was to dress in the fine white linen garment provided. She was to remain barefoot.

Ahlai hesitated, staring at the jars and cloths, uncertain how to proceed. The woman's frown deepened, diminishing what little charm her features might possibly have held. With a brusque efficiency, she guided Ahlai into the basin, poured olive oil perfumed with hyssop from one of the jars onto a cloth, and began wiping it over Ahlai's arm. Then, without a word, she reached for a wickedly curved knife.

Ahlai shrank back, her eyes wide, 'What is that for?'

'The strigil?' The woman laughed, grabbing Ahlai's hand and running her finger along the blunt blade before passing it to her. 'It's for scraping the dirt off. Get on with it, girl. Don't waste time!' With that, Bitterface retreated, disappearing behind the curtains and leaving Ahlai alone.

Despite the woman's harsh attitude, Ahlai found herself enjoying the first bath she had ever had. For a while, she was able to ignore the sense of foreboding that darkened her thoughts. Whenever the woman's face appeared around the curtain, Ahlai would quickly wash some part of herself, paying fastidious attention to the task. She felt safe in the quiet solitude and, for a time, managed to push the future from her mind. But eventually, the pressure to get dressed became undeniable.

Ahlai was led through another marble-floored corridor and unceremoniously pushed into a large room. Two other girls were already there, standing before Elihadad.

'Very good,' the priest said, rubbing his hands together as he watched Ahlai

enter. 'Come, join us.'

Elihadad sat in an elaborately carved chair behind a large writing desk. To his right stood a sizeable chest, with a stack of five or six parchments resting on top. His desk was cluttered with reed pens, an ink pot, and several sheets of papyrus.

There were no other chairs in the room, so the three girls remained standing, facing him in silence.

'So,' Elihadad began, his eyes narrowing as he studied the girls, 'the chosen vessels of the gods.' An awkward silence followed as his gaze swept over each of them with meticulous scrutiny. 'You must appreciate that this is a great privilege. Your families have been chosen to receive honour from the gods.'

He rose from his chair, circling the desk and pacing slowly behind the line of girls. 'Good,' he murmured to himself, almost inaudibly, before resuming his seat.

'You each appear perfect,' he continued, his tone firm. 'And within the temple, perfection is not optional—it is required at all times. When you fall short, that will be remedied. But remember, the gods demand more than a perfect appearance. They require perfect behaviour, perfect obedience, and perfect cleanliness.'

Elihadad clapped his hands sharply, and three older women entered the room, one of them the ever-stern Bitterface. 'Take these girls to their chambers,' he barked.

When Ahlai was shown to her chamber, she was astonished once again. Though the space was small, it was furnished with an opulence she had never imagined—silk cushions, the heady aroma of sandalwood incense lingering in the air. To one side, a small basin held clean water, with olive oil and scrapers neatly arranged beside it.

'This is where you will sleep and spend your days until summoned,' Bitterface instructed curtly. 'You may be called at any time, day or night. There will be no time to wash then, nor to prepare yourself, nor alter your appearance. Always be ready. A clean robe will be brought to you each morning. Understood?'

Ahlai nodded.

‘Your meals will be brought here. Keep this room clean at all times. You will be taught the wisdom and prayers of the gods. Understood?’

Ahlai nodded again.

‘The first day you become unclean, you must notify me immediately in the morning...’ Bitterface paused, her sharp eyes catching the confusion on Ahlai’s face.

‘Become unclean?’ Ahlai echoed.

The woman grimaced as though she had bitten into a lemon. ‘Bleeding!’ she snapped, fixing Ahlai with a look of utter disdain. ‘Notify me in the morning, and you will be removed from the temple until you are cleansed.’

Wide-eyed, Ahlai nodded. She watched as Bitterface turned sharply and stalked out of the room.

---oOo---

The next two days were tedious and lonely. Ahlai had only Bitterface for company at mealtimes and began to wonder if she would ever see anyone else—apart from the unpleasant old woman and her own reflection in the large bronze mirror on the wall. She missed her mother and father, the lively chatter of the market, and the laughter of her friends.

On the third day, just before noon, Elihadad appeared at the door. He scrutinized her silently, his gaze lingering as if evaluating every detail. Finally, apparently satisfied with her appearance, he said, ‘Come.’

She followed him through the labyrinth of corridors toward the heart of the temple. They stopped at an arched entrance veiled by a heavy curtain, watched over by a temple guard. At Elihadad’s nod, the guard pulled back the edge of the curtain.

‘This is the Holy Place,’ Elihadad said. ‘You must never enter, or the gods will strike you down.’

Ahlai shivered. The sheer scale, the overwhelming opulence, and even the forbidding restrictions spoke of an irresistible power. She had no doubt Elihadad was telling the truth. Surely, the gods were to be feared in such a place.

‘Look to the right,’ Elihadad murmured, his voice almost reverent. ‘The pole of Asherah.’

Ahlai turned her gaze. The pole was as thick as a man’s torso and stretched all the way to the ceiling of the Holy Place. It was intricately carved, adorned with images of fertility—fruit, breasts, and intertwining vine branches. Ahlai found it unsettling, even repugnant, but she quickly masked her revulsion.

‘Asherah controls your fruitfulness,’ Elihadad continued. ‘If you are to bear a child, as the gods demand, you must pray to her and burn incense in her honour when commanded.’

He nodded to the guard, who let the curtain fall back into place. Ahlai felt herself relax, if only slightly.

‘Stand straight, girl!’ Elihadad barked. ‘Never forget you are divinely chosen—perfect. Chosen for a perfect purpose. Your family is to be praised for their devotion. The gods always and only demand perfection.’

Instinctively, Ahlai hung her head at the rebuke.

‘Head up!’ Elihadad thundered, towering over her. He rapped her on the crown with his knuckles, firm enough to sting. She lifted her head, tears pricking her eyes as her teenage defiance stirred within her.

‘Higher!’ he said.

She straightened her back, lifting her head, and met his gaze with defiance, challenging him to find fault. Their eyes locked. As she looked into his face, she wondered what ‘serving the gods’ truly meant, and whether her father’s caution might indeed have been wise. What did ‘honour’ really mean for her? Under the weight of his

stare, she held her ground.

Suddenly, he smiled. ‘Aha! Some spirit! Good.’ He turned sharply on his heel.
‘Come!’ he commanded, striding toward the corridor that led to her chamber.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 11 Decline

It's Saturday. The hospital's starting to feel like home—like I'm a permanent fixture here. The receptionist, the nurses, the porter—everyone knows me now. Every day I watch Freya get worse, little by little, and it's crushing. She's only twenty-three! She should be living her best life now, not stuck in a hospital bed, dying piece by piece.

There's an old chap in the next bed to Freya with rheumy eyes, grey skin and cracked lips who has broken his pelvis. He seems to be in a lot of pain. He moans a lot anyway. Freya has noticed him and said a few words, but he's mostly unresponsive unless he's moaning. I look around the ward. For sure, some of these people are going to die. Is it bad that I hope it's him rather than Freya?

Late afternoon. Another consultant. Nice guy, quiet, careful with his words. Probably used to giving bad news. He tries to let me down gently, but it still hurts. I've seen this before. Freya's organs are failing, and she's swelling up. Fluid retention. I know what that means. I've learned more about heart failure than I ever wanted to know.

I'm just so so angry! *Why is this happening?* I can't fix this! Nobody can! But God's not helpless, is he? But he's sitting back and doing nothing, letting her suffer. And when she dies, what's next? He's going to burn her alive in hell forever? That's what I'm supposed to believe? Sometimes, I wonder how the hell I ever believed any of this crap.

But what's the alternative? Believe me, I've spent hours and hours—mostly at night—thinking about this. The alternative is worse. If God exists, he can fix this. If he

doesn't, then Freya's just a random result of some evolutionary luck. Nothing more meaningful than a bowl of primaeval soup. And if truth is supposed to reflect reality, and my brain—anybody's brain—is just some random collection of atoms or molecules or whatever, then how can anyone even trust their own thoughts?

I spend most of my time trudging around in gloomy circles worrying about Freya. And when I'm not, I'm worrying about whether any of this even matters.

Anyway, I didn't really want to tell you any of that. I just wanted to let you know how Freya is.

The Trunch got on my nerves this afternoon, so I let her have it. I'm really ashamed at myself. I don't think I have ever done that before. Gave her both barrels. She gave as good as she got, though.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 12 Ryan

So it's Saturday evening now—Ryan said he could see me at 7.30. I'm drinking tea again. Back in the same chairs as last Tuesday. I'm not doing the small talk this time.

Ryan smiles at me, 'How's things?'

I don't really have an answer to that. Not one that's both polite and truthful. Before I can come up with something I'm happy for my Pastor to hear, he says, 'Sorry... Stupid question. Pretty bad, I'm guessing?'

I nod. Numbly. Our eyes meet, and I can almost see the hopelessness flow from me to him. He doesn't know Freya. She's not been to church once in the last six years. Not since my second husband murdered her brother. Sorry. Manslaughtered. But Ryan knows how much we've been through. So that's good.

I really don't want to waste time on chat this evening. Even if I had time, I'm too tired. But I feel too awkward launching straight in, so I say, 'How's all the family, Ryan? I expect you're busy as ever?'

Ryan face softens as he smiles. 'They're all fine,' he says smoothly, 'but I'm concerned about you, Melissa. How are you—really?'

'I want to say "Fine". But I'm not really.' I pause and feel a bit anxious. I'm desperate to ask some more questions. Ryan is just sitting there listening, so I go for it.

'I walked past that poster up outside All Saints Church. Our church used to have it up a few months back. D'you remember it? Picture of the cross against a sunset, and the words, "Unconditional Love"'.

Ryan nods. I can see in his eyes he knows what's coming. But I spell it out

anyway.

‘Well, according to you, God made Freya with a genetic flaw that’s now put her into hospital. He then allowed the pain and distress of seeing her brother beaten to death. And he’s now saying to her, “if you don’t decide to repent and follow me, then you’ll be tormented continually through unending time. It won’t necessarily be real flames, but the pain level will be the same.”’

I pause. Ryan says nothing. He can see this is going to be one his more challenging pastoral sessions this week.

‘And if you find that you are unable to choose to follow me later, I’m not putting you out of your misery. I’m not getting involved. You’re on your own,’ I say flatly.

I lean back and look at him. His hooded eyes are saying, *Please let’s not do this*. But we’re going to. Sorry Ryan.

‘Does that sound like unconditional love to you, Ryan?’

Ryan finds his voice. ‘I can’t explain it, Melissa.’

‘I’m so sorry, Ryan, but I don’t know how else to say this, and there’s no-one else I could ask!’

Now when people use your name in a conversation, it can come across as patronising. But the way he says “Melissa” breaks my heart. Because I’m a mess. Either bitter or blubbering. It’s Saturday night when he should be enjoying time with the family. And yet he says “Melissa” as if I’m really precious to him.

‘The thing is,’ he continues, ‘God is endlessly loving but also holy and just. But if I reject his love, I expose myself to his justice.’

‘Let’s keep it real. We are talking about Freya here, not you.’ I feel bad being this confrontational. It’s not like me at all, but I... I should say, we have ducked this issue my whole life.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘So?’

‘Same deal,’ he hesitates. I wait, with raised eyebrows. He concedes, ‘If Freya rejects his love, she exposes herself to his justice. Which is separation from God eternally. Which is separation from everything good. That is the just punishment.’

‘No remission? No parole?’

Ryan pauses. Then he shakes his head.

‘So how does this punishment satisfy what God’s justice requires?’

I don’t think anyone had asked Ryan that question before, so I continue for him. ‘What I mean is, if a punishment has to go on forever, then it sounds like justice is never satisfied.’

‘We can’t explain God’s reasoning. His love and his justice are beyond our comprehension.’

‘But how can I be asked to accept statements about God’s unconditional love and God’s righteous justice if to do so, I have to totally redefine the words to mean precisely the opposite!’

Ryan takes a deep breath and sighs. ‘This is probably not a good time to be diving into this, Melissa.’ He gives a sad smile, and slowly shakes his head. ‘It’s all just too distressing for... ‘

‘No, it’s the right time,’ my voice sounds more pleading than I’d like, ‘because what previously was remote and academic is now personal and real. You know Freya can’t grasp these things because she’s not so able academically, but I should be able to!’

‘You know, God will absolutely take Freya’s mental capacity into account... ‘

He thinks he’s found a way to make this conversation go away by fudging, but I’m not letting that happen, so I cut in, ‘No, I don’t mean that. Freya can understand Jesus’ command to love God, and knows that he said to follow him. But, Ryan, the

trauma that she's been through means she simply cannot bring herself to trust Him, when He let Jeffrey kill Nick.'

'I think God in his love can take all this into consideration.'

'Yes, but haven't you just contradicted the simple statement you made the other day—that Freya has to put her trust in Jesus otherwise ... well, you know.' I stop mid-sentence. The conversation is beginning to depress me. I'm beginning to want out. But then I'm not going to resolve this unless I insist on confronting what the Bible says, so I belatedly finish my sentence, 'otherwise she's going to burn in hell forever.'

As I say that last part, a doubt pops into my mind. *Is that what the Bible says?* Ryan has carried on talking about God's justice being absolute, and Christ being the only way, and about accountability, but I'm no longer listening.

'Ryan,' I say, 'I'm going to do a bit of Bible study I think.' I stand up to leave. 'I think that's the best way forward.'

Ryan looks simultaneously relieved and uncomfortable. Probably relieved because I'm going and uncomfortable that he wasn't able to give me an answer that satisfied me.

He gets up and walks across to his bookshelf and slides out a slim book entitled "Hell and the Reformers". 'This might be helpful,' he says. I look uncertainly at the cover depicting a man tied to a stake, but I take it anyway. I don't want to be impolite. He's given up his Saturday evening in order to provide no help at all to someone who doesn't actually want to understand how a loving God can keep a torture chamber in the basement of Heaven, and everybody still be happy!

-----oOo-----

Chapter 13 Study

I get home at a quarter past eight. I've been rained on slightly, so I'm damp. I was worrying a bit on the way home—I've never been much of an academic so I'm not sure how this bible study thing is going to go. Not much stuck in my head from school, but as I was walking up to my front door, I did recall being taught about Tacitus, the Roman historian. He said that when the ancient Scandinavian tribes were trying to decide something important, they would discuss everything first of all when they were sober, and then they would discuss it all again when they were drunk. Only then would they take a decision.

So once I'm settled in the dining room with my Bible, and my laptop, and "Hell and the Reformers", I decide a glass of red wine is in order! I choose quite a large wineglass, as this could be a long session. I tell myself this is nothing to do with drowning my sorrows.

Now the phrase 'burn in hell forever' was the one that provoked the doubt. Does the Bible actually say that? I open 'Hell and the Reformers'. It's only about ten pages, and it says all the stuff I've been taught since I was knee high. I decide that's no good. All I am getting is someone else's opinion, and it is presented as all cut and dried.

I stare at the Bible for a few seconds, then turn to the Contents page. I have no idea where to look. Is there actually a text that says "burn in hell forever"? It's the "forever" thing that is bugging me. Thoughtfully I take a generous sip of wine, letting it swirl on my tongue. Aha! I recall the words, "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." It's the sheep and goats story in

Matthew's Gospel. And sure enough, eternal means forever. But Matthew wasn't written in English was it—so what did the Greek actually say?

That's when I remember that my Grandfather, who used to be a lay preacher, used what he called his "interlinear". It was a giant bible of sorts, with the English, the Hebrew and the Greek. I don't have one of those so I do what we all do these days. I search on the internet with the phrase 'Matthew 25:46 Interlinear'. And there it is on the screen, instantaneously! The English with the corresponding Greek on the line below. Eternal. I drop my eye down. *Aeonian*.

So I search, 'What does aeonian mean?' The single-sentence AI response comes back: 'The Greek word aeonian is typically translated as "eternal" in the Bible, but its meaning is more complex than that.'

Things quickly get confusing and tedious. Within three minutes I have five tabs open now—a lexicon, a couple of theological blogs, and a random Reddit thread where a couple of people are passionately debating Greek etymology. *Oh! This is quite a touchy subject*. I'm wading through an ocean of opinions, pushing me in all directions. My glass of red wine sits beside me like a helpful study partner, and I'm grateful for its calming influence. I take a long sip and tell myself to focus. One word at a time, I think.

For the next hour and a half, I scribble notes on a legal pad, my handwriting getting more drunken-spiderish with every passing minute. Occasionally, I glance at the wine bottle. Should I pour another glass? I decide against it. It would be good if tomorrow, I could read what I've written, after all!

By the time I finally lean back in my chair, I'm both weary and wired. My notes are messy, a mix of half-formed ideas, underlines and crossings out, but they'll have to do. I scan through them quickly, just to feel like I've accomplished something tonight. The words and verses blur slightly, but I know there's some progress hidden in there—somewhere. I'll just have to sort through it tomorrow.

The adjective is "aeonian". Noun singular is "aeon", plural "aeonias".

Mark 9:48: 'Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

Olam (OT Heb) => Aeon (NT Gk) => Eternity ... but only when convenient!!!

LXX version = Septuagint = OT Hebrew translated to Greek in (when?) It translates olam as aeon 96% of the time.

When "eternal" makes no sense, the translators put in "ages" or "age"!

Sometimes other words, like "world".

Example in Ephesians—(God made) plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages (aeons) past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

Did Hebrew "olam" mean "forever"?

NO! Jonah was apparently in the whale for "olam". (Chapter 2 vs 6)

It's all a bit of a jumble. It seems a "forever hell" hinges almost entirely on what the Greek word aeon means. I may have bitten off more than I can chew! I'm done for today. I have a feeling I know what's going to happen in the morning, so I finish off the glass of wine, grab the laptop and climb the wooden hill.

---oOo---

Morning! Yes, it is as I thought! Ouch! My head pounds as I open my eyes. I seem to have quite a bad headache. I tell myself it's down to too much study last night. It is 5.30am. I'm waking up this early every day at the moment. Stress.

I think I dreamed in Greek last night. Or did I dream I thought in Greek? Rubbing my temples, I drag myself out of bed, the remnants of a hangover making every movement feel sluggish. I grab the laptop and dump it unceremoniously onto the bed cover with a frustrated sigh. I need to make progress before I leave for the hospital in about three hours, but my mind is still foggy from last night's marathon of research plus stress over Freya. One thing though—the pressure to get to the answer—assuming

there is one—is distracting me from my dejection. I reckon I can do an hour and then get some much-needed coffee, even if it means skipping a proper breakfast. The clock is ticking, and I know I'll probably end up eating a slice of toast.

The first thing I discover is that the word *aeon* is the subject of enormous academic interest. After swimming in internet opinions—each more convoluted than the last—for about twenty minutes, I download a document entitled “Life Time Entirety”. It's a study of the single word *aeon*. I decide to read it before making coffee. That's before I realise it is 306 pages of closely packed 10 point font!

It's a post graduate dissertation by one Heleen M. Keizer. My eyes glaze over as I skim the first few pages, then I quickly scroll down through it and see that at least two-thirds of the document are footnotes in 6-point font. Maybe the *life time entirety* refers to how long it took Heleen to complete it! On second thoughts, I might have time to read the contents page before coffee—if I'm lucky. That alone is three pages long, and I need to conserve my energy. It will probably be another long day.

I stumble down the stairs to the kitchen, still battling the revenge of last night's red wine which is layered on top of my ever present worry for Freya. I pour myself a cup of strong black coffee, then sniff the bitter aroma which usually enables me to take human form! As I take the first mouthful (you know, that's always the best!), I'm astonished that most of human history was lived, and all of St. Paul's letters were written without a single cup of coffee! Enough, Melissa! Focus! I tell myself, shaking my head as I take another gulp to jolt myself awake.

First, I scan Heleen's introduction chapter. Interesting! It asks all the questions I have, and several more I never thought of. I am astonished to see that the word *aeon* was used by Homer—think 800 years before the New Testament! At which point in time, *aeon* apparently meant life. So how did it come to mean eternity? I wonder.

Not wanting to trawl through the hundred and fifty odd pages that may or may

not document that transition in fine detail, I skip straight to a section on Philo of Alexandria—he lived twenty or so years before Jesus was born. At the time Alexandria was a major intellectual centre of the ancient world. Philo took it upon himself to try to harmonise Judaism’s religious views with Greek philosophy. He wrote specifically about hell, but it looks like he defined it as a temporary purification process.

What? No! I’m distracted by a web page pop-up from yesterday’s search. It offers me a subscription to some magazine, but the article it points to tells me that at the time of Jesus, there is no written evidence for a widespread belief in a hell of never-ending torment. Really? I am not sure. You can’t always... make that you can’t usually trust the internet! I resolve to stick to really authoritative pieces of academic research like “Life Time Entirety”. Although I have to say after another ten minutes or so, it feels like I’m trying to understand the rules of chess when I’m really more of a Ker-plunk kind of person!’

I scroll through other bits that look relevant, but this is such an amazingly detailed massive piece of research, and so authoritative, that I feel justified going to the conclusion section at the end, rather than doing the additional five years of reading!

I decide to jot down some brief notes, feeling extremely guilty that Heleen has laboured long and hard over 300 pages, and I have the luxury of whizzing straight to the end of the story.

So I note...

*600 years before Christ, the meaning of the word “aeon” was “life”.
During the 600 years leading up to Jesus birth, Greek literature
was using the word aeon to mean life or the total lifetime of something
—a man or even the cosmos.*

When I see how brief they are, I feel really bad. Sorry Heleen! I keep going. The next part covers the use of *olam* and *aeon* in the Bible. I find this a bit difficult because

I've obviously ducked the hard work of reading the detail! But anyway, I've got to try.

Soon, I find myself getting bogged down. My head feels heavy, as though it's resisting every attempt to focus. With a sigh, I shove the laptop shut and wander out into the kitchen. My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven't eaten yet. Then the melancholy lands as I recall eating breakfast just a few days ago. Breakfast for two. Disgustingly unhealthy fried bacon sandwich. What does it matter, I think? But it seems there's no bacon left anyway. Freya and I, we ate the last few rashers. Together.

Come on, Melissa! Toast will have to do. I rummage through the bread bin and push two slices into the toaster. As I wait, I check the time on my phone. 8:15 am. Good. That still leaves me about another three-quarters of an hour before I need to leave for the hospital.

While the toaster clicks and hums, it strikes me how weird life is. We spend our entire time absorbed by the toaster, the washing up, yesterday's lemony cleaning spray smell, but as soon as something threatens that life, none of those things matter a jot! I can't stop thinking about her, lying so still in that hospital bed. The ever present sick black hole weighs heavy in my body. *I really really can't lose her!* I swallow hard, forcing myself back to the present.

The toast pops up, startling me. I butter it quickly, the knife clinking against the plate. The toast smell grounds me a bit. Back in the dining room, I set the plate beside my laptop and sit down with a determined exhale. Right! I take a bite of toast, the crunch breaking the silence, and push myself back into study. The work is hard, the questions unrelenting, but something is driving me. Albeit like driving in the dark with the lights off.

Romans 16. 2 Timothy 1. Daniel 7. I review the verses in the Hebrew, Greek and even Aramaic. I didn't even know Daniel was written in Aramaic. But then, why would I? After a while it begins to make more sense to me. Here's my notes. They won't make

much sense to you. Sorry about that, but you haven't done the hard work!

The word *aeon* means "all time which coincides with the created space/time".

The Hebrew says "from *olam*" or 'since *olam*'

The Greek says "before *aeon*"

That's an explicit reference to the domain of God outside of the cosmos.

Aeon means "life as regarding time" or "time as it relates to life".

The word "*aeon*" does not have any sense of "endlessness".

But it does carry the strong sense of "entirety".

Jesus talked about "this present *aeon*" and "the coming *aeon*".

They translated it as "age" rather than "eternity". I guess they had to!

The writer to the Hebrews (11:3) says

"By faith we understand that the universe (*aiōnas*) was created (*katertisthai*) by the word of God. So if "*aionas*" = "ages" ...

I stop mid-sentence and wonder if God did create the ages? I look up what the Greek word was, translated as "create". *Katertisthai*. Then I cross-check the definition without providing any context. "To make ready, to restore, to put into its proper order". Interesting. So I continue my notes.

Heb 11:3—Melissa version (!) "By faith we understand that the ages were precisely adjusted and fitted together at God's command".

Almost everywhere in scripture, using word "age" or "ages" works fine.

What is the driving need for "eternity" to be used instead?

I sit back and look at my notes. I can see that the simple conclusion is that the word *aeon* can mean any period ranging from three days (à la Jonah) up to the lifetime of the cosmos. But then I recall it has to carry the idea of "life" and the idea of "totality" or "completeness".

Phew! I'm beginning to feel a bit more sympathetic now to people trying to get

Bible translation done right!

In the back of my mind, there's an insistent whisper. *It's still three days being burned alive. Can you live with that? It's still not "unconditional love" is it?* I ignore it, for now.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 14 Iron Age

Naamah stirred the barley porridge. It was nearly done. She would have liked to sweeten it for Kana-Il, but the basket of fruits they had been gifted had been empty for weeks. It had been a new experience to enjoy fresh fruit for a short while, but sadly, they were back to their usual, rather plain diet. It might have lasted longer if she had been less generous to Zamira, the widow next door.

Zamira's husband had taken a younger woman, only to meet a violent end in a dispute with Zamira's brother—one fatal stab wound, and he was gone. Since then, Zamira had withdrawn, speaking little, her interactions marked by reluctance and the occasional bitter outburst. Yet Naamah, with her soft heart, could not help but reach out. And when Zamira needed the strength of a man for something practical, Kana-Il stepped in without question.

Naamah gave one last stir and then poured out a bowlful for Kana-Il. Before he had taken the first spoonful, the door shook with the rap of the mace. Again! They exchanged a glance. They hadn't heard from Ahlai in over three weeks, and their concern was growing.

Naamah cracked open the door, only to find herself staring at five faces—three temple guards and two goats, all looking equally disgruntled. The guards were probably unhappy about delivering lavish gifts to a peasant family, and the goats, dragged through town by a piece of string, would much rather have been grazing on grass.

'Who is it?' Kana-Il asked as he joined his wife and pushed the door open wider. 'Oh, it's you.'

It was the same trio of guards who had visited just over three months previously. The tall one passed the goats' leads to Kana-Il. 'For the father of the honoured family.' There was more than a trace of resentment in his voice, though everyone knew the

temple guards generally fared well. He added, in a stiff tone, ‘The gods wish to prosper you for the faithfulness of your daughter.’

Naamah’s eyes widened as a broad smile spread across her face. They had only ever owned one goat, a wedding gift eighteen years ago. It had provided them with milk for seven years, but when it grew old, they had slaughtered it, eaten the meat, and cured the hide. They had never had the means to replace it.

The second guard stumbled forward and dropped a large sack of grain at Naamah’s feet. She stepped back, staring in awe. This was food for the two of them for around three months.

Before she could react, the third guard thrust a reed basket into her hands, filled with several ceramic jars of oil and wine. ‘Thank you so much,’ she said, offering each guard a bright-eyed smile. She turned to Kana-Il, who had remained silent. ‘Look, Kana-Il! The gods have been good to us.’

‘Maybe,’ he muttered, turning away.

Finally, the tall guard, evidently eager to conclude his duties, delivered his final line. ‘May the gods continue to bless the family of the chosen with abundance.’ He really could have used a bit more enthusiasm—or maybe a director shouting, ‘Once more! With passion!’ But he had had enough. With a sharp order to the other two, the three of them quickly retreated.

---oOo---

Two months passed, and the sack of grain slowly emptied. They lived well. The goats must have borne kids recently, and they lactated reliably every day. Naamah was content with her lot, although very confused about her husband’s behaviour. Kana-Il seemed permanently anxious and evasive, though Naamah assumed it was because of his concern for Ahlai’s welfare. She dismissed his fears, however. Full food bowls every day, and the bleating goats promise of milk each morning was enough for her. And

Naamah was pleased to be able to leave a portion of goat's milk at Zamira's door a couple of times each week, but rarely did she receive any visible gratitude apart from the occasional curt nod.

It was again early in the day when the guard rapped on the door. It was Kana-Il this time who opened the door, expecting the three guards. Instead Ahlai flung herself into his arms. He held her tight as Naamah, recognising her daughter's shriek of delight, hurried out of the bedroom and joined the hug.

The three of them shared an excited exchange of 'How are you's?' before Naamah suddenly stepped back and said 'Oh, Ahlai!'

Ahlai smiled, nodding. The two women shared a look of understanding.

Kana-Il, still holding his daughter, glanced from one to the other, his expression puzzled. 'What?' he demanded.

Naamah shook her head, smiling at her clueless husband. For a moment there was a quiet in the room. Then Ahlai said, 'Tell him, Mum.'

Kana-Il's gaze flicked between them, the realization dawning slowly. His eyes widened. 'Oh!' he said as realisation dawned, 'You're with child.'

Ahlai nodded, her hand resting instinctively on her belly.

Naamah clapped her hands with joy. 'Yes! So there's a chance...'

Ahlai nodded again, her face growing serious and her eyes dropping to the floor.

'What?' Kana-Il said, feeling annoyed at the incomprehensible unspoken conversation yet again.

'There's a chance I'll be made a wife,' Ahlai said quietly.

Kana-Il's expression hardened, 'Fortunately, I very much doubt that!' he retorted. 'Over my dead body!'

'Darling!' Naamah protested, her voice a mixture of surprise and mild reproach. 'To be a wife to the high priest would be amazing—such an honour.'

‘I don’t wanna be anyway. Elihadad is always banging on about being perfect. Perfect face, perfect body, perfect cleanliness, perfect behaviour. I can’t stand it! If it weren’t for...’ She paused mid-sentence, then winced. ‘Ouch! That was a kick.’

Ahlai patted her stomach affectionately, and murmured gently, ‘Calm down in there!’ then turning to her parents, her face lit up and she said, ‘I can’t wait to get us both back home.’

‘No, I couldn’t bear to be his wife,’ she continued, her tone darkening. ‘He only ever orders me around,’ she added bitterly. ‘And when he comes to me, it isn’t love.’

‘He’s a man!’ Naamah responded, her voice a little too bright. ‘What do you expect?’

‘That’s men, is it?’ Kana-Il said, his voice raised angrily. He stared at Naamah for a second, his gaze narrowing. ‘Is that what I’m like?’

Naamah stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around him. ‘Not you, my love, you’re different from most men.’

He disentangled himself and stepped back, still hurting. ‘So what kind of man do you aspire to, as a son-in-law for your daughter,’ he said staring her down.

‘As good as you,’ she said laughing. ‘But wealthier!’ she continued, trying to disarm him. ‘So we may be halfway there!’

‘Very funny,’ he growled, turning away.

A sadness swept across Naamah’s face as she watched his reaction.

Sensing the moment, Ahlai stepped across and stood next to her mother. She took her mother’s hand and placed it on her swollen tummy. ‘Say hello to your new granddaughter, Mum!’

Naamah smiled then and said, ‘I’m hoping I am saying hello to my new grandson.’

Bending low, she spoke to the bump. ‘Hello little man. I’m hoping to see you

soon.’ Then she straightened up and put her arms around Ahlai once more, speaking in a faux-whisper, ‘Your sister has already given me enough granddaughters!’

Kana-Il turned, feeling somewhat guilty about his mood, tried humorous sarcasm, ‘Surely you can’t have too many women in one family?’

But either the phrase was too convoluted, or Naamah wanted to misunderstand. She simply rolled her eyes and responded, ‘Perhaps you would be better seeing to the goats then!’

Seeing Kana-Il stamp out of the hut, Zamira couldn’t help but feel a flicker of satisfaction. So, the perfect husband had his flaws after all.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 15 A Moment

They keep these places so stiflingly hot! I suppose they have to—everyone here is seriously ill.

The old man who moans a lot has been moved to the far side of the ward. He's quieter at the moment. The only person who ever visits him, maybe his wife—same age, late 70s or so—never stays long. She sits stiffly by his bed for a while, then slips out as quickly as she arrived.

There's a new patient across the way—a boy, maybe ten years old, with both legs in heavy casts. His parents are with him almost constantly. The dad even has his arm in a sling, which makes me think it must have been some kind of car accident.

Freya drifted off to sleep again about twenty minutes ago. Our chat before that can't have lasted more than ten minutes. The familiar faces in the ICU have given me their usual sympathetic smiles this morning. They know Freya isn't improving. When she wakes up, she can manage a few minutes of conversation, but then she fades quickly, needing another hour or so of rest. She is so weak that the slightest effort takes it out of her.

I'm slumped in the bedside chair, struggling to keep my eyes open. I'm not sleeping well at all. Last night, I had the most peculiar dream—vivid, detailed, and completely bizarre. I can't remember much of it now, just a strange sense of being caught up in some kind of web or network. Not tangled exactly, but involved, somehow. The more I try to pin it down, the more it slips away, and I know I'm probably inventing half the details just to match the feeling. Still, I woke up with this absurd fear that someone in the hospital was mixing up morphine and caffeine. I shake my head. Stress. Just stress.

I managed to speak to Freya at 9:45 this morning—our longest conversation all

week, a full fifteen minutes. Now it's 11:35, and I desperately need another coffee. I stand up, stretching trying to get some of the ache out of my limbs. Then I wander down to the cafeteria.

As I shuffle toward the counter, I jokingly tell myself to order caffeine, not morphine. But I am not amused; I'm too weary to find it funny. Then I order myself to order caffeine, and notice the subtle variation in the meaning of the word order. As opposed to the meaning of the word order. Then I realise I have spent way too much time thinking about the intricacies of language and the ease of miscommunication. And there I am, back to thinking about aeon and hell. Again.

See? Not enough sleep. Too much study. Not enough clarity. And far too much worry.

Angels

Eri's tone was calm, 'Take care now. We're cuing up for a possible encounter. The chaplain. Best if it happens today.'

Alariel leaned forward slightly, 'How about we put a question into his mind?' he wondered out loud.

Caeliel tilted his head thoughtfully. 'What question though?'

Alariel said, 'No, wait! Not a question. How about this—let him smell the coffee!' He mimed with two index fingers, people passing in the corridor.

Caeliel's lips twitched into a rare smile, and Eri's mouth curved slightly in agreement.

'It could work,' Eri said with a single, deliberate nod, 'I think he'll take it from there.'

Caeliel rubbed his chin, his expression growing pensive. He turned his head to Eri, 'But is she ready though?'

‘Absolutely.’

Alariel grinned eagerly, twiddling his fingers as if on an invisible piano. ‘My first intervention!’

Eri smiled indulgently, shaking his head in restrained amusement.

A Moment

I head back toward the ICU, coffee in hand, trying not to spill it as I focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

I can’t avoid it any longer; I have to face the fact that there’s a real chance Freya isn’t going to make it. She hasn’t improved in the last five days—in fact, she’s getting worse. I’m getting negative vibes from the staff—they are always very serious and non-committal. Even the nice consultant lady who reassured me that plenty of people live with Freya’s condition isn’t sounding as confident now.

A sudden wave of sadness washes over me, sharp and unexpected, almost knocking the breath out of me. Lost in my thoughts, I don’t even notice someone walking toward me until I almost bump into them in the corridor.

Startled, I look up and find myself face-to-face with a man of about seventy. His suit is old and approaching threadbare on the cuffs, his face a map of deep wrinkles, and his scalp on the top shows through his thin white hair. He’s wearing a dog collar. He’s not what you’d call an attractive guy, but he smiles at me.

‘Ah, coffee!’ he says with a knowing smile, as if we’re already friends. ‘Where would we be without it?’

I attempt a smile in return, but it probably comes out weak and watery.

‘You visiting?’ he asks, his tone casual.

‘Yes, my daughter,’ I reply, trying to keep my voice steady.

‘Yeah?’

‘She’s in ICU. I’m...’ The back of my eyes start to prick. ‘I’m not sure she’s...’ ‘I can’t finish the sentence. And then I’m crying. It’s just all far too much.

‘Let me hold your coffee,’ he says softly.

I blink at him, confused for a moment, then glance down and realize my hands are shaking, the liquid inside the cup dangerously close to spilling out.

‘Don’t worry,’ he adds with a gentle chuckle, his tone light yet steady, ‘I promise I won’t run off with it.’

I glance around, searching for a quiet corner where I can have a cry in peace. I’ve known this was coming, but I didn’t expect it to come on so strong.

‘Do you want to come and sit in the chapel?’ the old guy offers gently.

‘Can we?’ I manage, my voice is a bit wobbly.

He gives a calm, warm, reassuring smile. ‘I’m the chaplain here, so I get to decide! Come on.’

He leads me down the corridor, just a few steps, and we turn into a quiet room. The lighting is soft, and the chairs look rather more comfortable than anything in the ICU waiting area. I glance around, taking it in. It doesn’t feel like a chapel—no stained glass, no lectern. An elderly woman in a black Muslim robe is just leaving, moving quietly. She smiles at me as she passes.

‘A chapel?’ I ask, my voice tinged with surprise. ‘No cross?’

He nods, his expression patient. ‘It’s multi-faith,’ he explains, ‘but we do have a candle.’

I follow his gaze, and sure enough, there’s a single candle on the table at the front. And horror of horrors—it’s lit!

‘Is it a real candle,’ I ask.

He looks at me closely. ‘Yes,’ he says, his rising voice indicating curiosity.

I’m still looking at the candle flame, pleased that the chapel is a sanctuary in

more ways than one.

‘Wait! Aren’t you Freya’s mother?’ he asks gently, pulling my attention back.

‘Yes,’ I say, studying his face. ‘How do you know her?’

‘I know everyone who spends more than a couple of days in ICU,’ he says warmly. ‘Actually, I’m surprised you and I haven’t crossed paths before now. I’m Martin, by the way.’

‘I’m Melissa,’ I reply, still trying to gauge him. ‘So... have you spoken to her?’

‘To Freya?’ His face lights up with a big grin. ‘Oh yes. Freya the Firebrand!’

I narrow my eyes, tilting my head in confusion. ‘What do you mean?’

His grin widens. ‘Well, you won’t hear the story from the staff, but I can tell you!’

‘Go on,’ I say, curious to hear more but a bit apprehensive. *What is he on about?* I wonder.

‘I only came in halfway through,’ Martin begins, his expression both amused and impressed. ‘But Freya was... well, tearing a strip off one of the nurses.’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘Let me guess—big, belligerent, authoritarian?’

Martin chuckles. ‘Probably. Well, actually, definitely,’ he says with a knowing nod. ‘None of the other nurses are remotely like that.’

‘And what was it about?’ I press, leaning in slightly.

‘I gather Reg—the elderly gentleman opposite Freya—was pressing his call button because he’d spoken to...’ Martin pauses, sighing. ‘Nurse N!’ Martin makes air quotes, ‘Anyway, Reg was thirsty, and she had promised to bring him some water. But, well, it never showed up. Reg was getting distressed, pressing his call button every two or three minutes, and she still wasn’t coming back. So finally, Freya pressed her own call button and kept it pressed until Nurse N,’ air quotes again, ‘returned. When she did, she started berating Freya. I actually walked in right at that moment, but she didn’t see

me.'

I shake my head. Unbelievable! The said Nurse N was already not flavour of the month with me, and my inner Lioness is starting to growl.

Martin notices my clenched fists and raises both hands in a calming gesture.

'Melissa, don't worry. Freya handled the situation magnificently.'

'Really!?' I exclaim, my eyebrows raising in surprise.

'Yes,' he nods, his eyes gleaming with amusement. 'She waited until Nurse N had finished, and then calmly pointed out that Reg had already waited over half an hour for a drink, his lips cracked, clearly dehydrated, and Nurse N had failed in her duty of care.'

'How on earth did she manage that?' I shake my head, still incredulous. 'She barely has enough energy to speak to me for more than five minutes!'

Martin chuckles softly. 'Well, I guess she got the bit between her teeth! Because when Nurse N told Reg he'd have to wait, Freya started unplugging her leads and unsticking her pads, saying she'd do it herself because Reg couldn't wait any longer!'

I start to laugh, incredulous at the picture of Freya I'm hearing about—this is so like the girl I was living with just a week or so back. The defiance, the fire in her eyes, the spirit I thought was lost forever. But then the laugh catches in my throat as I remember what she looks like today—pale, fragile, hardly there—and the laughter turns into sobs, raw and sudden. It's strange how quickly it shifts, how one emotion can trigger another.

I wipe my eyes, trying to gather myself, but the words spill out. I tell Martin about my fears—of Freya dying, of what will happen to her after death. I'm rambling now, a bit choked, trying to make sense of the chaos in my head.

And then, in the midst of my spiral, I feel Martin's hand gently rest on my arm. His voice is calm, yet firm. 'Shall I give you my answer?' he asks quietly.

For a moment, I'm not sure what he means, but his steady presence is enough to still my racing thoughts. I nod, grateful for his simplicity.

I look up at him, my face, I'm sure, a portrait of misery.

Martin pauses, his eyes softening as he watches me. He opens his mouth to speak, stops for a second, then says, 'Actually, I don't need to give you my answer. Jesus already said something about those who give a thirsty person water to drink.' He starts to continue, but I stop him with a small, shaking head.

'Don't worry,' I say, trying to steady myself. I tip my head side to side and sniff, wiping my face to drain the last of the tears. 'I know what Jesus said. I think he just said it to me.'

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Chapter 16 Ryan

It's Thursday afternoon, and I'm not allowed to see Freya any more today—she's got a bunch of tests lined up. So, I've taken the opportunity to drop in on Ryan again. I phoned him first, because he's busy and he's got family. And I'm sure he has better things to do than answer my dumb questions. But I also know he genuinely cares about me.

I should mention I've pinched the candle Celia brought in the other night. It was pointless leaving it in the ward forever unlit, especially since someone (and I have my suspicions who!) kept shoving it away in the bedside cupboard.

Ryan surprises me with a plateful of rather expensive chocolate biscuits to go with our tea. Maybe they were a gift? I doubt he could pass them off as “pastoral costs”!

This time, I haven't just launched into everything like before. If Ryan is generous enough to give me his time, the least I can do is ask after his family and how the “pastoring” business is going. He tells me that his daughter has got quite a nasty cough. They think it might be a chest infection as it's been going on so long. She's just started a seven day course of antibiotics.

I'm really glad I asked now. Turns out it wasn't an academic question. ‘The antibiotics will crack it, I'm sure,’ I say, wanting to encourage him.

I've done quite a lot of thinking since I was last here, and I'm not sure how to start. It's all rather awkward really.

I feel like telling him that I need the truth! And that he could just be wrong! Especially given that it was Ryan himself who said, from the pulpit no less, that if you're deceived, you don't know you're deceived!

I want to tell him how much I've grown to love the strength and compassion, the fearlessness and the truth of Jesus. And even more than that, the sensitivity and

vulnerability and tenderness. And then to realise that the Father is just exactly the same. I simply can't accept that someone like that could allow unending retributive torment to continue.

I mean, even a drunk driver will stop to put a half dead dog out of it's misery won't he?

I actually would like to say that the theology I've been clinging to all my life is quite possibly the biggest problem the world has right now, because we've spent centuries telling people that God is vengeful, and now everyone thinks vengeance is fine, but actually it's tearing everything apart, because vengeance doesn't solve anything! Not one thing... and it just makes every problem worse, from petty arguments between kids to bitter divorces to wars that destroy whole countries, and all the while, deep down, people know that the only real solution is love, unconditional love, but they don't dare live like that because we've convinced them it's a weakness instead of strength.

But I don't think I can say any of that! Not to Ryan.

He's spent his whole life regarding God's unending retributive torment in hell as an essential building block in his belief system. And no doubt, just like me, he's scared stiff that if he pulls that piece out, then the whole thing will come crashing down like a Jenga tower.

So instead I tell him about aeon.

He listens politely as I recount the amount of work that has gone into the 300 page study I've read. I talk about the difficulty of translation, and confirmation bias, and context assumptions.

And he nods sympathetically.

Then I tell him that the word aeon doesn't even mean "unending".

He doesn't respond.

So I say that the only remaining bit of evidence in scripture for hell's torment being unending is just a one metaphorical verse about unquenchable fire, and immortal worms.

I stop. And wait.

Ryan is quiet for a couple of minutes. Then he says, 'I think the mistake you made is to study someone's dissertation instead of sticking to the Bible.'

'But you gave me a booklet to read to explain it—that wasn't the Bible!' I reply

'Yes but it's important to read stuff which is written by Christians who have an orthodox view.'

I can feel myself getting a bit wound up, and Ryan is such a decent gentle man, so I add a bit of levity with, 'I think Greg is pretty orthodox!'

'Greg?'

'Yes! Him and Clem and Ori!' I pause, having stuck a smile on my face. Light dawns in his eyes, so I continue, 'Yes, it was a hot topic in their day. They agreed that...'

Ryan cuts in smiling, 'Yes but St Gregory, and St Clement and certainly Origen were on the wrong side of the final decision about hell! A man called Tertullian made it absolutely clear...'

I cut in, 'For the first 150 years of Christianity, the eleven leading bishops, theologians and apologists never spoke about an unending retributive torment in hell. Until Tertullian!'

'Have you read the relevant parts of what Tertullian wrote?'

I shake my head. 'I've just dipped in...'

'You should read what he wrote, Melissa. All you're doing is going over old arguments that the church put to bed centuries ago!'

We are at a bit of an impasse. We look at each other, each with our wobbly Jenga tower. I have a feeling his "hell" block is near the bottom, with a lot of other blocks

resting on it. He's desperate to keep my meddling fingers away.

I take a deep breath, letting out a heartfelt sigh. He's still a lovely guy, generous with his time, and he's right about a lot of things. So I say, 'I'll take your advice and do a bit more digging in then.' He doesn't look happy, but that is what he told me to do, so I thank him for his help. I lean through the door and spot his wife. I thank her for the chocolate biscuits and then take my leave.

At the end of the evening, I place Celia's candle, a notepad, and a pen on my bedside table. I light the candle, then get into bed. I close my eyes to pray, but nothing comes. Then, too much comes. My confusion is still jangling too loudly. Eventually, it quietens, and I find I am praying just one word. Why? Over and over. The prayer is in my mind for maybe ten minutes or so. Not the normal mantra for relaxation, but eventually my breathing has slowed.

So I open my eyes and blow out the candle. It's gone. And so is everything else.

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Chapter 17 Dreaming

The room is pitch dark, so I know it is long before dawn. And the house is silent. The silence is cloying and thick. There's no traffic noise, no central heating pump squeak, no wind. Even the sound of my own breathing is inaudible.

I'm standing in the bedroom. My chest tightens. I don't remember getting out of bed. I must have risen three-quarters-asleep! I can't recall doing that but I ...

In an instant, Celia's candle flame comes alive, the yellow flickering tongue tasting the darkness. Strangely, the light it sheds touches nothing, except for me. Not the floor, nor the bed. Not the cabinet. I can see only the candle flame, but there is a subliminal oddness about this place. I take a step toward the flame. As I near, the flame dies and I am standing at the centre of a sphere of soft yellow light, perhaps six metres across. It is above me, below me and all around me. And the light sphere is shrinking. Fast. And now, it all feels very familiar and normal—which is even stranger considering what I am seeing.

The sphere is soon no more than two meters across. I just fit inside it. After a minute or so, its glow is an intense tennis ball sized incandescence hovering at waist height before me. I'm wondering how something so other-worldly can feel so utterly ordinary. And then I know. I understand how that is.

First let me tell you how I know, before I say what I know.

I am certain that I never heard anybody say anything, but the feeling I have is so precise and clear, and so... I don't know... verbal maybe? Yes, verbal... that it's just as if it is written inside me.

‘You ask, “Why?”’

And the next thing I instantly know is this.

‘Understand! This is you. Now. Your lifethread.’

Strange! It is just as if someone wrote it, or said it, except that they didn’t. So I wait a couple of seconds.

‘Your body, mind and spirit. Your thoughts, your fears, your joys and your regrets, your beliefs and priorities.’

And it feels true. The settled stillness fills the space, as if reality is waiting. Maybe the silence is enabling this direct knowing.

‘Know yourself. Take hold of that understanding.’

I hesitate, then slowly extend my hands. The sphere feels cool and solid beneath my palms, like glass. As I hold it, as it’s yellow light streams out from between my fingers, understanding deluges into me.

Every part of myself unfolds in sharp clarity—my desires, my beliefs, everything!

I know my fears, their source, their history, their triggers, their validity, their toxicity. I can leaf through my regrets as easily as if each were itemised, categorised, prioritised and described in painstaking detail on the pages of an exercise book. And the more I know myself, the more uncomfortable it becomes. Within seconds it has become terrifying, and I pull my hands back, shaking.

‘Look to your past lifethread.’

I catch sight of movement in the far distance off to my left. A mass of threads is appearing like mycelium. These, as fine as filigree, are swiftly growing, extending towards me and converging into thicker stronger tendrils like ivy. Other threads appear along the way and join the mass. After a while, the entire network has converged into a single stem attached to the left side of the yellow sphere.

I can see that every convergence where multiple threads meet is a decision point

in my past, shaped by innumerable influences—my upbringing, previous choices, settled bias, habits and chance. I am astonished! I never realised at the time that my future was almost totally defined by my past.

‘Take hold of a decision.’

I walk across to my left a few paces, then reach out and cup the network at a point where several tendrils merge. The memory floods my mind. It is as if I have stepped back into the past moment. I am buying the red Ford Fiesta, back in ‘97. And I’m aware of a whole ocean of influences that have washed forward into that moment—colour preference from childhood, familiarity with Henry’s “any colour so long as it’s black”, love of neat little things, review of second hand pricing, the smile on Tom’s face (recently widowed as I recall). But now I see the truth: there was no real choice. I never actually made a decision. Once all those things had come together, there was nothing left to decide.

I draw my hands back, puzzled. I move a little to the right and grasp the network at another convergence point. It’s 2013. I am handing in my notice at Baines and Grainger (Legal Services). And again all the precursors line up ready to be considered. My growing concern about the complexity of spreadsheets, Tim Baines unwelcome passes, the increasing demands of family life, and a host of factors that led to my resignation. And as before, I discover it wasn’t actually a decision. At that point in time, the outcome was inevitable.

The feeling that I have yet to take hold of a decision has not receded. I look again at the lifethread. Where are the real decisions? I wonder. I move further to the left, my eyes searching for a clue. Then I see it. A merge point which sparkles bright yellow.

As soon as I take it in my hands, I feel it turn my insides. It’s late 1999. Jeffrey has just proposed. I feel again the unprecedented excitement that such a man was desirous of marrying me. Never had I met a man so... male! My heart feels again the

desperate wanting that bloomed within me back then. And, as if it was this very minute, I hear the grey irritatingly reasonable voices in my head with their doom-laden pessimism. And I'm trapped again in that twisting agony of indecision. It went on for weeks, with the head and the heart bringing their weapons to the war within me.

'For your true decisions, freedom is conferred.'

There is another yellow sparkle just to my right, and two more to my immediate left, and even more off in the distant past. I take the one on the right. It's new year's day 2002. Possibly the most difficult decision of my life, and circumstances proved I chose very badly. I drop the sparkle. I wonder then why I was sometimes granted freedom and for other decisions it was a foregone conclusion.

Then I feel it again—that certainty inside me just as if someone whispered in my ear, or wrote in the sky. 'Look to your future lifethread.'

A movement catches my eye from the right hand side of the incandescent yellow sphere. It's putting out threads, extending off to the right, each thread branching and re-branching into infinite diverging possibilities. And there are occasional yellow sparkles embedded in the future too. Points where I suppose I will be once again be given the chance to choose without constraint.

I notice that beyond each of those sparkling points, there is nothing, their paths cut short. Before the question can form in my mind, the answer comes.

'True freedom creates total uncertainty.'

I begin to understand what I am looking at. Some parts of my future lifethread are unlikely or possible or probable. And some parts are completely unknown. I wonder why my future is not completely certain up until the first time I am free to choose—a single thread reaching the first yellow sparkle. And again, before the question is properly formed, I know the answer.

'Other people's freedom creates alternatives in your otherwise definite future.'

I slowly turn this over in my mind, trying to grasp the implications. I scan back to the past threads—these are all certainties, with glowing yellow points where I was granted freedom to choose. The future threads also have those points glowing yellow where my choice need not be constrained by the unrelenting pressure of the past.

My gaze returns to the brightly glowing sphere which is my “now”. It is just in front of me. The thought begins to form ...

‘So my “now” is also... ‘

‘Yellow,’ the knowledge cuts in. ‘A moment of freedom, a time to choose.’

My attention is drawn back to the now. A thread is growing on the right side. My future. Then another. More. Until there are four serpentine threads, tentatively reaching out like a time-lapse video of convolvulus. Then as I watch they double back past the “now”, and continue growing steadily back into the past, disappearing from sight at the far left of my visual field.

And then these strange words are written into my consciousness

‘Melissa. The call is for a retrofit.’

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Chapter 18 Martin

It was the charge nurse who registered the beep alarm at 6.50am. Hurrying to Freya's bedside, she checked her oxygen levels. Ninety-one percent. She cancelled the alarm and watched the level for a few moments. It climbed slowly back to ninety-five.

Thirteen minutes later the alarm triggered again. This time Freya's oxygen level had dropped to eighty-four percent. She adjusted the oxygen setting and watched the figure climb back to ninety-three.

By 9.48am when Melissa came in, everything looked normal.

Angels

'Eri isn't joining us today. And it turns out to be another critical day. There's a three way confluence in the Lifethread.' Caeliel explained.

Alariel was careful to pay attention. With the absence of Eri came a new level of pressure. Earlier he had been given a document entitled "Exegesis of the Word, as it pertains to the Character of the Father", subtitle "Abstract of the Plan, including Required Outcomes".

'So have you read the abstract?' Caeliel continued.

Alariel nodded and waited.

'Well, there are a lot of variables today, so I think we're best concentrating on Melissa's emotional state,' Caeliel said. 'If we can keep her as calm as possible, then I'm hoping the rest will flow through. Any thoughts?'

Alariel's mind was racing, 'I think Melissa's mindset is largely controlled by

Freya's feelings and responses.'

'You're right,' Caeliel paused for a moment, thinking. Then he said, 'How about we let the notes do the consoling?'

Alariel smiled, 'Good idea. Do we just tell her to take the...'

'No, no, it has to be her idea and her choice,' Caeliel cut in.

'Let's let her hear it on the radio then!'

'No that's still too coercive.'

Alariel widened his eyes in surprise, 'This is really hands-off stuff isn't it!' He took a moment to gather his thoughts, then said, 'Okay then, how about something similar.'

'What are you thinking?'

'Um.. maybe Chopin? One of the Nocturnes. Maybe Opus 9, No. 2. E-flat major.'

'Yes?' Caeliel thought for a moment. 'Yes! It's close enough. On balance I think that should work. Well done Alariel!'

Martin

The traffic was worse this morning, probably because of the early fog. The journey from Purbeck to Royal Bournemouth Hospital threads it's way across Poole, and some days it feels like I'm crawling more than driving. Today is one of those days. I can't get that weird dream out of my head, and I know I ought to be concentrating on driving because I'm so tired. Every now and then I realise that I can't recall bits of the journey. I wrote down all the details of the dream, even though it seemed quite nonsensical. I check the time. I'm on the dual carriageway now so it won't be much longer. By the time I reach the hospital, I've already missed twenty minutes of visiting hours. My irritation vanishes when I see Freya has just woken up. At least I haven't lost

time with her.

‘How are you today, darling?’ My voice is light, hopeful, though I know better than to expect much of an answer.

Her head lifts weakly from the pillow, her pale face framed by damp strands of hair. ‘Tired,’ she whispers before her head sinks back down. After a moment, she adds, ‘It’s so hard to breathe now.’ The words are faint. Then, quieter still: ‘I’m scared, Mum.’

The fragility of her voice slices through me. ‘You don’t need to be scared, my love,’ I say quickly, forcing a confidence into my voice that I don’t feel. ‘You’ve got an oxygen feed, so you’re fine. Don’t worry.’

She attempts a smile, barely a shadow, and even that seems to drain her energy. My gaze drops to her hand lying on the coverlet. It’s trembling. It unnerves me a bit, so I reach for it, closing my fingers around hers. Her hand is limp and cool, so different from how it used to feel—warm, firm, full of life. At least it’s relaxed now. That’s something, I tell myself.

‘I brought some music today,’ I say, pulling out my phone and opening the music app. ‘Something you’ll like.’

Freya nods lethargically, but I take it as approval. I press play on Liszt’s ‘Consolation’ and place the phone gently on the pillow beside her. The soft piano notes drift between us. Freya’s lips curve faintly, and one finger on the hand that I’m holding moves slightly along with the rhythm. I’m stupidly happy because she’s enjoying it. A reminder of who she still is.

The moment breaks apart when I notice a doctor—the one with no white coat—approach the foot of the bed. He nods to me, a single upward motion that means *I want a quiet word*. My chest tightens. I stand up and follow him, still holding Freya’s hand until it slides through my fingers.

‘Mrs. Turnham,’ he begins, his tone measured but not quite warm. ‘We’ve noticed that Freya’s heart rate is a little elevated this morning. Her breathing has also become more difficult, so we’ve increased her oxygen support. There’s a possibility she has developed a minor infection.’

An infection. My stomach plummets.

‘At this stage it isn’t anything to worry about, and if we confirm an infection, then she will immediately go onto antibiotics to bring it under control. Other than that, she is broadly stable, but we were hoping to see an improvement this week.’

The two of us are stood together, for all the world experiencing the same situation. But he is calm and clinical, and I’m panicking and emotional. My heart is pounding. This sounds to me like it could turn into very bad news within a few days. I don’t know what to say other than a weak, ‘Thank you for letting me know.’

‘Are you visiting tomorrow?’ he asks.

‘Yes.’

‘In that case if you are around at about this time, we can have another chat then.’ He smiles, maybe supposing that he is reassuring me. He isn’t.

I decide I should call Ryan. I walk out into the corridor and dial his number. As soon as I get through, he tells me that he would like to visit. He’s on his pastoral rounds this afternoon, so he would prefer to drive over now. I try to dissuade him because it is at least two hours out of his day, but he insists. He tells me firmly that he’ll be here in an hour.

By the time I get back to the bedside, Freya has fallen asleep. The music has stopped and everything is deathly still around the bed apart from the regular pulse beat from the heart monitor.

I sit down, watching her face. My only girl. My Freya. I can feel the fear gripping me as I try to stop my brain churning through the various ways it could end badly.

What if she doesn't get better? What will I do? She is literally everything I have in the world now.

Grief is no longer a black cloud in the far distance. It's overshadowing every moment. Am I about to face another dark time—one that maybe I will not survive? Then I think of Celia's candle, the fragility yet the power of the flame. And I recall that strange warmth that stilled me just a few days ago—a reassurance that Freya is going to be alright. I still don't know what that portends, but it must mean something good, mustn't it?

I spend some time in the cafeteria as Freya is sleeping. I play "Consolation" again, thinking of how Franz Liszt lost his child, and how he used the sorrow as inspiration for this utterly beautiful piece of music. Then I spot Ryan walking down the corridor.

I join him in the ward, and we walk together to the bedside. Ryan wants to pray with Freya which is fine because she's asleep! He's disappointed that we can't wake her up, but it can't be helped. If she was awake she would only make some comment about him praying.

I'm glad Ryan can see how poorly Freya is. Not that he needed proof—it's just a relief to have someone else bear witness to what I'm going through. We sit together in the heavy stillness, and he prays for me too. Despite my doubts and wavering faith, I find myself deeply grateful. Ryan's words are simple but steady, asking that I might find some measure of peace and comfort, no matter what's coming. For a moment, his prayer feels like a lifeline, something to hold onto in the midst of so much uncertainty.

He makes to leave. But before does, he tries to suggest how I might be able to talk to Freya about 'accepting the Lord.' But on reflection now, I'm not even sure I know what that means any more. The words feel a bit formulaic.

When Ryan is gone, I glance at the clock and realize it's nearly lunchtime. I don't know whether it is nerves or hunger, but my stomach is twisting a bit. I hurry down to

the cafeteria to grab a sandwich; I need a break anyway.

Half an hour later, I'm still sitting in the cafeteria. The nurse will message me if Freya wakes, so there's no rush to leave. My eyes feel dry and tired. I close them and put my head in my hands. Despite the clatter of the plates and the jarring grind of the coffee machine, I could easily drift off right here.

Oh!

I jolt awake, startled by a sudden awareness of someone sitting across from me. My heart skips a beat before I register who it is.

'Hi, Melissa,' Martin says, his expression a mix of friendship and concern. 'Sorry if I woke you, but I'm guessing you didn't really want to sleep here!'

'No, I must have dropped off,' I reply, 'I've not really been having good night's sleep.'

'Ah no, that's understandable. How's Freya today?' he ventures, take a sip of coffee.

'Much the same. Trouble breathing today though. She's asleep at the moment. But they'll message me when she wakes up.'

'You probably want to try to be awake for that then,' Martin twinkles a bit, trying to lift my spirits.

'Irony isn't it? I lay awake at night worrying, and then fall asleep when I'm here!'

'There's a law about that isn't there?' Martin responded. Evidently his profession doesn't allow him to be explicit.

His words take me back to when Freya was twelve. I can see her face now, looking up at me with that earnest expression she always had when something was really on her mind. It took some coaxing, but eventually, she asked, 'What exactly is Sod's Law, Mum?' I struggled not to laugh out loud—that was so Freya. Seemingly never quite understanding life, yet completely tuned in to other people's feelings. Just a

beautiful child.

We sit in companionable silence for a couple of minutes, both enjoying the transformational power of caffeine. I am looking at Martin. Wondering. Then I make up my mind. ‘Actually, there’s something I want to talk about,’ I tell him.

‘Well, I’m your man.’ He settles back in the chair, tilting his head slightly.

‘I had this dream...’ I begin. Then over the next five minutes or so, I give him the whole nine yards. I had worried that he would find it amusing or think I was a bit odd, but he listens attentively. I finish up, then almost apologetically I say, ‘Maybe it was just the usual nonsense.’

He’s nodding, silent, evidently thinking. ‘It might be nonsense, yes. But then again... Joseph and all that.’ He shrugs, then leans in slightly. ‘What was that last part again?’

‘I think I got it right—’ ‘The call is for a retrofit.’

‘A retrofit?’ Martin shakes his head, clearly confused. ‘That’s something done after the fact, like an upgrade—tinted glass or a different sound system in a car, something like that.’ He frowns, raising his eyebrows. ‘Beats me, Melissa.’

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Chapter 19 Iron Age

Ahlai squirmed on the bed, a dull cramp in her back. Dawn was still an hour away, but the eastern sky was lightening. She had felt a settled heaviness and accompanying backache for days, but never as sharp as this. Trying to sink back into sleep, she shifted position, but the pain remained. She told herself over and over that the time had not come.

An hour later, when Bitterface brought her clean robe for the day, she knew her self-deceit was pointless.

‘It’s coming!’ she gasped as soon as the woman stepped inside.

Disdain flickered across the older woman’s features, but as Ahlai squirmed again with the cramp, she swung into action.

‘Get up!’ she said roughly. ‘You have to get out of the temple.’

Slowly, Ahlai sat up, then swung her legs to the ground, pressing a hand to her back.

‘Hurry, girl! This is no place for uncleanness!’

Without warning, she suddenly hauled Ahlai to her feet and marched her out of the room, along the cool marble corridor, and through the temple’s front entrance, across the courtyard to a low mud-brick hut. She drew back the entrance curtain and pushed Ahlai inside.

‘Wait here,’ she barked, hurrying away, stumbling slightly in panic.

Ahlai could hardly stand. In the gloom, she made out a short, low wooden bench against the opposite wall. The floor was littered with rank-smelling straw and dried

rushes. She waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, then picked her way around the central support post and a small brazier filled with ashes. Lowering herself tenderly onto the wooden bench, she exhaled shakily.

She didn't have to wait long. Outside, she heard Bitterface's voice.

'She's in there!'

The curtain was drawn back, allowing the dawn's light to spill into the hut.

The woman who entered was of medium height, heavily built, dressed in a black wool tunic cinched at the waist—though the waist itself had long disappeared. Her dark hair, heavy with grease, was scraped back from her face and bound tightly in a single braid down her back.

'Hello, my dear.' Her voice was gentle. 'It's Ahlai, isn't it?'

The girl nodded.

'You're a little early, I think?'

Ahlai shrugged, twisting her face. 'It hurts!' she said.

The woman crouched down and pressed her ear to Ahlai's belly. She nodded sagely for a moment, then stood.

'Well, it won't hurt tomorrow! I'm Shifra, by the way,' she responded. 'I have to fetch my colleague Masmah, so just wait here. You'll be fine.'

Ahlai glanced around the hut again. Now that the sky was lightening, she could see two small windows high up on either side of the wall. The underside of the roof was smoke-stained, and the straw underfoot was brown-stained and trampled. Several bunches of old dried herbs hung from the rafters. Just across from the door was a small mud-brick niche with an idol perched inside. Ahlai had seen such idols before. The clay figurine was that of Asherah, the goddess of fertility. She was said to be the consort of the supreme god El—her lower body sculpted as a tree trunk, the upper body exaggerated with a swollen belly and full breasts, large eyes, and one hand raised.

The curtain swung aside as another woman pushed her way in, followed by Shifra.

‘Let’s have a look, then!’ Striding across the hut, the woman shoved Ahlai onto the bench.

‘Legs apart!’ she barked.

Without explanation, she thrust her hand beneath Ahlai’s robe.

‘Ouch!’ the girl exclaimed, the rough intrusion completely unexpected.

Masmat turned to Shifra with a sour expression. ‘I could have had two more hours in bed!’ she complained. Then, turning to Ahlai, she snapped, ‘And you—stop whining. It’s far too early for that.’

‘Water, herbs, mat, basin,’ she said, ticking the items off on her fingers. ‘Go on, then!’ This was directed at Shifra, who scurried out.

Ahlai studied Masmat. She knew the name meant ‘fragrance,’ and there was one—albeit rather acrid. The woman was scrawny, almost skeletal. Hawk-like eyes stared out of a narrow face, the skin stretched tight across sharp cheekbones as her mouth worked in concentration. Her hair was wild and unkempt, a tangled mass of black and grey strands.

‘I’ve had two weaklings die this week, but today yours will not!’ She paused. ‘Because it must not!’

Masmat stood over Ahlai and seized the girl’s chin in her strong, thin fingers, forcing her face upward. ‘Because you, little one, are going to deliver.’ She widened her eyes as if demanding agreement. ‘This baby will live, even if you don’t.’

She turned and yanked the bunches of dried herbs from the rafters just as Shifra staggered back into the hut, arms full. She dropped everything in a pile on the floor. Masmat nodded curtly. Shifra pulled out different bunches of herbs and began tying them to the rafters.

Wide-eyed, Ahlai asked, 'What are the herbs for?'

Masmat pointed to each bunch in turn. 'Pain relief,' she said, almost grudgingly. Pointing to the next: 'Warding off evil.' Finally, she gestured to the one four or five times larger than the rest. 'Masks the stink!' She laughed coarsely.

She picked a newly woven reed mat from the pile and tossed it onto the ground. 'The birthing mat!'

Shifra caught Ahlai's eye and smiled sympathetically. They exchanged glances while Masmat's back was turned.

Masmat muttered some unknown incantation to herself, then took a piece of fruit and placed it in front of the Asherah figurine.

Ahlai began to moan, the pain strengthening.

'Don't be afraid,' Shifra murmured. 'You'll be fine. You are young. It won't take long.'

'You need to move, though!' Masmat's tone was forthright, brooking no resistance. 'Stand up! Or squat here above the mat if you wish. If you lie there like a dying goat, we will still be here tomorrow!'

---oOo---

The sun had reached its zenith. The heat in the hut was suffocating, and the pain rolled through Ahlai in great waves. Her face was wet with sweat, and she gripped Shifra's arm. The woman murmured encouragement and reassurance to keep the girl's fear at bay.

Masmat, who had been sitting on the bench watching, suddenly leapt to her feet. 'Let's see what's going on, then.'

Ahlai flinched. She knew all too well now the routine—the pain, the rough fingers, the humiliation.

Masmat twisted her face in disapproval. 'Nowhere near!' she growled. 'You need

to walk about more. Crouch down. Stand up. Crouch down.'

Ahlai shook her head in despair. She was already completely exhausted, and apparently, she had hardly started.

Masmat picked up a cloth and dipped it into a bowl of herb-infused water. 'Here! Chew on this!'

Ahlai took it listlessly, but before she could bring it to her mouth, Masmat leaned down, bringing her face close to Ahlai's.

'You want to give up?' she demanded, her voice sharp and mocking. 'Too late for that, girl. Today you are going to deliver for me, whatever it costs you.'

---oOo---

Ahlai chewed the cloth soaked in herbs. Supposedly, it dulled the pain, but she was quite certain it was merely to stop her from complaining out loud!

'Six hours! Even camels can do better than that!' Masmat retorted.

Ahlai rolled in pain on the birthing mat as Shifra rubbed aromatic oil into her belly and urged her to breathe deeply. She began to cry quietly.

'Open!' Masmat demanded, then pushed a handful of bitter herbs into her mouth. 'Now swallow.'

'Do you want to push?' Shifra asked, bending her face close to Ahlai's.

Ahlai shook her head and grimaced, teeth clenched. The pain made her shriek when the contraction peaked, and Masmat was rapidly losing what little patience she had.

'Right! Up now, girl.'

Ahlai struggled into a sitting position.

'Squat here. Yes. Now hold this.' Masmat pushed a leather strap into her hand, attached to the middle post.

'Squat down... lower... now push!'

Ahlai was drenched in sweat, gripping the leather strap as Shifra encouraged her in whispers, wiping her face from time to time.

Masmat stood, arms folded, watching. Suddenly, she said, 'No, wait.'

She pressed hard on Ahlai's belly and frowned. 'The child is not head down!'

'Turn over, up on all fours! Come on, girl, even donkeys know better what to do.'

Turning to Shifra, she snapped, 'Come on now. See what you can do this time. Don't disappoint me!'

Shifra began to massage Ahlai's belly, attempting to turn the baby. She squeezed and pushed, but Ahlai winced as the pain became unbearable. Shifra changed sides and tried again, but after ten minutes of wrestling with the baby, she was still losing.

'Get away! Useless once again!' Masmat barked.

Shifra struggled to her feet. Masmat treated her to a look of contempt, then dropped to her knees. Placing her hands on either side of Ahlai's swollen belly, she looked up at Shifra, shook her head, and with eyes hooded in scorn, said, 'Watch and learn, woman!'

Then followed the most brutal battle. With no regard for Ahlai's safety—much less her comfort—Masmat dug her fingers in, twisted, and pushed repeatedly, completely ignoring the girl's shrieks of agony. She grinned, feeling the baby slowly turning.

'Agony now, or death later. Fortunately for you, I'll do the choosing.'

After a few more excruciating shoves, she ordered, 'Now, back up into the squat! Come on, girl! I don't have all day.'

Ahlai struggled up into position, letting Shifra guide her hands to the strap.

'Don't push yet! Wait till we tell you,' Shifra said.

The contraction built as Masmat held her hand on Ahlai's stomach.

‘Now! Push now.’

A long, animal-like howl echoed across the temple court. The baby’s head appeared.

‘The shoulders are stuck,’ Masmat snapped. ‘Turn the child!’ she ordered Shifra.

Shifra tried but failed. Masmat placed her hands over Shifra’s, digging their fingers in to ensure they had a firm grasp on the baby’s shoulders. Ignoring Ahlai’s cries of anguish, Masmat simply said, ‘Now we... turn!’

And sure enough, as Ahlai pushed, the baby slid out onto the reed matting. With tremendous strength, Masmat flipped Ahlai immediately onto her back, pressed both hands on her stomach, and waited.

‘Watch!’ she said to Shifra. ‘Next time, you do this part.’

In time with the final contraction, Masmat pushed hard on Ahlai’s stomach, ejecting the afterbirth. She took a quick look at it, glanced at Ahlai, then stood. Picking up the baby by its ankles, she shook it gently until it began to cry. Then, surprisingly gently, she placed the newborn into Ahlai’s arms.

‘Cord and final check,’ she said dismissively. Masmat watched intently as Shifra obeyed. After a few minutes struggling with the knife, and then checking for haemorrhage, Shifra looked up and nodded at Masmat.

‘Fine! Clean up, then,’ Masmat ordered, striding out of the hut.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 20 Iron Age

The door of the hut rattled once again. Both Kana-Il and Naamah instantly recognized the sound of the temple guard's mace striking the timber. The woman swung the door open, and the disgruntled guard, who had led previous visits, regarded her with barely concealed resentment.

'The girl chosen by the gods has borne a child. The child is to be called Yasub-El, for El will restore all.' His eyes were hooded, and his droning voice betrayed his disapproval. 'The favoured family—'

'When is she coming to visit?' Naamah burst out, unable to wait until the end of the guard's formal announcement. To her dismay, he narrowed his eyes and, with thinly pressed lips, began the speech again, clearly deriving some petty enjoyment from their impatience.

'The girl chosen by the gods has borne a child. The child is to be called Yasub-El, for El will restore all.'

Naamah rolled her eyes at Kana-Il as the guard droned on.

'The favoured family may receive the child Yasub-El at the third hour tomorrow.'

Finally when he had finished, Naamah turned to Kana-Il, her eyes wide with excitement. 'Tomorrow! We must have the family here! My parents, your uncle, and the older girls, of course.'

Kana-Il didn't respond right away, instead shrugging with little enthusiasm. 'I suppose so.'

Disbelief flashed across Naamah's face. 'You suppose so?! This is a celebration!' Her voice was a mixture of frustration and pleading, astonished that her husband seemed unable to share her joy.

Kana-Il glanced at his wife, his expression unreadable for a long moment. Then he sighed heavily, 'Yes, we must make the most of it.'

Naamah, somewhat offended by his lack of interest, turned back to her baking, a small frown forming on her lips. 'You might just show some enthusiasm!' She muttered under her breath, irritated that so often these days, she couldn't decipher her husband's peculiar moods.

---oOo---

The little hut was heaving with people, a mix of voices and laughter filling the air. The heat of the midday sun pressed in on the small space, but fortunately, the weather was clear and warm enough to spill out into the open air. The sounds of chatter and excited greetings mingled with the scent of fresh bread, sweet fruits, and spiced wine that wafted from the food table. The occasional squeal of children's laughter added to the lively atmosphere. Yet, amid all the noise, the most common sounds were the soft "Oooh's and 'Aaaah's as guests gathered around Ahlai's arms to admire the baby.

He was beautiful, his delicate features highlighted by the soft light filtering through the shaded window. Laid peacefully in Ahlai's arms, his dark, almond-shaped eyes were closed as he slept, long lashes resting on his cheeks. Ahlai, though still aching from the trauma of delivery, was floating in a settled tranquillity. Her son, his warmth against her chest, made even the agony of childbirth seem a small price to pay.

They say each baby born brings with it sufficient love, and little Yasub-El seemed to have brought plenty!

'Why don't I hold him while you get yourself some food?' Naamah said.

Ahlai looked at her mother with a half smile and raised eyebrows, 'Or why don't I hold him while you get me some food?'

Naamah frowned in mock frustration, then stood, 'Of course, my love, what would you like?'

'Just some pomegranate please.'

Just then, Zibiah, Ahlai's older sister, entered with her two young daughters. Naamah, still focused on the baby, didn't notice them right away. Zibiah, with a laugh, teased her, 'So, granddaughters are out on their ear now that there's a grandson! Is that it?'

'Zibiah!' Naamah shrieked, somewhat over-excited. 'What do you think? A boy! We are so lucky aren't we?'

But Zibiah had already grabbed Yasub-El from Ahlai's arms and was rocking him. The baby's eyes drifted open and his long dark lashes framed his beautiful clear eyes. 'Oh, he is beautiful Ahlai! He just might make me broody again!'

Ahlai laughed, 'Oh I don't think so, not given the amount these two eat!' she said, gesturing to the two little girls, stood gazing at their mother.

'Here you are, Grandad!' Zibiah said with a grin, crossing the room with Yasub-El cradled in her arms. She made a move to hand the little one to the older man.

'No, no,' he muttered, shaking his head with a distracted glance. 'I have work to do with all these people. Someone has to tend to the food table.'

The family continued to enjoy the celebration, the hum of conversation and laughter spilling out into the warmth of the day. But Kana-Il's silence lingered like a shadow in the corner of the room. His movements were mechanical, his responses slow and quiet, and he appeared rather disconnected. Naamah and Ahlai exchanged looks, but said nothing at first, not wanting to spoil the mood of the celebration. But as the neighbours began to drift away, and the hut grew quieter, Kana-Il's unease became

impossible to ignore. When the door finally closed behind the last of their visitors, Naamah turned toward her husband and with a brief upward nod asked, 'Alright. What's wrong.'

Kana-Il fidgeted, his discomfort growing with each passing moment. 'Nothing, I suppose. I mean, it is lovely having Ahlai and the lad here, but ...' his voice tailed off.

The silence that followed thickened as Naamah's puzzlement turned into frustration. She dropped her voice to a tense whisper. 'Well, there's something eating at you. You haven't even picked him up!'

Zibiah—watching from across the room—could see her father entrapped by something, but no amount of questioning by Naamah could prise him open.

Ahlai's voice carried across the room, filled with concern. 'Father, do you think there's something wrong with him?' The question filled the room, and the woman watched to see how he would respond. Ahlai's eyes were filled with worry, and she tightened her grasp on her precious child.

Kana-Il walked across the hut, and with infinite tenderness, took the sleeping baby from her arms. 'No,' he said gently, looking down into the child's face, 'There is absolutely nothing wrong.' Then raising his head he looked across at Ahlai and then Naamah and Zibiah and said, 'He is completely perfect.' A tear drifted down his cheek. Handing Yasub-El back to Ahlai, he glanced at Naamah for a moment, then walked out into the sunlight.

Just at sundown, a temple guard arrived to take Ahlai and Yasub-El back to the temple. Naamah reluctantly passed the baby back to her daughter, imploring her to keep him safe. Kana-Il had still only touched him once leaving Naamah confused. But once they were alone, Kana-Il put his arm around his wife as she wept a few tears.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 21 Dreaming

Last night, like every night now, I lit Celia's candle when I sat in bed for my end-of-day prayer time. It's a bit of a ritual I suppose, but that's okay isn't it? I always thank God that I've apparently got all the light I need to find my way, even though I seem to just be stumbling in the dark.

And then I dreamed again last night. Understandable I suppose, after my long chat with Martin. But at least this time, it made a lot more sense.

In the dream, I was back with the Lifethread, and somehow I knew I had to reach out and grasp a lump on one of the threads from years ago. And instantly, I was back in a conversation that I half-remember starting with Nick. He was saying how what Jeffrey was doing to me was abuse, and I was trying to explain that I was raised to 'turn the other cheek.' Nick got really angry with me, and I walked out on him.

Well, last night, it didn't play out the same way it had years ago. Don't ask me whether it was real or not—I mean, it was a dream, right?

In the dream, I didn't walk out on Nick. I chose to listen to him a bit longer. It was so vivid that when I woke up this morning, I had no trouble remembering it, so I wrote it all down. Only a few spelling mistakes considering!

Nick said I was sacrificing my own interests to keep him happy.'

'trying to please people was always your problem,' he said.

I protested. he kept saying I always changed my behaviour.

And attitudes, no matter my own convictions.

I said that wasn't right, though I could see maybe I did a bit.

Nick said I always end up in relationships where I just comply
—do what other people want.'

He called me a people-pleaser.

I said I wasn't, but he wouldn't let it go.

He said—'I'll tell you what a proper relationship is like'

—THAT really made me mad!

I almost walked out then, but he carried on

"think about your marriage to Jeffrey.'

Nick said both people in a marriage should be open to each other's
weaknesses and concerns, and should work together, not one being the
slave.

I said "that's nonsense'.

I said "I remember when I hit Jeffrey in the face out of rage.'

He said something like, 'you feel resentment and regret, don't you?'

I didn't agree (out loud), but yeah, I've got plenty of both!

He said 'yeah, symptoms of people-pleasers addicted to self-pity.

I didn't walk out even then. Don't know why no! I really wanted to
(Then there's stuff I can't remember...)

Then he said that disappointments in relationships, and tragedies in
life, leave a residue of sadness, and it's really important not to bury it.

(I can't remember if he said 'suppress' or 'ignore' or something else.)

(I didn't get that, still don't really, because that argument happened
before I lost him!)

Then Nick said—sadness is the emotion with the most creative energy'

(Obvious, but I never connected that to my own sadness before.

I do think Liszt's "Liebestraum" reflected his heartbreak after he
broke up with Marie d'Agoult, the mother of his three children.)

Then Nick said that I need to embrace my sadness and use it creatively
for others.

I said being a mother is creative, and he agreed. But then he said—
word for word—'One day you'll be called, and it'll be your sadness that
creates something new.'

I look at that final sentence. It does gel with what else is going on. I've certainly

got the sadness. And there was that weird phrase about calling for a retrofit, was it? Reading it now, it all seems a bit pretentious though. But I did want to record the dream as accurately as possible, just in case... well actually, I think it does mean something. And I do feel kind of inspired? Though how that works out practically, I have no idea.

---oOo---

In the ICU ward, the day drags by in a blur. Freya is making no progress, but thankfully she is no worse today. She sleeps almost all of the time. The medical equipment beeps every now and then. I sit beside her, holding her limp hand, watching the slow rise and fall of her chest.

I don't feel like lunch today, so morning quietly slides into afternoon. Mid-afternoon, I step out for coffee, and then return. I feel as if I am suspended between hope and despair, in a dispiriting limbo. I talk to Freya a little, as usual about nothing in particular—just sound to fill the silence.

Freya stirs at 5.15 just when I am getting ready to leave. I grab the chance to talk to her, but within minutes she is out of it again. My back is aching from sitting all day, and my head is aching from thinking too much. Wearily I make my way to the main exit.

---oOo---

I rummage through the freezer to see what I could rustle up quickly with minimum effort. One of Celia's ready meals, Chicken in Red Wine, catches my eye. I actually enjoy it, mostly because I missed out on lunch. I clear up after dinner and go to the cupboard under the stairs.

Tonight, I've decided I need something to cheer me up, and it ought not to be more red wine. Something to lift my spirits. Old photo albums. That's what I need.

I flick through the books settling on a particular photo every now and then as it

brings back memories.

I pause at a photo of Freya, three years old, standing up in a shopping trolley. I remember that day vividly—she had stubbornly refused the pushchair, and I had errands to run, including a stop at the butcher's, which was more of a general store, really. So, into the trolley she went.

These days, it's mostly old ladies who use them—those tartan fabric boxes on two small wheels with an open top and a handle. But Freya had loved it. She giggled the whole way to the village, especially when I made the wheels skid on the gravel just to amuse her.

Ah, happy days. Back then, I don't think I worried from one week to the next.

I flip through the album, stopping at a photo of Povington Hill blanketed in snow. The sun is nearly gone, dusk settling in—probably too late to be out on a winter afternoon with a five-year-old. But Freya had adored sledging, and the slope was perfect.

We'd already been there for hours by the time I took the picture. I can still feel the crisp air, the way my fingers tingled with cold, her screams of delight echoing down the hillside. I remember pulling her from a snowdrift at the bottom, wrapping her up in my arms, holding her tight.

My eyes fill as I recall the words I whispered to her in that moment. *'I'd rather be here doing this with you than anything else in the whole world.'*

I carry on leafing through the album. School photos, family party photos, holidays. I've gone through two albums and now I am up to Freya's early teenage years.

It's a photo of the two of us, side by side, grinning like crazy in bright yellow hard hats and red harnesses. We were clearly having the time of our lives.

The next photo tells a different story. It's just me, clinging halfway up the climbing wall, looking utterly petrified. Because I was. I remember freezing, unable to

go up or down, while Freya shouted encouragement from below. Half the sports hall had stopped to watch. That was the point at which I had a severe attack of ‘sewing machine leg’.

The instructor called up, his voice firm but amused. ‘You’ll have to move, or you’ll just cramp up and fall off.’

‘I can’t move. I can’t see the handhold!’

Freya shouted, ‘Just to the right and a bit up, from your right hand!’

I remember looking at the bright orange plastic handhold and thinking that it was way too far away.

‘You can stretch that far!’ The instructor’s voice echoed around the entire sports hall. Everybody was watching now to see what would become of the ill-advised middle aged woman.

Freya shouted again, ‘Go for it Mum!’

So I did. Made a leap. Managed to grab the orange hand hold, but my fingers were just not strong enough. So I had to endure the round of applause from Freya and her friends and seemingly half the village as I was lowered like a stranded cat being rescued from a tree.

At half past nine, I realise I have distracted myself from my woes for over two hours, which is a good result. So I retire to bed. Usual routine—pyjamas, clean teeth, candle, prayer, toss and turn for about an hour in the empty silent house.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 22 The First Goodbye

The phone rings sharply, cutting through the numbness of my sleep. I'm fully awake immediately, my heart already pounding in my chest. It feels like the middle of the night—I know it's bad news. My stomach flips. *She's dead.* I know it.

I fumble for the phone, knock it, and the box of matches, off the bedside table. I'm shaking. I scrabble on the floor, my fingers trembling. Finally I poke green and press it to my ear.

'Yes? Mrs. Turnham here.' My voice comes out hoarse, barely above a whisper.

'Ah, Mrs. Turnham, sorry for the early call.' The voice on the other end is calm, professional, but there's an edge to it. It's a woman. 'Freya has had a mini heart attack—not as serious as the first. She's just going back into surgery...'

I can't breathe. My throat tightens. 'How bad is it?'

'We won't know completely until the operation is finished, but we're doing a Coronary Angioplasty—a stent.'

I start to shake. I can hardly hold the phone. 'Can I come in to the hospital?'

'Yes, of course, but the surgery will probably take one to two hours—let's assume two. After that, she'll be transferred back to ICU in a side ward.'

I'm already walking round the bedroom, putting the light on, pulling clothes out of the wardrobe, finding my shoes. 'Can I see her then? I'll come over now!'

'Mrs. Turnham, just to say there's no panic. You're... what, just over an hour away?'

I hesitate, pacing now, the tension making me clench my jaw. 'It's sometimes an

hour and a half.'

'I suggest you leave in about two hours' time. You'll probably only take an hour starting at six.'

'And I'll get there at seven,' I say to myself. That seems okay. So I can slow down a bit.

'Yes, but I'm sorry, you can't visit until we know she's stable. That will be, what... four, six hours—let's say nine in the morning at the earliest. It could be much later in the day, though.'

I close my eyes, it feels like a cold metal hand has gripped my insides. 'Can I just ask...?'

'Yes, what do you want to know?'

'Is... is there a risk? You know, a risk that she won't make it through? The operation?'

There's a long pause, long enough that I start to worry that she's hung up on me. 'It is a risk,' the voice finally says, gentle yet professional. 'But we feel she has a good chance, and she's in the best hands.'

I nod, though she can't see me. 'Okay, I'm coming in.'

'Leave at six at the earliest, and do drive carefully, won't you?'

Trembling still, I sit down on the edge of the bed. It's pitch dark outside. Rain is hurling itself at the window and the wind is howling in the trees. I look at the clock. It's 3.55am. But I just want to be there—close to her.

---oOo---

It's almost eleven, and I'm sitting, shivering and uneasy in the hospital cafeteria again—my home from home these days. I've let my third cup of coffee go tepid. I run my finger around the rim of the cup, over and over, never getting anywhere. How long now before I get to see her? Ninety minutes to go. They will let me in at twelve fifteen

assuming she is awake.

The clock is not helping. When you are worrying and desperate, each second drags by filled with nothing but anxiety. I glance around. Other visitors, nurses on their breaks, the occasional doctor. Several familiar faces with sympathetic smiles. No-one actually says anything, and that's okay. I don't want to chat. I just want to be with Freya.

I got here just before quarter to nine, my mind in a mess. I checked in at reception and they called down to ICU to let them know I'd arrived. The receptionist smiled at me as she spoke to the Lead Nurse.

'She's still asleep,' she told me.

'When can I see her?' I asked immediately. I swallowed and tried to keep calm. My voice cracked on the last word, betraying the panic rising in my throat.

There was a brief conflagration, then the receptionist said, 'Not until after twelve. But unfortunately you can only have about fifteen minutes then, depending on how she is.'

'Can I sit by her a bit longer, if I don't say anything?' I pleaded. I have no idea how much time I have left with her.

'Speak to the nurse on the ward,' she advised, and then added, 'They will probably let you see her again between four and five. She should be in a better state for visiting then.'

I know she's fragile, but she may be dying. These may be the last moments of her life. They seem to want to eke out these tiny fragments of time, but I suppose they know what they're doing. Every second with Freya is precious though—to look into her eyes, to smile together, to hold her hand or stroke her cheek.

Now, back in the present, I've run out of ways to keep my mind occupied. Checked my messages, looked at my friends Facebook pages, read every headline in the Guardian app twice, and tried to concentrate on the "long read". I brought a book—a

mystery—but I find I am reading the same sentence over and over again without taking it in. I am on my fourth cup of coffee. None of it helps. Time is crawling.

Freya has a congenital chromosome deficiency called “William’s Syndrome’. It is what has caused the heart problems. It is a really complicated condition, but one of the side effects is that the sufferer is very attuned to other peoples emotions. Right from birth, children with William’s Syndrome focus far more intensively on faces, and are generally happy if the faces they observe are not sad or distressed. They often develop an unusually extensive vocabulary relating to emotion. Freya can read me like an open book. She can tell whether I am anxious or sad or simply tired. She can differentiate between happiness and contentment. I have to try and make absolutely certain I am completely calm when I finally do see her. Even strangers cannot hide their emotions so easily from her. It is quite scary at times.

Finally, finally, 12:15 comes, and I’m allowed into her room. The starkness of the hospital bed makes her look even smaller, even more fragile than usual. I’m shocked to see that she is now attached to a ventilator. The machine is actively pumping air down her throat via a large tube and face mask. Freya’s face is pale, she looks dreadful. I pull up a chair beside her, not wanting to waste a single second. I have to hold the bed frame to steady myself as I sit down beside her.

‘Hi, darling,’ I whisper. I try so hard to keep my voice steady. She doesn’t respond, but her eyelids just flicker. I lean closer, and kiss the side of her face. ‘It’s me. I’m here.’

Her eyes open then, and her mouth pulls into a kind of smile. She lifts her eyebrows acknowledging me.

‘Hi,’ I say, to confirm I understood her.

She tries to raise her head. She mouths something else but I don’t catch it. I put my ear right by her mouth and ask her to say it again.

‘I’m still here!’ she breathes. It sounds like “I shill ‘ere” because of the horrible tube down her throat. Then she closes her eyes, and I can see her relax back into the pillow again.

‘Don’t bother trying to talk. You’re too tired. I’ll just tell you what’s going on at home.’ In fact, I’m hardly ever home now. I’m either in here, or I’m on the road between Purbeck and Bournemouth. Or in bed, exhausted but awake and worrying. So there is very little I can say on reflection.

But she seems happy just to hold my hand. Whenever I squeeze it, a tiny smile crosses her face.

All too soon, the fifteen minutes is up. I’m told to leave, and I ask again whether I can just stay holding her hand. That buys me an extra ten minutes, for which I am ridiculously grateful.

Finally I have to go. There’s evidently no more negotiation to be had! They promise that I will get to see her again between four and five. So, I go back to waiting, back to watching the second hand on the cafeteria clock dragging itself round the face.

---oOo---

About an hour or so later, I’m dozing with my head in my hands when someone taps me on the shoulder.

‘Hi Melissa.’

I know the voice. I look up and smile weakly at Martin.

‘Have you seen her yet?’ he asks.

‘Yes, and I’m back in probably at 4:30.’

He asks how she is, and I tell him everything I know about how it went and how she is. Which broadly is “Okay I think” and “Asleep’.

He looks me in the eye and says very firmly, ‘Don’t worry Melissa.’

I’m surprised. I begin to retort, ‘Well it’s all very well... ‘

But he cuts in, 'It's a command you know.' I look at him uncertainly. I can see he cares. It's in his face. 'Which means there must be a very good reason not to worry,' he concludes.

I take a breath in and exhale with a rather shaky sigh.

'But of course it's hard. Just don't despair,' he adds.

I can feel my insides settle a bit. My breathing evens out and I relax for the first time today. Only then do I feel completely wiped out. Martin sees that and offers me a coffee. I smile and shake my head, 'I'm already over-caffeinated.'

'Well I've been thinking about your dream.'

'Really,' I reply. It's a good job someone has. I haven't been able to give it a moment's thought.

'Yes,' he grins. He appears to know something. I'm intrigued.

'Go on then!'

'That final phrase in the dream—"The call is for a retrofit"—it's not like you need anything added or fixed after original manufacture,' he says. 'I did wonder whether it was a metaphor for some kind of spiritual restoration. But it's not! It's not about a retrofit—f-i-t—at all!'

I narrow my eyes, and lean closer. *F-i-t? What?*

'It's retrophet—p-h-e-t!'

'Retrophet? What's that?'

'Look, this is all conjecture, mind. I could be wrong, but thinking about those threads—the four threads—remember?'

'Yes.' I shake my head, puzzled.

'Instead of propagating into the future, they made their way back into the past...'

'I guess so.'

'So a prophet declares God's word about or into the future—from the Greek *pro*

and *phui*—meaning in advance and to speak,’ he say triumphantly.

I stop for a moment, and then cotton on, ‘And retro means back!’ I chime in. ‘So the call is ...’ I stop, surprised that my brain is actually still working and coherent. ‘The call is to someone to speak God’s word back... into the past?’

It’s Martin’s turn to look a bit puzzled and say, ‘I guess so! That would fit with the threads.’

‘A call to me?’ I’m astonished. Ministers are called, but not housewives, divorcees, frantic mothers.

‘Look, I have to go,’ Martin apologises, ‘I have about four other people to see, but I just had to pass that on.’

I smile as he gets up to leave. ‘Thanks,’ I say.

As he walks away, he turns and says, ‘You’ll figure it out, Melissa. All the best for later. Give my love to the Firebrand!’

Before he is out of sight, my phone buzzes with a message from the lead nurse in ICU. I can see her! It’s 4.40pm.

This time, she’s awake, just. She looks almost as white as the starched hospital sheets. Her eyelids flutter, and she looks at me, big pupils, unfocussed.

‘Hey, darling,’ I say gently. I’m telling myself I need to be soft and strong and not fall apart. My tired brain inappropriately comes up with *Toilet paper*? Impatient with myself, I dismiss the nonsense. ‘How are you feeling?’ I ask, trying to keep my tone casual.

She can’t answer. She’s just too tired, so she simply shakes her head a little. I take her hand again, very carefully in mine, as if she were made of fragile porcelain. ‘It’s alright,’ I whisper. ‘I’ll do the talking. It’s enough for us just to be together. Just rest.’

For twenty minutes, I talk to her about anything I can think of. I tell her about what we will do as soon as she comes home, how we’ll walk down to the green and feed

the ducks, and go to the charity shop and get some good books. I tell her about how she'll soon be able to play "Consolation" to me, and that there is a young guy at church who is learning piano. I pass on Martin's best wishes, and that reminds me of the altercation with the Trunch. Sotto voce I congratulate her on the water glass business telling her I'm really proud of her. Then for some reason, that brings tears to my eyes and a choking lump in my throat, so I have to stop.

Freya squeezes my hand then—so I know she's listening.

Before long the time is up, but the nurse says I can stay for another fifteen minutes provided I just stay very quiet and don't try to talk to her. But within three or four minutes, she falls asleep again. Her breathing evens out, her body visibly relaxing. I sit there for a moment, just watching her.

I'm not so much anxious or frantic now, but my heart is aching with pain. I get the feeling again that it is fine to not worry, but the possibility of separation is agony. This is the flip side of love. It could be the end. Is this the last time we get to be together, to hold hands?

I have to go. So I stand up and lean across, close to her face. I kiss her forehead. Then I stroke her cheek with the back of my finger, lingeringly, as if just that tiny touch can communicate all the love I feel and the hope I cling to.

I straighten up. The backs of my eyes hurt as the tears come. I can't bring myself to say goodbye. So I whisper, 'I'm coming back tomorrow, Freya. Be strong. Please.' I'm weeping openly now, so this is a bit embarrassing. I step away.

---oOo---

It takes until seven o'clock for me to get home. Rush hour. Celia has stocked my freezer with nice ready meals—some home cooked and some bought. I force myself to eat half of a Lamb Tagine. It's delicious but I'm not hungry.

I'm scared now about Freya. And the questions about hell come rushing back

into my mind. Today it's real. It matters. I recall that Ryan said I should look at some of what Tertullian wrote. So after I've cleared away the dinner plate, I dump the laptop on the table and find some translations of his writings.

It's heavy going, and I've got the right information in front of me, but I find I'm once again reading the same sentence over and over as my eyelids lose the battle against gravity. By quarter to nine, fatigue is garbling everything and I keep finding myself jerking awake.

I take the only possible course of action. Pray (for Freya of course), clean my teeth and fall into bed.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 23 Angels

Alariel was evidently panicking about the dreams.

‘No,’ Caeliel responded, ‘you’re jumping to conclusions. You can ...’ He broke off spotting Eri off in the distance. ‘You can ask him yourself now.’ he said in a low voice.

‘Ask me what?’ Eri said as he joined them.

‘We were overwatching Melissa speak to Martin, and it would appear she dreamed about her Lifethread. So are we supposed to be involved in that?’ Alariel asked, looking puzzled.

‘I’ve told him,’ Caeliel interjected, ‘that we would know if it was anything we had to do. But I’m a bit curious, because that’s not normal is it? Human’s seeing their Lifethread, I mean?’

‘Can you not work it out?’ Eri replied.

The other two both shook their heads. Then Caeliel brightened. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘if she saw it, then it must have been sanctioned and I can only assume that it is to do with being called to the retrophet role.’ He looked enquiringly at Eri, hoping for confirmation.

‘Yes, you’ve got it.’ Eri responded.

‘Retrophet? Like Melchizedec? That’s unusual isn’t it?’ Alariel asked.

‘Not as rare as you would think. But it is reserved for changes which are highly significant and fundamentally important.’

Caeliel could see Alariel’s mind working. ‘I know what you’re thinking!’ he

retorted.

‘Well only that this way bigger than I expected, and... well... why on earth it would involve me? An apprentice.’ Alariel replied.

Eri places his hand on Alariel’s shoulder. ‘In fact, Alariel, you were made for precisely this job. Caeliel is bringing you up to speed, but the day will come when you will have to manage without him.’

Alariel looked aghast. The title of the abstract ran through his head trailing more implications and consequences that he dared not think about. ‘But... ‘ he stuttered, shaking his head. ‘But why can Caeliel not do it? Or at least be with me?’ His voice had taken on a pleading tone.

Eri gave a broad smile. ‘I do hope,’ he said slowly with heavily measured emphasis, ‘that you are not distrusting my judgement?’

Alariel paled. ‘No, no, you know I am fully trusting... ‘ He was starting to repeat himself in his embarrassed confusion. ‘... fully trusting your... um everything of course I...’

Eri cut in, ‘You’re too easy Alariel!’ and gave a great laugh which resounded around them for several seconds, and had not actually died away fully until a couple of minutes had passed.

‘He’s winding you up,’ Caeliel told him, then turning to Eri, added, ‘Aren’t you?’

Eri conceded the point with a tilt of his head. ‘Alariel,’ he said in a genuinely respectful tone ‘forgive me!’

Alariel’s eyes opened wide, ‘Me forgive you? Is that even possible?’

‘Probably not! Anyway to be serious for a moment, there will come a point in the plan where Caeliel will not be available—he has other tasks which are not quite so important as yours, but ones which I would very much like to see successfully

completed.'

'Sure!' Alariel said.

'As you wish, of course.' Caeliel replied.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 24 Dreaming

The room seems to be lit—but dimly. The air is hot and humid. And it has a tinge of something unusual—an aroma rather like a second hand bookshop.

The floor looks to me like beaten earth. The two side walls absolutely covered with book shelves. The door through which I presumably entered is behind me, ajar. I can hear murmurs and bustle outside, but in here there is a heavy silence. There is a window in the wall across from me; it's tiny and most light is coming from three candles burning steadily on a table. They are casting light on a scroll and a plain sheet of... parchment I suppose. An ink pot and several ink-stained quills are pushed to one side. There are leather-bound books everywhere, filling the shelves and piled in the corners of the room and beneath the table. There a man sat, his back to me.

Somehow, I know! I know immediately it is him, hunched over, squinting at a manuscript and muttering. He seems to be around 60, but it is hard to tell. After several minutes Tertullian slowly straightens up and reaches for a quill, dips it and hunches back down writing on the parchment. There's a scratchy fingernails-on-blackboard sound that sets my teeth on edge.

I stay still, just watching. After a few minutes, the man is evidently not going to acknowledge me, although he must know I am here. Hesitantly, I walk slightly to my left, and then I realise there is another man in the room. He's younger, fair hair, floppy fringe, thin, in his mid twenties I would say. He's sitting on a large iron-bound travelling chest in the corner. As I meet his eyes, he drops his gaze down to the book opened on his lap. Somehow I know I'm supposed to be here, but my confidence

wobbles a bit, as they are both apparently determined to ignore me.

From where I'm standing I can see Tertullian's face in profile. His eyes are narrow, and his mouth is working, biting his lips in concentration. He frowns. Now his lips are moving soundlessly, and his brow is furrowed. Maybe with anxiety. He pauses his writing, lays the quill down on the table, and leans back in the chair, head tilted slightly to one side. He deliberately interlaces his bony fingers and rests his joined hands on the table.

The room is chilled to an uneasy tension. It is accusing me of trespassing where I am clearly not wanted. Tertullian's thin angular face is lit sharply from below by yellowing candlelight. Suddenly the shadows move as a gust flickers the candle flames. But he is unmoving, like a rock set in place. I tense, then realise it is a psychological play. Only Tertullian's breathing betrays the illusion.

He mutters something almost under his breath. I don't catch it. He repeats it. Evidently he wants me to hear it. 'Cave, decepatrix venit,' sufficiently loud this time for me to hear.

Although I have no knowledge of Latin, it was obviously an insult. But I wait. I am, it would seem, on assignment as it were. And I refuse to be diminished by this man's arrogance.

For a long moment, Tertullian pays me no heed, his resumed quilling an implied declaration of my apparent insignificance. Then, without looking up, he speaks.

'My work cannot welcome disturbance.'

I stay quiet for a second, then surprise myself by replying in a calm unhurried tone, 'And what is the work that carries such importance?'

He slowly rotates his head, his narrowed eyes fastening on me. 'Defending the truth.'

I have no idea where the words come from but I hear myself say, 'And what is

this truth that is so weak it needs you to defend it?’

Tertullian rises majestically to his feet, his jaw clenched with rage. ‘Vade retro me, Satana,’ his tone theatrically performative. He stares at me for a long moment, then resumes his seat and takes up the quill.

No words come now, so I stay quiet. And I have no place to go, so I remain standing, with my arms folded, just waiting. The longer I stand here, the more precarious I feel. With the tension racking up, I am just hanging on to something, and it is not my self belief!

Tertullian shakes his head dismissively and begins again to continue his writing. After a couple of minutes, noting I have not yet left, he turns his head very slightly towards me and barks, ‘I have no interest, neither intend a response for prattling women.’ And he waves his hand dismissively towards the door behind me. He unrolls the scroll, turns his back on me, and hunches over to resume his study.

Still I do not move. I know I am meant to stay. Despite my misgivings, I keep my gaze trained on him, challenging him to ignore me.

He tries so hard to continue reading but the unsettling silence is drowning out his concentration. Suddenly startling me, he leaps to his feet, with a face like thunder. ‘Go, woman, go!’

Before I have a chance to move, there is the sound of shouting outside. There’s a scuffle in the corner as the young man leaps to his feet. He’s wide eyed with fear and Tertullian gestures wildly to him, striding across and pushing him away from the trunk. Tertullian lifts the lid and the young man has scrambled halfway in when a soldier strides in through the door.

He walks right past me, as if I am invisible. Another soldier appears in the doorway guarding it. ‘Tertullian, you know full well you are not allowed students, sucking up your subversive nonsense!’ The soldier grabs the young man, dragging him

to his feet and twisting his arm up behind his back. He screams in pain. He struggles but it is hopeless. Both soldiers are huge and well armed. Just the one is enough to drag the student across the floor and out into the open. He is still shrieking, terrified.

I find I have shrunk back into the corner but neither of the thugs paid me any attention. The shouts and screams die down as they drag him away. They've gone.

Tertullian looks at me, tears in his eyes and his face twisted with rage. 'He is the third to be taken,' he says in a low voice.

'Where will they take him?' My voice is thin and shaky.

Tertullian shrugs, his eyes narrowed in bitterness and cast down to the ground. 'The others never came back,' he replies flatly.

He walks across and grips my elbow, 'Go! It is too dangerous to talk to me. Do not return.' He pushes me hard out of the door.

The door slam wakes me. Struggling to sit up, taking care to avoid the glass of water on the bedside table, I fumble for the mobile, noting the time at 3.12am. By the backlight, I locate the pen and notepad and begin writing.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 25 Confusion

My life is ruled by the cafeteria clock now! I'm back in again today, hoping to spend a little more time with Freya than yesterday. Realistically though, the routine is unlikely to be much different: hours spent waiting, interspersed with too much coffee. The caffeine plus the worry is preventing me from getting good night's sleep. Well, that plus the dreams.

Talking of which, I've brought my notes in today. I may as well try and make some sense of last night's peculiar dream. I read them through. Understandably, they are a bit garbled, but overall they are pretty good for three in the morning!

I dreamed of Tertullian! He was obviously a pretty difficult character. Academic, driven, opinionated, aggressive even. Not particularly likeable. Of course, he may have been nothing like that. It was only a dream after all. But I have at least got some signal in the cafeteria, so I'm going to see whether the dream made sense.

I check a few websites on my phone. It all seems to check out. The more I read, the more depressed I get about human beings' capacity for cruelty. It turns out it was actually in Carthage, where Tertullian lived, that Christians were literally thrown to the lions. The site of the amphitheatre has been confirmed, and contemporary accounts talk about the public entertainments held there. And they would tie Christians to stakes in the ground, heap straw around them and burn them alive. All while the spectators was whipped into a frenzied mob, revelling in the brutality.

But the poor guy! His friends are getting murdered by the regime. And the orders came down from the top—Emperor Septimius Severus. They were being beaten,

and buried alive in filth-ridden cells for years, some of them.

Gosh, this is pretty heavy. I'm not sure I want to read much more. It's not exactly cheering me up. I'm hoping to see Martin again—he seems to be in here most days.

Perhaps it is a bit odd studying this stuff while my daughter is so ill. But if she really is at death's door, which I have to accept is possible, then the afterlife, whatever or wherever it is, is not just hypothetical and irrelevant is it?

I have realised that most of us deep down struggle to believe in anything beyond the grave. More to the point, does anybody seriously try to imagine an actual burning inescapable torture that never ends? No! It's "don't think, just believe'.

Well I refuse! If Freya dies, I want to be sure she's safe. And if hell is real and Freya is there...

Actually I can't even contemplate that. It is just too much. Do you know what? I think I can honestly say that if Freya is there, suffering in hell, then I don't want to be in Heaven. I have to be with her, taking care of her. Maybe I'm wrong to think that, but it's not a whim, it's a definite conclusion I've come to.

But I'm not better than God, am I? My love isn't purer than God's. I'm not a better mother than God is!

Oh, I have a message from the Lead Nurse. I can come into the ICU ward now and see Freya. But first she wants me to report to the ICU reception desk.

---oOo---

Dr. Pradesh is waiting for me at the desk. She gestures for a quiet word, and I follow her into a side room. The all-too-familiar grip of fear tightens around me, and I start to imagine all sorts of worst-case scenarios.

'Mrs. Turnham, before you visit Freya this morning, I wanted to let you know that late yesterday, we detected an infection, and we've started her on an antibiotic

drip. You may find...’

‘Is it serious?’ I cut in.

Dr. Pradesh’s tone remains gracious and understanding. ‘At the moment, the infection is localized to her lungs. It’s almost certainly related to the intubation.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘While the tube ensures oxygen is delivered to her lungs, it does carry a risk of introducing bacteria.’

I start to ask another question, but Dr. Pradesh gently raises a hand and continues. ‘Your daughter is very unwell now, so I want you to know that visiting hours are no longer restricted, though each visit may need to be quite short.’

She pauses, and my mind whirls. I don’t know how to respond.

She continues, ‘There is also a little confusion. This is a result of the infection, and provided the antibiotics work, there should be no lasting problem.’

Her face is sombre, and her words paint a grim picture. But I don’t want to worry unnecessarily, so I press her bluntly.

‘So, worst case, Dr. Pradesh—how bad could this be? And then I’ll ask about best case.’

She is quiet for a moment, clearly weighing her response. Finally, she replies, ‘With infection and her heart already weak, there is a risk of sepsis taking hold. That is our main concern.’

‘And if sepsis takes hold, what then?’

‘Sepsis is a very serious, life-threatening condition, but many people recover and lead normal lives afterward. If you stop by the reception desk later, I’ll leave a leaflet explaining it all in simple terms.’

‘So with sepsis, assuming she got it, she could die from that, couldn’t she?’

‘I’m afraid so, yes.’

‘How fast would that be?’

‘Remember, Freya doesn’t have sepsis; she probably has a strain of pneumonia. But sepsis itself can progress very quickly—sometimes within 24 hours.’

The possibility that Freya might not survive is beginning to grow like a dark shadow in my mind. I don’t know how to fight it, or accommodate it. And I can’t wish it away. But I tell myself I have been commanded not to worry. So I’ll do my best.

---oOo---

It was a shock to see Freya today. I’ve seen her three times, interspersed with the inevitable coffee shots. She looks thinner, her face is drawn, her eyes hollow. Suddenly the possibility of her death has become real.

When I go in for the final time today, I sit by the bed and take her hand as before. Listlessly she rolls her head towards me. Her eyes are blank.

‘Hi darling, it’s so lovely to see you.’

I know she can’t reply with words, and her face shows no sign of recognising me.

‘It’s me Freya, your mum.’

She stares at me for a while, and then the faint light of recognition dawns in her eyes and the ghost of a smile curls the corners of her mouth. I exhale slowly, a long trembling sigh.

I haven’t mentioned anything to her about my conversation with Dr Pradesh, but I decide I should this time. ‘They’ve put you on some additional medication to fight an infection. Did you know that?’

She just lifts her chin, the smallest upward nod to reply.

‘Are you in pain, my love?’

She mimes, opening and closing her mouth.

‘Only when you breathe in and out?’

Chin lift again.

And so the conversation, if you can call it that, goes on for a few minutes more, before I say, ‘I think it best if you relax now, and I’ll tell you some more of the latest news from home.’

I’ve prepared in my mind a few things to say to her, because I guessed I would have to carry the conversation today. I know it isn’t what I say that matters, but just that I am here. I’ve told her most of this stuff earlier in the day, but I don’t think she’s remembering anything. She’s so fragile that I long to wrap her up tight and spirit her away to her own bedroom. I soon run out of things to say, and because it has been on my mind I start to tell her about the strange dream I had. How the decisions we make are sometimes not our own decisions, but someone else’s. And I mention that sometimes we make decisions without even realising it.

She’s getting really tired now, and she is fading in and out, and I’m beginning to ramble, saying stuff that doesn’t make a great deal of sense. So I wait quietly until she falls asleep and I see her breathing a little easier, then I creep away. The leaflet is there for me at the front desk.

Martin spots me as I approach the main entrance.

‘Melissa! Hi. So glad I caught you before you disappeared. Are you just off?’

‘Well, yes, but I can chat for a while. I’ve got nothing to go home for.’ I smile ruefully because that’s how I feel.

We go back into the cafeteria and sit under the watchful eye of the clock. I fill him in on Freya’s condition, and he is rather shocked at how quickly the situation has turned downhill. Before I know it, I’m pouring out all my fears about living alone and how it will be the first time in over thirty years that there won’t be someone in the house to come home to.

He’s good at this. He doesn’t try to fix anything like most men do. Instead, he just listens—so carefully that I can see he is putting himself in my position so that he

can completely understand.

I ask him about how his day has gone, what other patients or visitors he has seen. I'm astonished that he has seen so many individuals in just one day. I learn that it's an unpaid post, and he's a retired minister. But before long, I can feel myself getting tired. He spots that immediately of course, and knowing I have a longish drive, insists on walking with me to the car.

I've got through another day. This is tough going, but I do have a feeling about the dreams. Something is happening there.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 26 Dreaming

Tertullian's lips press together in an angry grimace as soon as he sees me. 'I told you not to return,' he pauses, 'child!'

I shake my head and smile, trying to ease the tension, although I feel my back stiffen involuntarily. 'I am hardly a child! But I had to return.'

He shakes his head as if despairing, 'Why? Did I not say it was dangerous? How can you be so stupid?'

'I needed to find out how is the young man who was taken.'

Tertullian's face contorted in anguish. 'It is as our Lord said. He gave his life. We must give ours.' His face hardened and he pressed his lips together in anger, 'It is wicked to pull back from speaking out, whatever the cost. But one day... ' he paused to take a deep breath, then rasped, 'one day, we will be vindicated.'

I can hardly grasp this man's mindset. And yet given the circumstances, maybe I too would find it easier to give up my life, than to forgive the one who takes it. I look at him quietly for a few moments and I see a man torn in two. Slowly he regains his composure..

More gently then I ask, 'So what is so important about your study that you risk your life?'

Tertullian's lips curl slightly in a smile as he observes me through half closed eyes.

'I am called to study the works of theology, and I am tasked to record my conclusions for the guidance of the church.'

I deliberately pause to gather my confidence—he is after all only a man. 'So what are you concluding today?' My tone sounds calm, unhurried. That's good. I realise I have to do better this time. I don't know why but I am curious as to the direction of the

conversation. It feels as if I am here at precisely correct moment.

‘The glorious justice of God,’ he replies tersely, trying to shut the conversation down.

‘And what is that?’ I ask, genuinely puzzled.

‘The glorification of the faithful, the exaltation of the martyrs... ‘

‘Ah, the reward in heaven... ‘ I cut in.

He frowns, annoyed as if I am not allowed to contribute to the conversation. Evidently I should be remaining silent, because he shakes his head and interrupts me, ‘and the fate of the unbelieving—that eternal fire that forever torments the sinner.’

Aha! Suddenly I know why I am here. ‘Forever? Really? Are you sure?’ I can hear my voice tinged with challenge.

Tertullian looks at me then, suspicion dawning as contempt narrows his eyes. ‘Yes, the Gospel of Matthias talks about Gehenna as a place of destruction. But try to understand this if you can, woman. Some bodies of flesh will be restored to eternal life—a life that lasts unendingly. And some bodies of flesh will be punished with eternal fire—so that fire lasts unendingly. It is simple enough!’ His finger jabs the tabletop, emphasizing his irrefutable correctness.

‘So tell me,’ this time my voice is sharper, slicing the air, ‘what Greek word used in this passage is understood to mean eternal?’

Tertullian steps back, momentarily silenced in shock that a woman... a woman! Should imply some lack in his comprehension or qualification. He grits his teeth to clamp his tongue for a moment, then he retorts, ‘Are you questioning my understanding of Greek? Do you know Greek? Have you trained, as I have, for years in studying the Greek language?’

‘No, but—’

‘Aha! So whence comes your authority to ask this question?’ His voice is

dripping with scorn, as though it was laughable that I should question him!

I feel my lips tighten, and I stand my ground. Before I know it, I have replied, 'I might just as easily ask, from where comes your reluctance to answer?'

Tertullian straightens his back, rigid, but pushes his head forward aggressively. 'I have no reluctance. I am eager to answer!'

'Answer then.'

'The word is Aion.'

'And you are able to assert that it always and in every place is sensibly translated as eternal? Meaning unending?'

For a moment, his eyes are flecked with uncertainty. He closes them and waits for his calm wisdom to manifest.

It takes too long, so I say, 'Let me help you out.' My voice is soft, but I realise it is just possible that what I say will not be considered helpful.

'I will not be lectured to by a woman—a daughter of Eve whom the serpent was so easily able to deceive. Moreover, a daughter who is, herself, deceived!' The words, spat from his lips, launch across the room in a tone filled with venom.

'Perhaps then you would hear the words of our Lord, recorded in Mathias, "Anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this aion or in the aion to come."'

Tertullian's mouth works with annoyance, but he keeps it shut.

I press on. 'Or consider the Apostle's words to the Christians in Ephesus, "Jesus is far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present aion but also in the aion to come."'

Tertullian grits his teeth, clenching and unclenching his jaw, his lava hot rage threatening to erupt. 'If you had studied as I have, woman, you would understand it is a complex matter of context.'

There's a strength in me now. I walk forward and stand toe to toe with him. Eye to eye. I know he is suffering, but so am I.

I lift an eyebrow, my gaze drilling into him. 'Age. Aion means age,' I say evenly. Without missing a beat, I continue, 'Not unending eternity. There are plenty of Greek words that explicitly always mean an unending time. *Aperantos* or *Ateleutos* would have been perfect if that was the intended meaning.'

Tertullian grimaces and snorts through his nose in frustration. 'But the context —'

'Or *Aidios*. You know surely the Apostle wanting to express eternally unending chose *aidios* for his letter to those in Rome: "His *aidios* power... that is his eternally unending power... and divine nature have been clearly seen" etcetera' I have driven the point home leaving him no room for escape.

'Bah! You are deceived, and in your confusion are twisting scripture. Do sinners not deserve to suffer unendingly? Would you make light of sin that caused our Saviour to give his life on the holy cross?'

'It means Age,' I counter, confident now, my tone flat and unyielding.

Tertullian's face twists in rage, his voice rising, 'When the emperor exalts himself as a god, while defiling himself with women, he burns Christians to light his path, but he remains in utter darkness.' His voice grows frenzied, spittle flying as he rants, 'Does he not deserve to burn forever?'

It is unpleasant being so close, so I step back. But my expression remains fixed, my gaze unwavering. 'It means Age.'

Tertullian ignores me, his eyes lit with vindictive delight, his voice now an almost fevered chant. 'What a spectacle it will be when the Lord himself displays, when he triumphs over those who have persecuted His name, who have exulted in their cruelty against Christians! What a spectacle when the world is consumed in a great

conflagration!’ He pauses, his mouth twisting into a sneering smile, ‘What a spectacle when all those kings who have been hailed to the skies are groaning in the depths of darkness! What a spectacle when the magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord are melting in fiercer flames than they ever kindled against Christians!’

I’m horrified, my breathing frozen as I watch him. And I realise that what I have read about Roman persecution, its crucifixions and burnings alive—*they are all real*. This man has lost friends to the perverse cruelty of the Romans, delighting in their unrestrained power. For a moment I feel a kinship with him. But the foulness of his words are still hanging in the air like the stench from a sewer pipe.

And he hasn’t finished. He grips my arm and pushes his face into mine. ‘And what a spectacle when those wise philosophers are burning with their disciples, whom they taught to deny God and to disbelieve in the resurrection! What a spectacle when the poets tremble before the tribunal, not of Rhadamanthus or Minos, but of Christ!’ There is a delirious delight in his eyes. ‘What a spectacle when the tragic actors are more tragic themselves in the flames; when the charioteer is running red with fire instead of with blood; when the wrestlers are tossing in the flames instead of in the gymnasium!’ He laughs again, a bitter, ugly sound. ‘What a spectacle for us! What a laugh! What joy! What exultation!’

I stand stock still, almost gagging, my stomach churning as the rancid vitriol hits my face. Then he stops. He is panting. Silence stretches out, thick and heavy between us for a moment before Tertullian mutters to himself, ‘that was rather good. I must write that down.’

Then, as if he is seeing me afresh, realising he has at last silenced me, he turns his ire in my direction, ‘You, woman, would seek to lead me astray into your paths of sin. Oh, it was ever thus. The Revelator John does not without reason call us away from the whore of Babylon. And Jehu did not without reason command Jezebel’s eunuchs to

throw her out of the window to the dogs in the street!’

It is too much. The prima donna has overdone the theatrics. I’m tempted to roll my eyes, my head shaking in disbelief. ‘Oh, whatever!’

‘And if I am not mistaken,’ he sneers, unaware that his overblown rhetoric has already carried him way beyond the bounds of credibility, ‘you like Jezebel, have smoothed your skin with potions and extended your eyelashes with antimony, affecting to create in yourself a beauty that your Creator did not bestow. Enough now! Out!’

Now it is way too much! I have to clamp my jaw shut, because a wholly inappropriate giggle, borne of astonished incredulity, is bubbling up into the back of my throat. As ever, I am irritated at myself. Why is it always at the most inappropriate moments? I close my eyes. Tertullian, completely confused, observes all this, plus the subsequent succession of hiccoughs. Sadly it only confirms his view that women are weaker than men, vainer than men, and more susceptible than men to evil. And no doubt he will write that down as well.

I struggle to regain my composure, then open my eyes and meet his gaze one last time. I take a deep breath, and let it out in a sigh. It is time to leave. I turn and walk out of the room, the door slamming behind me with a finality that echoes in the silence.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 27 Iron Age

A few days after Ahlai's visit, Kana-Il received an immediate early-morning summons requiring him to return with the guard to the temple. The pale sun was only just above the horizon, and the morning was cool. The grass along the wayside was still wet with dew, and there was little movement or sound coming from the huts as they passed. Two dogs snuffled in the grass at some discarded food waste. The guard was silent as they walked.

Once inside the temple, Kana-Il was led to a side room. It lay in semi-darkness, windowless, with only two flickering torches set in niches along the stone walls. Smoke curled from a salver, and the choking aroma of incense hung heavy in the air.

Elihadad was already seated, accompanied by the Captain of the Temple Guard. Kana-Il noted that they were both dressed for the occasion. Elihadad wore his purple and red robe, and the captain, a black cloak over a dark red tunic, his arms encased in bracers of carved leather. Elihadad held the ceremonial mace, and the captain had a ritual jewelled dagger sheathed at his hip.

Kana-Il was an intelligent man, and he could spot a power play when he saw it, so he refused to be abashed by his own simple peasant clothing. He stood, arms crossed, holding their gaze, and waited for instructions. The high priest and the captain were seated, with a vacant seat between them, but they left Kana-Il standing like a naughty schoolchild.

Elihadad stood. 'You are to be subject to Keshet Kodesh.'

Kana-Il frowned and then raised one eyebrow questioningly. He had not heard of this binding oath. 'What is the keshet of the oath?' he asked. 'I will not agree to be bound unless I understand the conditions.'

Elihadad smiled in contempt, narrowing his eyes. He shook his head slowly as if

he were despairing over a misbehaving pupil. 'You are already in too deep Kana-Il. You will not refuse the command of the gods, nor the traditions of the tribe.'

'What are the conditions?' Kana-Il repeated.

'Simply this. Under no circumstances are you to disclose to any tribe member anything you may learn about the Tesem Kodesh. Neither the preparations, nor the celebrations. Neither the financial arrangements, nor the sacrifice arrangements. In fact, to be safe, you are better never to refer to the Tesem Kodesh in conversation at all. Even as your friends and family drink, and dance, and prattle all they wish about the feast, and afterwards, you are to remain silent. Do you agree?

Kana-Il bowed his head. A kind of mental claustrophobia was wrapping itself around his mind.

'Sit!' Elihadad ordered, indicating the vacant seat.

'Kana-Il, son of Mabob, of the line of Jebus, do you come freely today?'

'I do,' Kana-Il's reply sounded more confident than he felt.

'Do you agree to bind yourself to the Keshet Kodesh before El?'

'No, I do not,' Kana-Il retorted.

Elihadad looked startled. 'But you must be bound!'

'I will not be bound before El, but before Baal. For he is god of war, and the enemy Amorite this year threatens. And Baal is god of abundance, for which we must plead. And the offering after all, is to Baal.'

Elihadad nodded, conceding the point.

At this, the captain of the temple guard reached across and slid his hand beneath Kana-Il's tunic. Kana-Il's stomach involuntarily tensed. He was all too aware that the ancient custom indicated the subordination of the subject to the god in whose name the oath was sworn.

Elihadad's voice was the performative drone much loved by acolytes of every

religion. ‘Swear now before Baal, before the god of war, of the harvest and of the storm,’ instructed Elihadad.

‘Repeat the words of the oath—’I will keep my lips from speaking, my eyes from telling, my hands from showing of the secrets of Tesem Kodesh.’ ‘

Elihadad waited until Kana-Il had repeated the words, then he continued, ‘Should this oath be forsaken, may the lord Baal tread me down, strip me of all possession, my household fall to ruin, my name cast out, and shame forever rest upon me and my children and my children’s children.’

Kana-Il repeated the words, sweat breaking on his forehead. The captain of the guard tightened his grip as Kana-Il writhed in pain, then he withdrew his hand.

‘An oath sworn in the presence of witnesses mandates the punishment, should the oath be forsaken,’ Elihadad asserted. ‘You may go.’

Kana-Il turned to Elihadad before leaving, ‘Has Yasub-El been chosen already for the honour of the gods?’

‘Yes,’ Elihadad replied, ‘There is one other, and he appears perfect. However, further investigations indicate the mother to be scrofulous. The third child is still in the womb.’

Kana-Il’s face paled as the high priest spoke. Trying his best to keep his tone even, he said, ‘An honour indeed then for my family.’

---oOo---

Naamah and Kana-Il were becoming accustomed to the temple guard’s mace rapped on the door of their hut. In fact, the wood now bore a variety of dents, evidence of the guard’s enthusiasm. However his pronouncements by contrast each time remained as lethargic and grudging as ever.

He stood and addressed the pair, ‘Now that Kana-Il is bound to the Kesher Kodesh, the family that the god’s have favoured must receive that favour in gratitude.’

He gestured for them to come outside, where they found another goat, this time very pregnant, tied to a stake in the ground. 'The brood will be twins,' the guard said in an aggrieved tone.

Naamah was delighted. They were becoming increasingly secure, and less vulnerable to the hardships of lean times. Soon they would have five goats in all. They would be able to sell the milk to their neighbours and in the marketplace.

'Come!' the guard ordered abruptly, and immediately walked off towards the southern gate of Jebus city. Passing through they turned left, and followed along the city boundary. They crossed the brook and then began to ascend the lower slopes of the hill on the other side. The pasture land here was divided into parcels, some meanly by thorn hedges, some more securely by ditches and berms. Several had drystone walling to a height of about six feet. The guard stopped at one of these. He dragged open the wattle gate and the three of them went in.

Kana-Il and Naamah stared across the field, their eyes wide, their jaws hanging open in astonishment. Two donkeys and a cow stared back, slowly chewing the cud with the same deadpan expression, just as if they too were trying to grasp what had just happened.

'For the favoured family of the gods,' he said with an evident mixture of resentment and disdain. 'Record of title conferred upon you is lodged within the temple archive.' With that he turned and exited through the wattle gate and left them.

They wandered across the field, Naamah with excitement and delight on her face, Kana-Il by contrast trying to hide his concern. They tried to approach the donkeys to pat them, but they simply ran away, and they had no experience with large livestock so were insufficiently confident to make the cow's acquaintance.

After a while, Naamah looked at her husband. 'What are you thinking?' she asked.

‘I’m thinking ...’ He trailed off, then let out a breath in a heavy sigh before continuing. The anxiety was etched on his face. ‘I’m thinking that we ...’ He stopped again. Then his face changed and brightening, he said, ‘I’m thinking we should share our good fortune.’

‘How so?’

‘We should lodge a transfer to joint ownership to our five closest neighbours. Our children have grown up together. In the past, we have shared our hard times and our good times with them.’

Naamah considered this. She knew her husband was a generous man, a fact which sometimes irritated her, as like many men, he would often prioritise the outsider over and above his own family. It was a trait that both annoyed and attracted her.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he cut in first, ‘Naamah, this is the right thing to do. We will still be secure, and we strengthen our little community.’

The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. The field, its walls, the animals, like all wealth would also manifest both work and worry. And that too would be shared. ‘But what of Zamira—you know she will refuse to be part of the community.’

Kana-Il thought for a moment. ‘We could give her the pregnant goat,’ he suggested.

Naamah gave a little disbelieving laugh. ‘Really? Are you serious?’ She searched his face intently.

‘Yes,’ he smiled down at her. ‘Think about it. Before her troubles, you were good friends. Now she is so afraid of what people think of her that she lives like a hyrax, creeping out only when no-one is around.’

Naamah smiled as she shook her head disbelievingly, ‘Okay...’ There was a short pause as Kana-Il held her serious gaze. Suddenly throwing her hands forward in a

gesture of goodwilled surrender, she laughed, 'Fine... Yes! Fine.'

'Well done, my love!' he said. 'Perhaps we'll keep one donkey for ourselves.'

She hugged him tightly, 'I don't understand you half the time, but I do love you.'

'Ditto,' he said with a sparkle in his eyes. Kana-Il was not really an effusive type of man.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 28 Fever

The soft clink of milk bottles wakes me. It must be gone seven! No dream again? I didn't dream last night! Nor the night before. In fact not since that second dream of Tertullian. Well, maybe that's it for dreams. Then as usual, before I have a chance to lift my head from the pillow, the heavy waking dread resettles on me. I recall Freya's vacant eyes with unsettling clarity.

I make breakfast—toast and coffee—mostly on autopilot. My head's in a bit of a mess, and I'm trying to keep busy—both my body and my brain. And I'm still reflecting on the dream about Tertullian a couple of nights ago. I understand better now the kind of really horrendous situation he is in. He's still a chauvinist though! Was that seriously a jab about mascara? I guess it was just the current culture he was living in?

His delight at the idea of hell certainly makes more sense now. It's impossible to put myself in his position—though I do worry that we may both be trying to believe what we want to! Freya is so poorly that my chats with her only last about ten minutes. I opt to take my laptop and hotspot my phone to keep my studies going.

---oOo---

As always, as soon as I arrive, I immediately ask at ICU reception how Freya is. The shift nurse quietly updates me—she still has the infection and her temperature is elevated somewhat. 'We are keeping an eye on her,' she says, as if that would reassure me. I hope they are!! This is after all the Intensive Care Unit.

'Can I see her?' I ask, feeling my anxiety level climbing.

‘I’ll check whether she’s awake.’ The nurse disappears into the ward. I wait two or three minutes. I wonder what she is doing. What could be taking so long? She reappears with another nurse, looks across and sees me, spends another couple of minutes chatting before walking over and telling me I can go in. I give a curt nod and hurry away from the desk, wishing they were a bit more sensitive.

When I get to the bedside, Freya is awake, but laying down with her eyes closed.

‘Hi darling, it’s me.’

Freya’s eyes slowly come open and she turns her head lethargically to face me. Her face is sweaty and her eyes are hollow and dull. But her pupils flicker and jerk in a way that makes my stomach tighten up. I reach out for her hand, but she doesn’t respond. I’m horrified. In twenty-four hours she seems to have weakened considerably. I pick up her hand. It feels hot and trembly. Now she smiles at me, but only for a split second. I can tell that she is really stressed.

I close my eyes, my heart pounding, and fire off an emergency prayer. It’s the usual thing I’ve done before—promises to never doubt God again, determination to avoid the things I know are wrong, but enjoy too much to give up. But then I pause, mid-prayer. Somehow, I’m left in no doubt that God doesn’t want to get into any deals. That leaves me confused. So instead I wait a couple of minutes in silence, and then just tell him how I feel. And then, although I couldn’t explain how, I’m convinced that he already knows. And that’s it. I don’t usually pray like that.

After twenty minutes or so, Freya surfaces. She turns her head to me, but takes several minutes before she recognises me. Then thankfully, she smiles—pleased to see me. But after only five minutes she has to rest her head back on the pillow and close her eyes.

I chat a bit to Freya about the piano, because she’s been trying really hard to get better at it, and has got to grade five. I know that since all the stress of losing her

brother, and all the subsequent legal trauma that went with it, she has tended to play piano. I remind her that professional pianists, like elite athletes, often practice mentally—that is without an actual piano to play. Simply by running through the score in their minds, they can reactivate and strengthen the muscle memory. To be honest, it is mostly to avoid having nothing to say, but I suppose it might be true that Freya could do this even in bed. Maybe it may help her relax.

She appears to have heard me and smiles a little.

After another ten minutes or so, Freya is unresponsive, but breathing okay. I can see a discussion going on at ICU Reception. A nurse walks across.

‘There are a couple of people who have come to visit, but I have told them we don’t allow non relative visiting in ICU,’ she says apologetically, ‘would you like to come across and speak to them.’

I look across to reception and spot Celia, so I walk over. Ryan is there too.

‘Hi guys!’ My tone is artificially bright. ‘Freya is asleep, so perhaps we can grab a coffee in the cafeteria?’

When we get there of course they want to know how Freya is. I tell them my impression—that Freya is fighting an infection, and to be truthful, only just hanging on. Celia says, ‘Oh, Melissa, I’m really sorry. This must be so hard for you.’ She takes my hand. But of course she has absolutely no idea what I am going through.

Ryan nods sympathetically with half closed eyes and says, ‘Keep trusting, Melissa. We are all praying for both of you.’

My gaze rests on Ryan. I’m so confused that even a simple statement like that is incomprehensible to me. ‘What am I trusting for? A way out?’ I ask flatly. ‘Or trusting that you’re wrong?’

He looks awkward. I admit it wasn’t my most gracious moment, but I honestly don’t know how to dress it up any more and I’m too tired to want to. He thinks for a

while, then says, ‘Well you know that God is the essence of love, but also that the judgement of the Lord is true and righteous altogether.’

My response comes back at him like a shotgun blast. ‘Ryan, if his judgement is that Freya deserves torment forever, then I don’t trust his judgement!’ He looks momentarily stunned! But is this really so hard to grasp? Frustrated I fire the other barrel. ‘And if I can’t trust his judgement, then I can’t trust his love can I?’

I sit back in the chair, and look at him, exasperated that he can’t seem to reassure me about anything. And to be honest I’m increasingly sick of churning through complicated bits of theology trying to get myself some peace regarding Freya, who as far as I can see may have only a few days left to live. Maybe it would be simpler just to embrace the idea that this is all there is to life, God is an illusion, and the only peace is the silence of the grave. But then I go down the same stupid rabbit hole scrabbling about in the dark trying to find some basis for morality which isn’t a social construct. And it isn’t of course, otherwise you have to regard the slaughter of six million Jews in the Holocaust as a mere inconvenience. So I’m stuck.

Ryan looks blankly back at me. He shakes his head and sighs heavily. It’s like we’re trying to communicate through a brick wall of confusion. I know he’s a sensitive man. And he knows I’m not arguing to win. He understands what is dragging me through this, and hurting me, and it hurts him too.

‘Ah, Mrs Turnham, I thought I’d find you here.’ I turn in my seat, tense at the sound of Dr Pradesh’s voice. She is approaching, her face serious. ‘Could I take a couple of minutes?’ she asks. I nod and pull myself to my feet. I follow her down the corridor and into a side room.

‘Do sit,’ she says, gesturing to a settee.

She sits by my side and after a brief smile, says in a calm deliberate tone, ‘I am concerned that Freya has not shown any improvement regarding the infection that we

are treating. So far it hasn't responded to the antibiotics.'

'So what happens now then?' I ask, shaking my head.

She meets my gaze and replies, 'Well, the infection is resistant to the initial antibiotics we have used. We have added a broader-spectrum antibiotic, and our hope is that this will be more effective.'

'Okay, is there anything else that you can do?' I struggle to keep my voice steady.

She replies in an even tone, 'There are one or two signs the infection may be affecting her more widely.'

As she carries on speaking, the weight of worry presses down on me now. These conversations are just going from bad to worse. My mind races, trying to decode what she could be implying. Her gaze drifts downward, avoiding mine. Her explanation is cautious, evasive, each word hand-picked. I think she's holding something back.

I cut across her bland words with deliberate directness. 'You're worried it's sepsis, aren't you?'

A compassionate softness shows in her face, but I note she still avoids my question. 'That isn't confirmed yet. We are monitoring her very closely. She's young, Mrs Turnham, and she's fighting. We won't hesitate to escalate treatment if we need to.'

I can see the gravity of the situation writ large on her face. I think they are running out of options. I nod, mute with worry.

'You can go back into the IC unit when you wish,' she says gently. I bow my head. As I close my eyes, the true situation that we are enduring slowly comes into focus. When I finally lift my head, she has gone. I'm alone and afraid.

For a moment, I sit paralysed, but then it all erupts inside me—a surge of raw, uncontainable frustration. *Why can't you take me instead?!* The thoughts crash into my mind, fierce and unconstrained. *I've had most of my life, and she's just beginning.*

This isn't just. It's not fair what she has gone through. Take me! I don't care...

To my horror, I find I'm speaking them out loud in a voice that cracks with desperation, in between ragged breaths. It's a rant! It's an honest prayer. And yet, it doesn't ease the ache. It doesn't make me feel better.

The aggression dies away as quickly as a stilled storm. I stay unmoving, my head low, tears streaming down my face. Sniffing, trembling, my heart aching, my head sore, my body sinking beneath the crush of despair.

After a while, there is a quiet tap at the door. I look up. I do my best to wipe the tears from my cheeks with the backs of my thumbs, and from the corners of my eyes with my fingertips. It's Martin. He comes to sit by me, and solemnly passes me a large clean folded and ironed snow-white cotton handkerchief. I spend a few minutes dabbing my eyes and getting my balance.

'Bad news?' he asks in a soft voice.

I nod, miserably, head down. 'The antibiotics aren't working, and the infection is getting worse. And I can't do anything'

'I'm so sorry to hear that. But Melissa,' he pauses until I lift my gaze, 'you're carrying a lot right now, and you're doing really well.'

I've screwed up his beautiful handkerchief into a ball in my lap. 'How long does this have to go on? She can't take much more. Twenty-three, she is!' My breath comes in a hopeless sigh.

I look him in the face now, and I'm moved to see his eyes are shiny with compassion too.

'Watching someone you love fight like this feels hopeless and impossible,' he says, 'but you are not the only one watching her. There's one who never sleeps, who never gives up—He's watching too.'

'Freya doesn't...' I stop for a moment to regain some composure, 'She doesn't

believe that, or even want that...’

‘But she knows you are watching. That matters, you know... To her it matters.’

‘Does she even know I’m here? She wakes only for a few minutes... ‘

‘And when she does,’ he cuts in, ‘she finds you there.’

‘I don’t think she has long...’ I can feel her slipping away from me. My beautiful child. My whole life I have taken care of her, and now I’m failing.

‘Melissa, I have sat alongside many here in this building who have fretted that they are helpless. But time and again, when people pull through, they tell me that they could sense being surrounded by love. They know. They feel it.’ He pauses to let it sink in. ‘Freya feels it.’

I can feel tears beginning again, and I try to clamp down on my emotions. I draw a shaky breath. I hold on to that. Maybe he’s right. Me just being here helps? ‘I need to get back to ICU,’ I murmur.

‘Would you like me to pray with you?’

I know if he prays with me, I’ll just start to cry again, so I say, ‘Later, please. When you get home. The nighttime is difficult.’

He nods. ‘Of course. Take care.’

‘Thank you,’ I say, my voice barely audible.

---oOo---

I’m home. It’s half nine. I’m looking at a shoe box.

When I got home, I popped into Freya’s room. I don’t normally come in here, she is after all a woman in her early twenties. I don’t know why but I looked under the bed. I wish I hadn’t now. There was a shoe box right at the back next to the wall. I looked at it for a while before dragging it out and opening it.

I look inside. There is something wrapped in tissue paper. Two things. I unwrap the first. My heart breaks when I see what it is.

An old guy, lovely chap, at the church used to make what he called “holding crosses”. He died, well, six years ago, I guess. They’re made from olive wood, shaped into a cross, smooth curves, beautiful grain. Quite small, they sit comfortably in the palm of your hand. You supposed to just hold it as you pray, or when you’re stressed. Just a reminder that Jesus gave everything for you. He made one for each child in the church and inscribed their name on the crossbeam.

This is Nick’s. Someone, I guess Freya, has scrawled the word ‘Why?’ on the stem. Angry writing in felt pen.

With shaking hands, I unwrap the second—it’s Freya’s cross. There’s nothing written on it, but one side of the cross beam is broken. On closer examination it appears to have been initially sawn with a serrated knife and then deliberately snapped off.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 29 Angels

‘How did it go today,’ Eri asked, ‘you were separately assigned I believe?’

Alariel spoke up first, smiling and flushed with success. ‘Yes, we were. It went well! For me anyway’

‘So you were assigned to ...’

‘To Ryan,’ Alariel cut in, ‘and it was really specific and relatively straightforward. As planned, over breakfast, he read the newspaper headline about the judgement accorded to the climate protesters—the prison sentence. “Not true, not right” emblazoned across the front page. And that was enough. And right on cue, he said it!’

Eri nodded approvingly, “‘The judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” Well done, Alariel’

Turning to the other angel he continued, ‘And how was it received.’

Caeliel looked glum. ‘Not good! Not good at all!’

‘What did she say?’

Caeliel hesitated. ‘You won’t want to hear this! She said “If I can’t trust his judgement, then I can’t trust his love, can I?”’ Caeliel shook his head sadly, ‘The worst possible outcome. And it was a disastrous day. Almost everything went wrong.’

‘No,’ Eri said firmly, ‘She came up with an answer that although bitter, was sufficiently poetic to have imprinted strongly in her mind.’

‘What? “If I can’t trust his judgement, then I can’t trust his love”? How can that be good?’ The two angels couldn’t believe it.

Eri had a broad smile on his face now, 'Just watch!' he said.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 30 Iron Age

Naamah prepared breakfast while Kana-Il sat at the table, writing. Suddenly the wail of the shofar echoed across the city. The pair exchanged amused glances. Since the old blower of the ram's horn had stepped aside for his enthusiastic young successor, the sound had grown steadily more forceful. Now, when the boy put his full effort into it, anyone close by was liable to flinch as if El himself had spoken.

Two or three of their neighbours emerged and sauntered down to the temple square to listen to the announcement. A while later they came back to relay the news that the high priest was giving notice of the Tesem Kodesh—the annual worship of the gods at Topheth. Some years it would be celebratory if the tribe had been blessed with fertile fields, good crops, defeated enemies, health and wealth. In lean times, the gods would need to see a people in abjection pleading and appeasing. But whether good years or lean, there would be sacrifices offered on the altar of Molech.

The announcement triggered the general mobilisation of those who were communally minded to prepare for the occasion. Young men would be collecting wood for the fires that would be set. Women would be baking in preparation for the meal to be shared together in the presence of the gods. The young girls who had been selected for the “Revel of Plenty” were busy in final rehearsals.

Then there was the preparation of the altar. The great bronze statue of Molech sat atop a stone platform, the metal body darkened by years of ritual fire. Molech was depicted as the body of a huge man with a great distended hollow belly, with the broad shoulders and the wide head of an angry bull. The arms were stretched out forwards as

if in welcome.

It was essential that the bull's head metal was cleaned and polished until it shone. Very few ventured close, and those tasked with the job underwent rigorous purification at the temple prior to approaching the image of Molech.

---oOo---

'Come with me to the city gate,' Kana-Il said, 'I need a witness.'

'Will not the elders witness?' Eshban replied, looking steadily at Kana-Il.

'Yes, but I would rather a friend witness for me.'

'Then definitely, Kan! I'd be pleased to.'

As they made their way to the place where trade deals and transactions were conducted and sealed, Kana-Il shared his determination to transfer the parcel of land, the cow, one donkey and the pregnant goat into the communal ownership of their neighbours—six dwellings in all.

Initially, Eshban could hardly believe it. 'Kan, when did you get so rich? I don't understand.'

'It is because our family has ...' Kana-Il paused and made eye contact with Eshban, '... has found favour with the gods.'

Eshban narrowed his eyes. 'Ah, yes. But it seems overly generous doesn't it?'

'Well that is how it appears to me,' confirmed Kana-Il. 'But I'm not going to turn it down!'

'Absolutely not!' Eshban agreed. 'So then I am not actually a witness, am I?'

'No, you're the community representative in the transaction. You're right about the elders—they'll do as witnesses. But for now, it is better if this stays between you and I.'

Eshban's eyes narrowed as he looked at Kana-Il, trying to work out why this should all be so clandestine.

‘It is just that, what with the feast, there’s a lot going on, and... it’s best if we can, you know, manage how the others get to know... ‘ he trailed off lamely.

The transfer was made as an oath, this time to El, witnessed by the elders, and symbolised by the passing of a clod of earth from Kana-Il’s hand into Eshban’s. The words specified the detail of the transaction- that the parcel of land, the cow, and one donkey was to pass into joint ownership with each of the beneficiaries individually named. The specifics of the gift of the pregnant goat were also included.

The details of the transaction were then repeated aloud by the witnesses to ensure an agreed common memory.

Once the transfer was ratified, they made their way back to the cluster of huts. There was no-one visible apart from Naamah who saw them approach through the open door, and two or three children playing in the dirt. A small boy was poking the pregnant goat with a long stick, delighted that the rope prevented the goat from retaliating.

‘So... this one can go now!’ Kana-Il untied the goat and retied it to the tree close to Zamira’s hut.

The woman emerged from the hut. ‘What’s going on? I don’t really want your goat tied up there!’

‘It’s your goat now, Zamira. A gift from Naamah!’ Her face registered amazement. ‘And me!’ he added. ‘We already have two goats, so it seems only fair!’

‘It’s too much,’ she murmured, eyes filling with tears.

‘No,’ he said nodding, ‘it’s just right! We’ve always shared the good times and the bad, and there’s no reason to stop now.’

She looked at him with gratitude, shaking her head in disbelief, ‘Except it’s been mostly my bad times and your good times!’

He looked at her seriously, 'We'll see.' he said with a wry huff.

Naamah, standing in the doorway, wiped her hands on her apron. She called across the yard. 'Will you not come in to eat? I've been baking!'

Kana-Il looked across at her, red-faced and sweating, then checked the sun's position. 'Could you pack it for me instead?'

Naamah frowned. 'Pack it? Why? Where are you going?'

'To Ben-Alashdal's.'

She blinked in the heat, passing her sleeve across her brow as she tried to place the name. 'Ben-Alashdal? Your cousin? But that is out past the hills—on the road to Luz!'

'Yep! It's a bit of a trek.'

She stepped forward, concern flickering across her face. 'And why do you have to go?'

Kana-Il tightened the binding on one of his sandals, then straightened up. 'I'll explain when I get back. I need to get a move on, if I'm going to be back before sundown.'

Naamah hesitated, lips pressed together, looking puzzled. Then she sighed, 'Very well. Give me a minute. Will you have cheese or chicken?'

'Cheese.'

She disappeared into the hut, and moments later, passed him a wrapped bundle and a water-skin. He met her gaze just long enough for her to see he had business to attend to—important business. 'Thanks!' Then he turned, slung the water-skin over his shoulder and strode away.

'Aren't you going the wrong way?' she called, 'Luz! South of Jebus—really?'

Without breaking stride he called back, 'Yes darling, you're right. This is a little detour first.'

Shaking her head, she joined the countless billions of women throughout history. 'Men,' she muttered.

---oOo---

That night Zamira did not sleep. The goat gift delivered two offspring at quarter past midnight, one strong and one weak. She had not played the part of goat midwife for many years, but she recalled the process quickly enough and her strong hands ensured that both were delivered in quick time. The problem was that the strong one tried to push the weak one off the teat, and there was a chance that unless Zamira played referee, the weak would go to the wall.

Constantly intervening was tiring but by 6.00am they seemed to have settled down with some kind of negotiated boundary. Zamira made sure that both were abiding by the peace agreement, and then she retired to bed at 6.20 just as the city was waking up.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 31 Dreaming

Another long day of sitting by the hospital bed, tense and fearful. I'm exhausted. Again. But glad I can finally sleep. The candle is the last source of light, so I douse it and settled down. I'm out in no time.

Some time later, I become aware that the candle flame has flickered back into life, a pool of rippling light gently settling around me. And there is a place I should be.

But before I have the chance to worry that I am not there, I am.

In someone's study. The room itself is neat. Comfortable. A single arched window let out onto a balcony. Laid out before me is the panorama of a North African town. The streets are filled with people buying, selling, laughing, arguing, walking, sitting, drinking, eating. All of life in fact. Beyond the town, the sun glitters on white horses to the horizon.

Hanging on hooks on the wall are two lavish robes in bright colours contrasting with the sober earthy coloured walls and floor. Facing the window is a solid desk of silvery gray wood. The wall farthest from the window is furnished with shelves from floor to ceiling, stacked with what looks like large hand made books bound in leather covers. Some are patterned, several are embossed, but most are plain. The man sitting at the desk is evidently concerned that everything be in order. The quills are arranged side by side at top centre. Codices and loose parchments are stacked at the top right. The ink pots are arranged at top left safely distant from the books and papers.

The man looks very old. His skin mottled and wrinkled by the sun, his eyes a little rheumy. So I speak softly. 'What a lovely view, isn't it?'

Augustine visibly jumps, turns and stares at me. ‘Uh! What? Who are you? How... how did you...?’

Anxious to reassure him, I smile and murmur, ‘You were too deep in work to see me arrive.’

‘Really?’ he says, his voice unsure.

I nod. ‘What town is this?’ I ask, before I realise it will sound foolish.

‘Hippo Regius’

‘And that is... the Mediterranean Sea?’ I say, uncertainly.

Looking puzzled, Augustine nods. He looks around the study, then returns his gaze to me. ‘It’s rather inconvenient... your arrival. I was in the midst of...’ He nods distractedly at the parchment laid before him.

‘The City,’ I crane my neck to read the title. ‘The City of God.’

‘Yes,’ Augustine says, ‘The City of God—the final labour of my life.’

Augustine frowns and clears his throat. He looks down at the parchment, as one would regard one’s favourite offspring. ‘A labour of twelve years, now nearing its completion.’

I lean over the desk, focussing on the round clear lettering of the Latin text. Straightening up, I say, ‘Twelve years!’ I’m astonished, ‘It had better be good!’

Augustine frowns, and I think he is about to rebuke my frivolity, so I quickly smooth things over. ‘Sorry! I’m just interested in the construction method. Well,’ I pause and meet his puzzled gaze, ‘and the strength of the foundations!’

Unease passes across Augustine’s features, quickly replaced with a mask of calm. ‘Perhaps then you would share your qualifications as a magister operis?’

I have no idea what that is, but I meet his gaze evenly, determined to keep my voice steady. ‘Sadly no qualifications. I am just someone who sees cracks appearing in walls in a time of earthquakes.’ I give a smile and raise my eyebrows to lighten the

conversation. ‘But that is a serious volume!’

Augustine returns my smile. ‘Serious?’

‘I mean... well... big!’

‘This is only volume twenty-one. The previous twenty volumes are over there.’

He points to the bottom shelf on the opposite wall.

‘Wow!’ I whistle, my eyes wide. ‘And now you’re reviewing it. That’s a long job. What does that involve?’

Augustine’s face lights up with pride. ‘I have to ensure consistency—between one book and the next, and across chapters that address the same subjects from different perspectives.’

As if led by unseen threads, I find myself drawn to ask, ‘And where exactly are you in the text?’

‘Right now?’ he responds.

I nod.

‘I’m rereading a paragraph in chapter twenty-three, written several weeks ago.’

‘Go on, then,’ I say, motioning for him to proceed.

Augustine rises to his feet, picks up the codex, and begins to read with a voice more suited to a lecture hall:

‘Whoever says, “Both punishment and the kingdom will have an end,” must heed the Gospel and our Lord Himself who says, “Thus these shall go into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” He links eternal punishment with eternal life; both must be understood as without end, otherwise neither will life be eternal.’

Well as soon as I hear the words “eternal punishment”, of course I’m not surprised at the turn of the conversation. But then I missed the rest of what he said. ‘Sorry, but what do you mean by that?’

Augustine carefully places the manuscript back on the desk. 'It is clear, is it not? Some claim eternal life is forever, but eternal punishment is not. Such a view is illogical.'

'Hmmm,' I murmur. I'm playing for time, unsure how to proceed, so I tip my head to one side to make it look like I am thinking. Finally I give up, and simply say, 'Go on.'

Augustine warms to me a little, obviously taking me for a serious enquirer. He continues in a less formal tone, 'Jesus Himself said: "These people will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life."' This links the two concepts. If someone claims eternal punishment does not last forever, they must also claim eternal life does not last forever. One cannot exist without the other.'

Suddenly it all clicks into place. My previous conversations, my reading, my middle of the night crazy thoughts. I let out a small laugh, because I am being led across familiar ground. 'Ah yes, I've already had this debate with Tertullian.'

Augustine shakes his head, confused. 'Tertullian?'

'Yes,' I reply dismissively, waving a hand. I don't want to get sidetracked. I feel on the brink of something. 'And you're trapped in the same loop. You're stuck in circular reasoning.'

He stiffens slightly. 'Circular reasoning? What do you mean?'

'It's when you assume something is true, in order to prove it's true,' I say, as kindly as I can. 'Have you not heard of this?'

His lips press together for a moment, and then he replies, 'Of course! Aristotle defined this *petitio principii* centuries ago. I'm fully familiar with it.'

I curl up inside with embarrassment. I've patronised him. And made a fool of myself.

But Augustine is gracious, and simply pauses frowning for a few seconds, trying

to contextualise my critique. 'But the aionion life of God *is* unending.'

'Absolutely it is,' I agree, 'but not because it's described as aionion. That's not what makes it eternal.' I pause for a moment. Then a few fragments from my hours of study drop into my mind. 'Look at Peter's letter, which calls it *aphthartos*—imperishable. Or Paul's, which says we'll be clothed with *athanasia*—immortality. Or John's Revelation, which states there will be no more death. Those are the substantive reasons that we know the life of God is unending.'

Augustine looked momentarily unsettled. 'I must rely on scripture, of course.'

'Of course,' I say. I have to be careful now, because I have already looked idiotic. So I simply ask, 'But what about the origin of your scripture? Show me.'

Augustine glances at me for a moment, trying to assess this jumped up pretentious visitor. He leads me to a shelf of imposing codices. He sweeps his hand across the top three shelves. 'The scriptures are here.'

'Which one contains the Gospel of Matthias?'

Augustine pulls a large codex from the third shelf down, its dark leather covers creaking. 'This is Matthias,' he says, walking back to the desk and setting it down with evident tenderness.

I open it, expecting to find a Contents page. But just one look at the parchment crammed with indecipherable letters, and I know it's beyond me. There is no indication of chapter or verse numbers, nor even spaces between words. Frustrated, I ask, 'Can you find chapter twenty-five for me?'

He shakes his head, not understanding my request.

We speak at cross purposes for several seconds before I realise there is no concept of chapters, nor verses. 'Oh, I get it! Sorry, can you find Jesus' words for me, "These people will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life"?''

He carefully leafs through, then settles on a page and indicates the correct line.

‘Here!’ I say, tapping the words, *Et ibunt hi in supplicium aeternum*. ‘And what translation is this?’

‘The Vetus Latina,’ Augustine answers. ‘Are you suggesting aeternum is incorrect?’

I still don’t know where this conversation is leading, but somehow the questions form in my mouth. ‘Let me ask you: What does aeternum mean?’

‘Without end,’ he says firmly.

‘Always? Consistently?’

‘Yes,’ he insists.

I let a wry smile cross my face. ‘Then yes, I am suggesting it’s incorrect. I’m sure you know that the root of the Greek word aionion is aion, meaning age. At best, aionion may mean age-long or of the age. How does that come to mean unending?’

It appears I have the bit between my teeth, as the words keep coming! ‘You are aware no doubt that the Greek word aeon is regarded as equivalent to the Hebrew word owlam?’

‘Of course.’

‘And speaking of the stars in the sky, Psalm 148 tells us that God “established them ad olam”. How would you translate that?’

‘He established them forever and ever. Our greatest scholars attest to this.’ Augustine is beginning to look offended.

‘And yet the truth is that each star like a man is born, flourishes, and dies. Perhaps you are not aware of that?’

He shakes his head vigorously. ‘No! This cannot be! Like the whole of creation, all things were made in the beginning. That is true even of the angels.’

He catches me off guard. ‘Sorry! You think that angels are no longer being created?’

‘Without doubt! The creation account in Genesis is crystal clear! And does not this very Psalm also say, “Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. ... Let them praise the name of the Lord, for at his command they were created.” Augustine widens his eyes and glares at me, and taps a bony finger on the desk in time with his words, ‘Past! Tense!’

‘Is that your evidence?’

‘Yes, it is my absolute conclusion!’

I try to smile disarmingly and pause for a beat. ‘Of course. And this matter of angels is not particularly important, but on much else, do you not fear to build your house of certainty on sand so shallow? Are you not aware that your reputation and your assertions will ... ‘ I stopped. I should say something stopped me. Then I found my own words correcting me, ‘You should consider that your assertions may echo down through time and affect the beliefs of thousands, possibly millions, or hundreds of millions of men and women!’

Augustine evidently takes that as a backhanded compliment rather than as what it is—a rock solid prediction. He smiles and replies, ‘I think, my dear, that your opinion of me is rather over-inflated.’

I manage to correct his view of my apparent sycophancy, ‘I would think even better of you if you did not specify with false clarity, truths that scripture leaves veiled.’

More than a trifle annoyed now, Augustine steps back and crosses his arms defensively. ‘Well, I still hold to the view that aeon has always meant unending.’

‘Not always,’ I counter. ‘Tertullian introduced the idea—almost certainly influenced by his suppressed desire for retribution.’

His face darkens. ‘Tertullian was a man of God, holy and zealous. To accuse him of such a thing is outrageous!’

I lean forward, looking into the old man’s face. I’m breathing hard, but

something settles me and I wait for a moment to recall that I am interested in demonstrating, emulating even, a God of infinite love. In a gentle tone I say, 'Consider his time, Augustine. His friends were beaten, people he loved were crucified, burned alive even! The state waged violent, wicked attacks on Christians. And while he was facing all that, he was trying to come to terms with his Lord who was telling him to turn the other cheek. Do you think he didn't struggle with forgiveness?'

Augustine hesitates. 'What are you implying?'

'I'm saying that, unable to obey Christ's command to wholeheartedly forgive, he rationalized his anger into a theology of eternal torment. Personally facing such inhuman abuse, he wanted to believe that his enemies would suffer. Does this not come across to you in his writing?'

Augustine remains silent.

'And his influence spread far and wide, especially by the time this version of Matthias was translated', I say tapping the codex meaningfully.

Augustine's face has gone pale. 'This is a grave accusation.'

Suddenly I know what I have to say. I pause. This is going to be difficult. I make my voice as gentle as I know how. 'It's more serious than you know, Augustine. Think of your son, Adeodatus.'

The mention of his son visibly pains him. 'How do you know of Adeodatus?'

'I know a little of your life,' I say, smiling faintly. Then, tentatively, desperately hoping to lessen the shock, 'Would you ever hold his hand in a flame, even for five seconds, as he screamed in agony?'

Augustine recoils in horror. 'Of course not!'

Again, I know what I have to say. I fear to say it, but I know this is why I am here. Augustine is searching my face trying to understand. Our eyes lock and I say, 'Then why would you ascribe what is infinitely worse to our Father in heaven? Are you

a better abba Father than He? If you accuse God of such horror, you must be absolutely certain you are correct—beyond any doubt. Please, Augustine, reconsider.

Acknowledge, even in your writings, that you could be wrong.’

Augustine’s silence is heavy, his thoughts clearly warring within him. He gives me a slight nod, his face troubled, but the conversation has come to its natural end. I step back, hoping against hope that the weight of the words I was given will find a place to settle within him.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 32 Sepsis

It's just past seven. I've been semi-conscious since five. With worry about Freya and the memory of crazy conversation—this time with Augustine. In my seemingly rational moments, I know I'm losing the plot. In my dreams though, everything is getting clearer.

I'm debating whether to delay going in today. Yesterday, she was pretty bad, so I'm hoping against hope that she will be a bit better today. But deep down I know I'm grasping at straws. So I think I'll not arrive quite so early. It is such a long distressing day. I feel bad about not going though because she might be awake and wanting me. But not if she's anything like yesterday.

---oOo---

In the end I decided to leave home at 9.00am. The traffic was terrible of course, but now I'm here. It's 10.20 and I'm hunched over an empty coffee cup in the cafe, because the lead nurse told me that Dr Pradesh wants to see me before I go in. Sounds like bad news, so my stomach's churning.

It's becoming clear that this can't go on much longer. Poor Freya is so ill—either she'll miraculously turn the corner or I'm going to lose her. I thought last night that I was kind of prepared for anything, but sitting here anticipating whatever the doctor wants to talk to me about is awful.

A nurse pops her head round the door, sees me and beckons me over.

'Dr Pradesh would like a chat before... '

'I know,' I say, impatient to get on with it.

‘She’s free now, if you’d like to come,’ the nurse says. I follow her to the small ICU consulting room.

‘Ah, Mrs Turnham,’ Dr Pradesh is not wearing her white coat, but she still exudes professional authority. ‘I wanted to talk to you briefly before you visit Freya today. She is really very unwell. The antibiotics that we have tried, and it is now three different types, are not reducing the infection, and consequently Freya’s body is now with sepsis.’

The news is a hammer blow. I know how dangerous sepsis is and despite repeatedly whispering hope into my own ears, this is not really surprising. The doctor is still talking, but I’ve missed what she said, because my thoughts were unravelling into panicky what-ifs.

‘... just the oxygen feed.’

‘Sorry, could you say that again? Sorry!’

She smiles understandingly. ‘Of course. I was just saying that we have taken her off the ventilator and now she has just the oxygen feed again. But her blood pressure is low and so there is the risk of organ damage, and possibly necrosis of extremities...’

‘Sorry,’ I interject, ‘what does that mean?’

The tone of Dr Pradesh’s voice is dangerously gentle—this is evidently extremely bad news. ‘The tissue in the fingers and toes is vulnerable if the blood supply is insufficient. This means that the skin and flesh can die. Freya already has one toe which has been constantly cold and is now darkening.’

It is like my heart has stopped. Dr Pradesh grasps my arm and guides me to a chair. I put my head in my hands. She puts her hand on my shoulder.

‘Mrs Turnham...’ I am just about holding it together. As I raise my gaze to hers, she gently touches my forearm, ‘Mrs Turnham, don’t give up hope.’

I’m taking huge gasps of breath, and then realise I’ve been biting my bottom lip.

Slowly I relax.

‘We are doing everything we can, and so long as she is fighting, we are fighting too. And so must you! She needs you to be strong.’

Dr Pradesh fixes me with an almost stern gaze, ‘Can you do that?’

I grit my teeth, and grimly nod. For Freya, I absolutely can.

When I get to her bedside, she looks at me with no glimmer of recognition.

‘Hello darling,’ I say, smiling.

There’s no reply. She simply turns her face away. Her skin is greyish and mottled. Her arms and shoulders look thin and fragile. After a minute or so, I repeat, ‘Hello darling.’ This time she looks at me, and her eyes light up.

‘Hello, mum.’ Her voice is almost unrecognisable, just a thin croak. ‘I want to come home.’

‘Oh Freya, I would love to be able to take you home, but you need to be here, where they can make you better.’

‘I’m not getting better. Just worse.’

‘You still need the Doctor’s ...’

‘Listen,’ she cuts in urgently, her voice higher and thinner, ‘I don’t want to die here. I want to come home!’

‘But Freya, there’s all this equipment you need for ...’

Freya frowns and her eyes narrow. ‘No!’ Her voice rises in anger. ‘I’m going to die here one night, and you won’t even be here. I’m coming home...’

‘I can’t take you, Freya, the hospital won’t discharge you like this.’

‘They’re not looking after me, and now you won’t either!’ Freya’s head lolls back on the pillow. She’s exhausted. Tears are running down her face and she’s shaking.

‘I’m here,’ I say leaning across and dabbing her cheeks with Martin’s clean white handkerchief, which I had planned to return today. ‘I’ll never leave you, Freya.’

‘I’m going to die,’ she whispers.

I swallow, clench my fists. ‘Freya, don’t you dare give up. In a few days, you are going to come home! Yes! But first you have to recover from this infection. And you will.’ I’m aware that I’m probably lying, but what am I supposed to say? I can feel myself welling up, but I have to hold it together.

‘You said everything would be okay.’ Her voice is filled with fear.

‘And it will be!’ I lie again. ‘Just a few days more, Freya, please.’

She turns her face away and refuses to look at me. I sit for a few minutes, hoping.

After a while, I stand up to leave, and almost immediately one of the machines starts screeching. A nurse rushes in, cancels the alarm and immediately checks the blood pressure monitor. Within ten seconds she is joined by a doctor.

He takes one look at the monitor. ‘Noradrenaline inline. 0.1 microgram,’ he says sharply.

He stands unmoving, eyes locked onto the monitor. After two minutes that seem to last for two hours, he says, ‘Increase to 0.15.’

After another minute, he nods slowly, ‘Okay,’ he addresses the nurse, ‘check in ten minutes to see where we are in the range.’

He looks at me, gives a tired smile, and says, ‘All fine now.’ He nods, and then they both walk away leaving me alone with Freya who hasn’t said a word. I sit for a few more minutes, then head to the cafe craving distraction in caffeine.

There is no-one there I know, and it doesn’t take long enough to buy and drink the coffee, so I go back to the bedside.

This time, Freya doesn’t recognise me. Despite repeated explanations that I’m her mum, she’s completely confused. I assume it’s the fever caused by the infection. It may seem strange, but this is more comfortable than her reminding me of all the ways that I haven’t been able to take care of her. For an hour I linger by the bed, mostly

reading my phone, then another doctor shows up. I haven't seen this one before. He seems to be about fifteen, and bursting with confidence.

He offers a smile as if everything were perfectly fine. 'Let's have a look at this toe then, shall we?' he says breezily. He turns the bottom corner of the cover up and there's a perfectly healthy looking foot. I breathe again. 'That's what a good one looks like!' he says, still smiling. Evidently he's a man who enjoys his work. He looks at me with eyebrows raised as he walks round the end of the bed to my side. Turning the other corner up, he says, 'Come and have a look at this then! Are you Mum?'

'Yes, that's me,' I say rising from the chair.

Suddenly I see it. I can't believe it. The middle toe is black and misshapen. And it smells. I wrinkle my nose and squeeze my eyes narrow trying to shut it out.

'Good!' he says.

Good? I think.

'That's not too bad.' A nurse arrives. 'No surgery needed. Not yet anyway.' He's addressing the nurse now. 'We'll have the enzymatic dressing please.'

They are both ignoring me, and Freya is still incommunicado. The toe looks awful, and I'm not contributing anything positive here, so I go back to the cafe. It is lunchtime after all. Not surprisingly, the freshly burned after-image of a rotting toe is dulling my appetite.

I have a couple of small sandwiches, which have evidently been cut with a blunt knife. Plus a drink—some fruit flavoured water from a little box. The table top is hard plastic, a little chipped around the edge. I push the chair back and get up. The legs make a distressing sound when the feet scrape across the floor. I suppose I have to go back, but I'm dreading it.

I spot Martin sitting over the other side of the cafe. Good! We can have a bit of a chat to set me up to get through the afternoon. I weave my way across and see he's

talking with a young guy who is in tears. All I can do is nod at Martin as I walk by. He's obviously uninterruptible. It's no good. I have to go back.

When I get back in, Freya is sleeping. I'm thankful for that.

---oOo---

She wakes up for about twenty minutes just after 3.00, but she's delirious, talking nonsense the entire time. I gesture for a nurse who comes over. But she is only interested in the instruments surrounding the bed. Apparently everything is fine.

Once Freya goes back to sleep, I decide I've had enough. I walk back to the cafe to see if I can catch Martin, but there's no sign of him. I pop my head into the chapel, but he's not there either.

I wander back to ICU and ask whether she's likely to wake up again this afternoon, but all I get is could's and maybe's.

---oOo---

I fell asleep in the chair tonight. I've just woken up and it's ten o'clock—time to go to bed. Brilliant!

I get in bed, switch off the side light and try to sleep. It's not happening. Hardly surprising! I decide that I could do with praying for a while. So I try to get going, but my mind is spinning now. The future is completely unknown. I won't be able to live in this house. There's too many memories. I've kind of blown my connection with Celia and the folks at church. My heart sinks. Everything looks grey and bleak. There's absolutely nothing to look forward to. I open my eyes. I wasn't really praying anyway.

On impulse, I fumble for the matches and light Celia's candle. Maybe it is that my eyes were accustomed to the pitch darkness, but candle flame seems to cast a strong golden light around the room. Usually it is a fairly small flame, but now it's about two inches long and burning so brightly. It's almost surreal, a golden room filled with shifting shadows.

I lean back against my pillow and close my eyes. The after-image of the flame is printed on my eyelids. I'm seeing the golden flickers with my eyes closed. Weird isn't it? What I'm seeing is real, but that's not what I'm seeing. And as I watch the golden flame which isn't real but is, that peculiar calm washes over me again like a warm wave. After the horribly complicated and distressing day I've just had, to relax in this calm is delightful. And I drift into semi-sleep with the words, 'Delight yourself in the Lord'.

It would have been a good way to end the day, but I woke up twenty minutes later and realised I hadn't blown the candle out. Then had trouble getting back to sleep. Because my back aches from sleeping in the chair!

-----oOo-----

Chapter 33 Iron Age

It had not been an easy night for Ahlai either. She had a not dissimilar problem to Zamira. Perhaps the anxiety she felt had somehow affected Yasub-El. The baby had refused to settle after the 2:00 a.m. feed, whimpering every few minutes. By 5:30, those soft complaints had escalated into full-volume wails, forcing Ahlai to get up, though she felt as if someone had covertly removed all her bones.

By the time Yasub-El was finally quiet, nursing again, the sun was painting the horizon with streaks of orange. The city was waking, but Ahlai felt as if she had never truly slept.

A sharp rap at the door startled her. She made sure she was decent, then called, 'Come in.'

The door swung open, revealing Bitterface. Her gaze swept the room briefly settling on Ahlai. She gave a sharp nod, then stepped inside, holding the door for the High Priest.

Elihadad entered without hesitation, walking straight to the bedside, his expression impassive. 'Yasub-El will participate in a ceremony of special blessing, at the Tesem Kodesh tomorrow,' he said flatly.

Ahlai's arms tightened instinctively around the baby. 'What does that mean?' she asked, feeling a cold wave of unease wash over her.

'It means,' Elihadad continued, speaking to her as if she were a stranger, 'that tonight, you will return to your parents for the night and come back tomorrow with them for the feast of Kodesh.'

She hesitated, took a sudden deep breath. ‘And what—’

Elihadad cut across her with a dismissive flick of his fingers. ‘The child will stay tonight in the temple, and be prepared for the Tesem Kodesh.’

Ahlai tensed as fear gripped her. She picked the baby up from her lap, stood and held him close to her body, wrapping him in her arms. ‘What does that mean?’ she demanded, her voice suddenly sharper, more assertive.

Elihadad exhaled impatiently. He drew himself up to his full height, towering over her. ‘It means you need have no concern tonight,’ he said, his eyes narrowing. ‘Perhaps your mood will benefit from a better night’s sleep.’

He turned and walked towards the door. Pausing then, he glanced back at her and added, ‘For your safety and peace of mind,’ he continued, gesturing toward the open doorway, ‘a guard will be posted outside your chamber today, ‘so no-one can disturb you on this final day before the feast.’

Ahlai sank onto the bed, looking down into Yasub-El’s tiny face. The baby’s lip went down and he whimpered softly. She began to rock—not just to soothe him, but also to allay her own fears.

---oOo---

It was mid morning when a temple guard brought the news to Naamah. Her husband was busy helping a friend make a wattle hurdle. The message was that while anyone could attend Tesem Kodesh of course, the concubine and her parents were traditionally accorded places of special honour. Despite close questioning, he remained worryingly vague concerning the arrangements for the care of Yasub-El.

As soon as Kana-Il returned home, he was confronted by Naamah, suggesting that he go and get some answers at the temple. ‘It is so inconsiderate!’ she said.

Kana-Il was more responsive than she had expected, and he took off immediately.

He was back within fifteen minutes. He had not been told any more details. More concerning still, he was denied access to his daughter. No, he was told, he would not be able to see the mother of the child chosen by the gods on the penultimate day prior to Tesem Kodesh. All his overly emotional protestations had been met with firm refusal, delivered politely because of course, the peasantry could not be expected to understand temple protocol.

---oOo---

Just after sundown, Ahlai was returned home, again under guard. She looked woebegone. It was the first time she had ever been separated from her little one, and she was feeling it keenly.

‘Where is he?’ Naamah demanded.

‘Elihadad has kept him at the temple for the night,’ she replied dully.

‘And are they bringing him over in the morning?’

‘No, there is some “special blessing” for him and then we will have him back at the Tesem Kodesh.’

Naamah shook her head, and shrugged. ‘Well, I suppose there is nothing we can do.’ Then, noticing Ahlai beginning to break down, she wrapped her arms around her. ‘He’ll be fine,’ she murmured reassuringly.

Kana-Il watched the two of them, his face drawn and grim as he distractedly tapped his fingers on the kitchen bench.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 34 Dreaming

I seem to be wearing black leather buttoned ankle boots, which are noticeably damp. The heavy woollen dress is a dull grey wafting invisible clouds of camphor, underneath a paisley shawl, complete with black hat and gloves. The dingy vestibule smells of wood and varnish, not unlike a small country parish church. There is very little light here, just one tiny very grubby window. I am though, carrying the candle. The gloom of the place is dispelled by the flickering golden glow of the flame.

The rain is soft pattering on the window and the din of the busy street is muted now by the heavy wooden outer door. Faint cries of “Hup” and horses hooves filter in, interspersed by the rattle of carts and carriages over cobbles.

I can just hear a man’s voice through another door leading deeper into the building. There’s a couple of seconds silence, then a great wave of applause. I ease the door ajar and peer in. It lets on to the very back of an auditorium seating I suppose three or four hundred people. Most of them are on their feet clapping. There’s a mixed crowd of men and women—students, and clergy, and business people, those in formal frock coats, cravats and top hats, some in simpler attire—great overcoats and boots and bowler hats. Some of the women look like society debutantes in expensive dresses and flamboyant hats with ribbons and flowers. Others are wearing simple shawls like mine. But every women has a hat.

There’s a wave of shuffling as some people sit back down, while most make to leave. A young woman in a billowing crinoline dress pulls the door wide open. A group of friends are behind her and stream past me, their voices bubbling with enthusiasm. I edge in drawn by some unknown purpose.

The young man on the stage is stooping, talking to several younger people. I weave towards the front as the hall empties. It’s slow going as the traffic is all against

me. A wooden easel on stage displays a large card bearing what must be a lecture title —'Great Poets Of The Last Generation'—and I can hear the group earnestly discussing whether Sir Walter Scott had misconstrued Scottish history to suit his romantic narrative. I can't really catch the detail, and I'm frankly not bothered whether he did or not.

The group breaks up after a few minutes, and the speaker is left alone on the stage, collecting his papers. I note from the display card that this is one George MacDonald. The name doesn't ring a bell, but as I approach I catch his eye. He watches quietly until I reach the stage.

'Hello,' he says. His voice is like dark chocolate, his manner refined and polite. I open my mouth to speak, but he swiftly interjects, 'Before you ask me your question,' he drawls with a Scottish burr, 'was the material familiar to you?'

Before I have a chance to worry about how to reply, the words arrive on my lips, 'No, I am relatively uneducated regarding poetry. I have come with some questions on another matter.'

He looks at me keenly, dark eyes narrowed beneath a strong brow. His demeanour is intense and I am perhaps somewhat uneasy. 'Wait then while I collect up my belongings, and we can go and take tea.'

---oOo---

A few minutes later, I am scurrying to keep up with him as he strides purposefully towards the centre of town. 'Sorry I forgot to ask your name. Please forgive me.'

'Melissa. Melissa Turnham, but do call me Melissa, please.'

'Well Melissa,' he announces, 'we'll visit the tea room in the Queen's Hotel. Have you been there?'

'No, I... I don't live... here.'

‘Ah no, of course not, a visiting southerner? Well the Queen’s is newly built last year. Splendid place!’

We turn into a fabulously grand hotel and make our way along a wide corridor, passing what appears to be the dining room. Mr MacDonald leads me into a side room, where maids are serving tea and cake. He looks at me and a ghost of a smile flits across his face. ‘My treat,’ he says gravely.

‘That’s very kind, Mr MacDonald,’ I murmur.

‘Call me George.’

Instantaneously we are seated by the window, contemplating a cake stand which is already a quarter empty, I am eating cake and George is holding a bone china teapot asking about whether I need a top up. My shawl is hung on a coat stand. Peculiar! I’ve lost some time somewhere along the way!

‘So,’ I begin, ‘I understand that I am supposed to consult with you on a matter of personal urgency.’

He looks a little puzzled, then quietly says, ‘Go on.’

As before, the words arrive. ‘My daughter is dying, and God is not answering my prayers.’

His face softens, and his eyes search mine. ‘Yes,’ he murmurs, nodding slowly. He waits for further explanation, but nothing arrives, so I keep quiet. After a long silent minute, during which he is evidently collecting his thoughts, he begins.

‘Perhaps it would help if I share some of my story with you?’

I nod.

‘My wife, Louisa and I, have four bairns. Lily, George, Greville and... and Mary our firstborn. Mary lived with us for only five months and then we lost her... well anyway, she is with the Lord now.’ George stops for a moment, swallows, takes a couple of deep breaths and continues. ‘We loved that wee bairn. We still do. It was five years

ago, 1853. A terrible year.'

'I was ministering in a little chapel down in the south, at Arundel. I had over the previous few years become convinced that God's love triumphs over his wrath, and I suppose the devastating loss of Mary brought an exquisite tenderness to my heart. Bereavement does that, you know... brings you to a hard place or a soft place. You are never the same.'

As he is speaking, I am wondering which road I shall take.

'I was broken. I could not understand what Abba Father was doing. I thrashed around like a drowning man, until I realised I had to trust in the love that I was preaching about week by week.'

George puts his head down. He is speaking quieter now, deep and slow. 'They threw me out. I resigned. They wanted more wrath and retribution for sinners, and I wouldn't give it to them.'

'I had been afraid that Mary would be lost. But then I understood... ' he lifts his head and looks at me fiercely, 'and now I know...' he slows his delivery, lingering over each word, 'that love will never let go of my Mary. Love is unstoppable.'

Another fleeting smile touches his eyes momentarily, 'And love will never let go of me. Because strangely'—he pauses for a moment, blinking, then shaking his head, continues—'I too am beloved.'

My thoughts settle on the piece of olive wood inscribed with the name "Freya"—the piece broken in two—the fractured cross. I put my hand on his arm, 'My daughter Freya has wholeheartedly rejected the Lord.'

George is watching me, 'Go on,' he says gently.

'It's God's unending punishment that I am afraid of. So I have been doing some study. I've looked at the early church fathers who as far as I can see, said nothing at all about punishment in unending hell fire.'

George is nodding and tops up his teacup. He seems happy to listen.

‘Belief in that idea appears to surface after 150 years or so, with Tertullian. But his circumstances explain a lot. And perhaps it is not surprising amidst the level of obscene cruelty visited on the church in his day, that they were all sympathetic to the idea of some holy vengeance, rather than being obliged to wholeheartedly love their enemies. And then I just think that Augustine simply followed on.’

‘So where has this study brought you?’

I lift my chin and look him in the face. I don’t know why I am supposed to be consulting this Mr George MacDonald, but at least he’s on my wavelength, it seems. ‘I need to understand all this myself, rather than simply accepting what others say,’ I reply.

He nods gravely holding my gaze.

‘So I’ve done masses of study...’ I stop, guiltily recalling Heleen’s 306-page dissertation. ‘Well, quite a lot of study anyway... regarding the word eternal—*olam* and *aeon*, in Hebrew and Greek, looking at the context.’

‘And...?’

‘I think in most contexts it means “age”—sometimes “lifetime”, or “generation”, or even “the age of the cosmos”. At a stretch it could mean “eternity”... but I don’t think—’

‘Fine,’ George cuts in. ‘And how does that help?’

‘Well, I’ve realised that it doesn’t really. If God punishes Freya by burning her alive for even one day?’ I shake my head, dismissing the thought, ‘It’s just too horrible to contemplate.’

‘Of course, we are not talking about real flames—it is a metaphor,’ he points out.

‘And that doesn’t help either, because it can only be a metaphor for unimaginable agony. And it seems so unfair! Freya has had to put up with so much

trauma, disability, bereavement, heart attack, probably a final painful death, then to be judged with the risk of being punished—even if only for a day!’

‘Melissa, if I can be so bold, I think you are approaching this from the wrong direction. You are searching scripture looking for ways to escape from an all powerful God who unleashes his holy anger in retribution.’

George beckons to the waitress. She comes across and smiles, eyebrows raised. ‘How can I help’ she says.

‘Well, we have a two teapot problem, and only one teapot!’ he says in all seriousness.

He’s obviously a regular, because she drops one eyebrow leaving the other raised. She narrows her eyes and says, ‘In which case, Mr MacDonald, I shall attend to this emergency without delay.’ She exchanges a glance with me which I understand perfectly.

‘Do you know Antonio Stradivari?’ George asks.

I shake my head, wondering where this leads.

‘The legendary violin maker. For Antonio, in the 1700s, every violin he created had to be perfect. That is why today, they change hands for over a hundred pounds! I think the record is one hundred and eighty! His desire to create the perfect instrument was not because he wished to be recognised nor to become wealthy. It was only to create something absolutely pure. He was driven by a true love for the perfect violin.’

This is all new to me. Though I have heard of a Stradivarius violin of course. And I’m reasonably sure they cost more than a hundred pounds!

George continues. ‘You could say that he “loved unto purity”. They say he would tap each piece of spruce or maple wood and select only the pieces that had the correct density and resonance. Then he would cut and carve and shape and smooth each piece with attention to the finest detail of the grain. Any irregularities would be

noted and either discarded or placed precisely so that they became essential to the design.'

'His love spent itself to make each violin lovelier, so that he could love it more. Just as true love looks for absolute beauty in what it sees, Stradivari's love for the violin looked for absolute perfection in sound and form.'

'The violin was created not just by his skill but also his devotion. He knew the wood, the material so well that he saw in each piece what it could become—almost as if it was being brought to its ultimate purpose.'

'Nothing he did, whether sawing or scraping or bending was to the detriment of the wood, because it was to become something beautiful.'

'We are so often afraid when we feel broken apart, or bent out of shape. When God takes hold of us and begins to cut and carve and shape and smooth, we are quick to weep and wail, convinced that this is punishment. But in fact, we are in the hands of one who loves us perfectly.'

'Melissa, let me tell you this. Only that which loves, and that which can be loved, is never-ending.'

As he speaks, it is as if he has somehow opened my eyes and lifted my vision. To see something breathtakingly beautiful far away. Mount Fuji on the horizon. Like that in a way, but also intimate and tender. A mother dressing a child's grazed knee.

'You are beloved, Melissa. And everything in the beloved that is not beautiful must be destroyed.'

George is looking at me for some indication of understanding, maybe of acquiescence. I nod.

'And our God is a consuming fire.'

As George speaks, I sense truth unfolding. And the scripture comes to mind —“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with

punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

George continues in a soft tone now, ‘The judgements of the Lord are true and altogether righteous—they are more to be desired than much fine gold.’

‘I certainly don’t want the judgement of the Lord,’ I say bluntly. ‘And I don’t want the “fine gold” either come to that!’

‘Perhaps you should!’ He tilts his head in a challenge. ‘Desire both, that is.’

I am grappling with the idea of wanting to be judged by God. I never heard anybody preach that in the pulpit!

‘I can see you’re struggling with that! Bear in mind that our human idea of judgement is contaminated with retribution. But the Father does not want us to obey simply to avoid vengeance, nor simply to try to appease him.’

‘No?’

‘Well what do you think? Do these things belong in a parent-child relationship?’

‘No, never!’ I say vehemently.

‘Indeed! But retribution is woven so tightly into your concept of justice that you need God’s Spirit to disentangle it. My words will never be enough. Ask Him! What does he think about retribution and appeasement?’

George leans across the table and takes a large slice of flapjack.

‘And once you truly understand his judgement, perhaps you will desire it for Freya.’

I sense it is time for me to leave. I stand, wiping my mouth on the white napkin embroidered with the Queens Hotel logo.

George picks up the candle, which strangely is still shedding light across the table, and passes it to me. The golden light glows stronger as the room, including George, fades from sight.

‘And maybe desire some fine gold!’ His distant parting shot echoes in my ears as I

awake.

I take the opportunity to note the details of the dream before it fades. *George MacDonald*, I think to myself, *I'm going to look you up on the internet. And what is it, with the fine gold?*

-----oOo-----

Chapter 35 Collapse

It's 7.30 in the morning. I am sitting eating breakfast, and reading the notes I made at 4.00am. I was surprisingly coherent! Weird dream though! I haven't had a chance to figure out who George MacDonald is yet. But it's not important right now. I have to leave in about half an hour. It does feel like I am living two separate lives—one swimming in theology and the other drifting downstream alongside Freya.

---oOo---

Traffic was not too bad today. I'm sitting alongside Freya's bed once again. The ICU is quieter today. Only one other patient who is asleep. Freya is very lethargic, but at least she is conscious. She is so weak, she cannot speak or even lift her head.

Her breathing is almost inaudible—light shallow breaths—which I am subconsciously matching with each breath of my own. As if I can sustain her breathing by my own will to breathe.

It is strange to see someone so young, who just a matter of days ago was full of life and energy, now just clinging on. She is completely sustained simply by the medical machinery ranged around the bed. Her life hanging on the flick of a switch.

The antibiotics have not been able to conquer the sepsis and within a matter of days, maybe hours, she will sustain irreversible organ damage. Her lips are pale and her skin is dry. I have been smoothing moisturizer into her hands, but if I am honest, it is mostly because I need the physical contact.

Where is consolation now? Freya's hands lay lifeless on the bed cover. Instead of the liquid piano melodies that her long fingers once wove, now there is the ugly bleep

of the cardiac monitor. Her eyes are closed, and I cannot see excitement dancing in them as she conquers a difficult section of Franz Liszt's genius.

The staff move quietly around me now. A nurse adjusts the IV drip without a word, carefully avoiding eye contact. Every hour, a doctor arrives, glances at the clipboard, and leaves just as silently. Conversations at the desk are hushed, their tones heavy with unspoken certainty and there is a sense in the air of simply waiting for the inevitable.

Several doctors have come to see Freya this morning. Two of them I have never seen before. Like the other staff now, they are all very serious apart from one of the new people. He looks youngish, mid forties I would say, with somewhat wild dark curly hair. He disappears like the others, but later I see him talking to Dr. Pradesh. Every now and then he gesticulates enthusiastically.

I alternate between recounting to Freya stuff that I hope she might find interesting, and then sometimes praying desperately for her to recover, although in truth, I don't have any great expectations now. My panic attacks have subsided and now I am living in a kind of numb despair.

It is a very long and difficult day. I am not getting much back from Freya today—just the occasional glance, and even then I am not sure she is recognising me. I am just thankful that she doesn't appear to be in any pain. She hardly moves, just the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes.

I reach across and brush a strand of hair away from her face. She opens her eyes then, sees me and tries to speak. But all she can do is open her mouth a little. No sound comes out.

'Don't worry about talking, darling. I know you are tired. I'm staying with you, right here. Don't worry.'

Ten minutes later, I wish I hadn't said that. I need to grab a sandwich in the cafe,

and I'm worrying that she'll suddenly want me and find me gone. I spend another ten minutes or so conflicted about what to do, but then decide she is unlikely to surface for a while. She does seem to be properly asleep now.

I hurry to the cafe and locate a table. Suddenly I find I am hungry. Across the aisle, a woman sits with her daughter, who looks about Freya's age. I should have changed tables, but something roots me in place. Their chatter and laughter rises and falls, bright and effortless, a sharp contrast to the oppression keeping me unable to move. No doubt these cafeteria walls have absorbed every shade of human emotion. I wait quietly, avoiding eye contact, unwilling to break the spell, until they gather their things and drift away. Then the minutes stretch longer, dark with foreboding. The sandwich is long gone, the orange juice an afterthought, but the taste of both is forgotten. I should get back to Freya, but the sight of her—so lifeless—is too much to bear.

Then Martin arrives, for which I am supremely grateful. But he has only fifteen minutes so he says. In the end he stays twenty five and eases me along with gentle reassuring words about how love always finds a way. I am so desperate that I hold on to what he says, even though he is vague in the extreme.

Then he returns to the chapel to meet with someone, and I walk slowly back to the ICU. I am stopped at the desk. There has been a road traffic accident, and two seriously injured people are being admitted, so I am asked to wait for an hour in ICU Reception. In the end, it is an hour and a quarter before I can get back to Freya. She is only semi-conscious and is muttering things that make no sense. I stay an hour, then the lead nurse comes across to me and says that Dr Pradesh would like to see me.

I fear the worst. I suspect they will propose palliative care from this point onwards. I am terrified of the prospect, but maybe it would serve Freya best now.

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Chapter 36 Iron Age

The annual service to the gods always took place at Topheth, located in Gah Hinnom, the valley just south of the city. The city itself loomed high above on a sheer northern cliff over a hundred feet high in places, making direct access impossible. Were it not for the cliff one could walk the distance in ten minutes, but the only navigable route on foot took just under an hour. To reach the site of the Tesem Kodesh, one had to travel eastward, where the cliff gradually sloped down to a navigable path, then double back westward through the valley.

All morning, great crowds of people moved up and down the route, carrying food, water, and wood. Some lugging musical instruments, while others led goats or carried pigeons for the sacrifices. City elders and temple staff bustled about, shouting instructions and delegating tasks, while the temple guard stood watch from the sidelines, ensuring order.

By eleven, a core of enthusiastic celebrants had gathered, shouting and laughing. Soon, the age-old Jebusite tribal chants rose through the valley, their echoes bouncing off the cliff face.

Naamah and Ahlai stood by the door of the hut, waiting. Kana-Il had gone to check on the animals in the pasture, and they had expected him to be back before this. When he finally appeared, his expression was grim. Catching sight of them in the doorway, his face darkened further. He strode across the clearing, giving only a curt nod to Zamira, who was sitting in the shade of her hut.

‘You’re not coming,’ he said, his voice clipped. ‘I’ll go and represent the family.’

‘What?’ Naamah stared at him in disbelief.

‘I want to come,’ Ahlai said, her voice unsteady.

Kana-Il shook his head. ‘No. I’ll go alone and bring Yasub-El back at the end of the day.’ He turned away, as if the matter was settled.

‘No! We have to be there!’ Naamah protested. ‘How can you—’

Kana-Il spun back toward them, his jaw clenched, eyes blazing. ‘I said I’m going alone. And I will. Get inside.’

They froze, unable to believe that they would not be able to witness this incredible honour, Ahlai’s son, Naamah’s grandson elevated as the chosen child of the gods.

Kana-Il seeing them not moving, roared just one word, ‘Obey!’

They hesitated still, stunned by his uncharacteristic furious coercion. Then, without another word, they turned and went in—Ahlai in tears, Naamah seething.

He made his way down to the cliff top, fought his way through the undergrowth and peered over the edge. He estimated there was over a thousand people down there already. He could hear the drums pounding, sweeping the crowd along as they chanted with an unsettling fervour.

He turned east, walking along the cliff top until he came to the scramble path. As he turned onto the narrow track, he was joined by two temple guards who walked one in front and one behind.

‘I don’t need you to tell me where to go!’ he muttered grumpily.

The leading man turned grinning and said, ‘No, but you’ll need us to get you through the crowd!’

And he did, for as soon as those at the back caught sight of him a cry went up, a buzz began to increase in volume until one person shouted, ‘Welcome to the head of the chosen family!’

The guards pushed people aside so that Kana-Il was able to walk straight through the seething mass of people, right to the front, as close to Molech's altar as ever he had dared to go.

The young man with the shofar walked across to where Kana-Il had been seated. 'I think you should have the honour of blowing the ram's horn!' he said smiling.

Kana-Il took it and spent several minutes trying to get some sound—any sound—out of the thing. In the end, all he was able to produce was a rather rude sounding raspberry, much to the crowd's delight.

'Perhaps I'll do it after all,' the young man grinned. He took a huge breath and sounded a long blast that reverberated back and forth in the valley for several seconds.

Elihadad stood on the stone platform almost touching the fearsome statue. 'A blessing on us from the gods,' he cried, dramatically flinging his arms high and then falling to his knees. Many in the crowd went down on their knees too, but then a great cry went up from the crowd, and the drums began again.

For over an hour, the crowd danced and sang the traditional songs, praising the great deeds of Baal, El, Molech, and Asherah. Then the feast was declared. Pigs, sheep, goats, and pigeons roasted on spits at countless fires around the edge of Topheth, filling the air with thick, savoury smoke. As the adults ate and drank, children scrabbled in the dirt, shouting and tumbling in wild, chaotic games. Toward the end of the meal, the wrestling competition was announced. The fights were brutal, with most matches ending in one contender sprawled on the ground, barely conscious.

As the meal wound down and the last of the wrestlers had been carried off, the shofar blast pierced the air. All eyes turned to the stone platform where the High Priest, Elihadad, stood.

With practised authority, he lifted his arms and declared in his best priestly intonation, 'Behold! The chosen child of the gods!'

He raised Yasub-El high for all to see. Kana-Il's breath caught as his grandson was brandished triumphantly, perilously close to the fire smouldering in the hollow belly of the bronze Molech. A roar of approval rose from the crowd as Elihadad turned, displaying the infant in every direction. The child was draped in a robe of brilliant colours, a matching hat crowning his tiny head.

‘The perfect child!’ Elihadad proclaimed.

And, as one, the crowd answered, ‘Blessing be upon him!’

Elihadad held the child high, his voice ringing out over the crowd. ‘Bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh!’

The assembled throng answered as one, ‘Blessed be he, the best of us!’

Yasub-El, now wailing, was lowered into the arms of a waiting priest, who turned swiftly and carried him away. Kana-Il strained his eyes to follow their path, his heart pounding, but the priest and his precious grandson were quickly swallowed by the sea of cheering, waving worshippers.

A long queue formed as worshippers came forward with their offerings—mostly pigeons, though dozens of lambs were also presented. These were the gifts of the peasantry. The few elites in the tribe gave financial offerings, which vanished swiftly into the temple coffers.

The fire in Molech's belly was fed once more with dry wood, and the two boys manning the bellows were ordered to match their rhythm to the pounding drumbeat. Within minutes, the flames roared, and the bronze statue began to glow. The hollow eyes of the bull's head flickered ominously, soon burning like embers. The heat grew so intense that the bellows boys had to step back several paces to avoid being scorched.

Kana-Il and two other men—the fathers of the concubines—were escorted away under close guard. Their task was to return to the city and select the finest sacrifice lambs, those bred specifically for this sacred occasion. Flanked by their silent escorts,

they walked with heavy steps, each man keenly aware of the significance of the ritual.

Inside the temple, they were ushered into a dimly lit side room off the inner courtyard. In the centre, a table held three lambs, their legs bound tightly, leaving them helpless. The first man stepped forward, hesitated, then selected a lamb. He was instructed to place it into a pristine white bag, its movements barely disturbing the fabric as the top was drawn shut. Without a word, a guard gripped his arm and led him away. The second man followed, his face taut as he repeated the ritual, then vanished through the doorway.

Kana-Il was left alone with the last lamb.

As Kana-Il stared down at the struggling creature, a cold bitter sickness surged in his throat. The animal's tightly bound legs trembled, its head thrown back, eyes wide with terror, its chest heaving with frantic breaths. He clenched his fists, fingernails cutting into his palms, but the cruel horror of what lay ahead was all too clear. These lambs would not be granted a swift death. No temple razor edge would end their suffering in an instant. Instead, they would be devoured by Molech's fire, their screams delighting the bloodthirsty mob.

Kana-Il looked up as the door creaked open. Elihadad entered, his face a mask of disdain as he looked across at Kana-Il. Beside him, the Captain of the Temple Guard followed, his grip firm around a small, wriggling bundle.

Yasub-El.

It seemed to Kana-Il that his heart had stopped.

The baby whimpered, his arms waving and fists flailing in protest. Elihadad took him from the guard's arms and, without ceremony, deposited him on the table. The smooth wood was wide enough to hold them both—the child and the bound lamb.

The message was clear.

Agonising rage twisted in Kana-Il's chest as Elihadad reached down, lifted the

trussed lamb as if it were no more than rubbish to be tossed away. He handed it off to the final guard. 'Take it away,' he said, casually.

The guard obeyed.

Kana-Il's vision blurred as tears started in his eyes. The lamb was gone.

And the baby remained.

Elihadad gazed at Kana-Il with narrowed eyes and slowly nodded. 'It is our tradition, Kana-Il. Now take the child in the bag, and do not forget your oath'

'I will not sacrifice the child.'

Elihadad merely smiled. 'Do you think for a moment that I have not had this conversation countless times before. And each time our traditions have been faithfully followed. It will be the same this year, I can assure you.'

The Captain stepped up close behind Kana-Il, the cold point of his dagger pressing into the soft skin behind his earlobe.

'If you continue to refuse, we will simply slay the child here and take him. But I can assure you that Molech is not the only one who demands to hear the screams of a living sacrifice. It would be difficult to prevent the mob turning on you, Kana-Il.'

A wave of helplessness swept over him. His mind raced, searching for some means of escape, but it seemed impossible. Hands trembling, he obeyed. As he pushed the child into the bag, Yasub-El's beautiful eyes looked up at him for one quiet moment before the baby suddenly screamed out in panic.

The hour-long walk back to Topheth was a slow horror. Yasub-El struggled and cried, as the roar of the crowd, and the pounding drumbeat, and the crackling hissing of the fire got closer with each step.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 37 Dread

Dr Pradesh is in the small consulting room, where I usually see her.

‘Mrs. Turnham,’ she says softly, ‘we need to reassess Freya’s care. It appears that the current treatment isn’t working—the infection isn’t subsiding and there is a risk it may soon spread to more organs. I’m so sorry.’ A faint, sympathetic smile flickers across her face.

‘Alright, it is what it is,’ I shrug. ‘What are you thinking?’ I look at her quizzically. She seems a little uncomfortable, but I suppose that is understandable, given Freya’s prognosis.

‘I’m afraid the specific bacteria we are fighting is extremely resistant to antibiotics. It is one which very commonly affects people in intensive care.’

I nod, the conflict pulling me apart. I’m torn between dreading the end and longing for it—desperate to escape this awful limbo, yet terrified of what comes next.

‘I have a colleague who I want to involve in the discussion, so if you are able to come in tomorrow at 11.30am I will set that up. It will probably be in here,’ she says, hands in front, two forefingers pointing downwards.

‘Fine,’ I say. I really don’t want to be involved, given that it will probably just be explaining how this is going to end. But I acquiesce—it looks like I have no choice.

I walk to the car. It has been an utterly horrible day. Not my worst of course, but awful nonetheless.

---oOo---

It is half past nine. The house is sad and empty. I can’t stand it. I have decided to

go to bed. Everything feels like a huge effort. I hardly have the energy to get undressed. I light the candle and lie down. As my head hits the pillow, the anguish and despair of the past week washes over me like a wave, and I curl underneath the cover in the darkness, trembling. A ragged sob rises in my throat and shakes me before I can stop it. Tears prick my eyes and wet my cheeks and soak into the pillow. The loneliness is a vast cold damp shadow. I am afraid—of the dark, of being alone, of what tomorrow holds.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 38 Iron Age Dreaming

I'm standing in a small clearing, surrounded by about five or six what look like mud huts. Wattle and daub walls and roofs thatched with reeds. There is a woman sat in the doorway of one of the huts. A goat is tied up but lying down outside her hut, and two kids are feeding, pushing their tiny heads into the goats body as they fight over the milk.

I can hear sobbing coming from one of the huts opposite. Curious, I walk across and enter.

It is quite dark inside. There is just one window, well... there's no frame or glass. It's just a not very big hole in the wall. I suppose this is the main living area. At the back of the hut is a curtain which gives a small amount of privacy. There is almost no furniture—just a large box, a rough table and a bench.

There is a musty earthiness about the place overlaid with the smell of recent baking. It smells primitive, but not unpleasant.

There is a young girl seated at the table crying. A woman is standing comforting her. As I walk in, they both look up. The girl wipes her eyes on her sleeve and looks at me curiously. The woman narrows her eyes as she views me with suspicion.

'Who are you?' she asks bluntly.

I'm aware that I am in someone else's home, so I say, 'I'm a visitor...' I trail off not sure how to continue. But then the words come, 'I've been sent here to help you through today.' I don't even know what that means. Then an awful fear rises in me. I don't know what I am supposed to do, but I know I have to help.

I am surprised to see that my unconventional greeting has been gratefully received.

‘We’ve had a row...’ The woman breaks off, sniffs loudly, then continues. ‘My husband and I, and it has upset Ahlai here.’

‘Oh.’

‘You hear that?’

The woman cocks her head to one side, and I listen too. There is far off sound of singing and shouting.

‘Yes,’ I reply, ‘what is it?’

‘It’s the feast at Topheth. Most of the city are there. It’s held every year. My grandson, Yasub-El is the guest of honour. The child chosen by the gods! And Kana-Il says we have to stay at home.’

The girl suddenly cuts in, ‘I wanna go to the feast. I need to be there.’ She looks anxious.

‘Kana-Il is your husband?’ I ask.

The woman nods her head.

‘So why did he say you couldn’t go?’

The woman shakes her head miserably, ‘I don’t know. It’s not like him to be so... so selfish.’ Then she straightens up and says, ‘I’m sorry, I’m being rude, have you come far? Would you like a drink?’

‘I’m not sure how far I’ve come, but I’m okay. I don’t need a drink. I’m Melissa, by the way.’

‘And I’m Naamah, and Ahlai here is my daughter.’

Scrambling to her feet, the girl says, ‘I wanna go to the feast. He’s my son they are honouring. I should...’

‘Listen Ahlai. You can’t, my love. Your father has forbidden it,’ Naamah cuts in.

They are both hesitating. I realise this is some kind of patriarchal culture, where the women do what they're told. I've had it with men like that, to be honest, and I have a natural kick back reaction now.

'I think you should both go!' The words are out before I have a chance to think about it.

'Do you?'

'Yes, you know what men are like!'

Naamah looks doubtful, 'Well he's not usually like that... '

'Just go! Don't sweat the small stuff.'

---oOo---

When we get there, after an hour's walk, it's a pantomime. Complete chaos. There's obviously been some fighting, and there's scores of children just running wild, laughing and screaming. Lots of the adults are drunk, both men and women. There's animals wandering about and the rank smell of burning flesh. There's a bunch of half naked teenage girls practising some kind of dance. I can see now why any respectable man would want to keep his wife and daughter away.

'See, Mum, it's perfectly fine—just the same as last year!' Ahlai says, gesturing at the pandemonium.

I can't believe it! Naamah just nods and says, 'Yes, it's fine.'

She looks at me and says, 'I don't know what got into him!'

Just then, there comes a horrendous hooting noise, and the crowd start a cheer, as a very tall man climbs up next to what looks like a huge statue of a bull. It is not easy to see from here, we are at the back of the crowd. It is so noisy, almost like a riot. For all the world though, the tall guy could be a cartoon wizard out of a child's storybook. His long flowing robe and crazy hat. But I have, obviously, come into a very different culture.

A very old woman has sidled up alongside us. She seems to think it's her job to give us a running commentary. Apparently the wizard guy is the tribal high priest. She doesn't think much of him, but drops her voice as she tells us. Evidently no-one wants to get on the wrong side of him. To me, he looks like a children's party entertainer, but a lot less fun.

He's shouting something now. 'Be in awe, be in worship, be in humility before Molech!'

That quietens the crowd but only for a moment, because his next words release such a hue and cry of screaming.

'The perfect lambs for sacrifice!'

Quite a few of the adults seem to be in some kind of ecstatic frenzy, some beating their chests, some beating their own heads. The noise level rises as a man approaches the bronze statue.

The old woman pokes Naamah in the side with a long bony finger. 'You watch now, the men love this!'

Naamah looks irritated. 'I know what's going on. It's foul!' She turns to Ahlai, 'I'm sorry my love, we have missed the best part of the feast. We should have come down earlier.'

'I don't care, I just want to get Yasub-El back,' she replies tearfully.

I go up on tiptoe and only then do I realise that the bottom of the statue is some kind of oven—it's blazing white hot, and the metal is glowing orange. The man is hesitating. He is holding a white bag, and it evidently contains something alive, something wriggling. The crowd urge him on some with encouragement, some with taunting.

Finally he rushes forward and places the bag on the outstretched arms of the statue.

Instantly the crowd fall silent. There is the sound of a creature in agony, as the bag moves side to side. It is a lamb. I can tell by the noise. Then it drops into the flames, and the animal squeals with a sound I won't ever forget. Then there is silence.

The wizard guy is standing completely motionless, his staring eyes burning, his arms stretched out in front of him with his hands palms down, his fingers stretched out wide like scissorhands. He holds the pose stretching the time until the tension is unbearable. His words come even, slow, and totally controlled, 'Molech. Demands.' And then suddenly he throws his hands in the air and screams, 'Another!'

The crowd erupt and a second man steps forward. The old woman digs her finger into my ribs and nods enthusiastically at me, her eyes alight with anticipation. 'Another lamb,' she says pushing her face into mine. I can see she has only a few teeth, and most of those are black. And her breath smells appalling.

The same thing happens, only this time it's worse because I'm waiting for the shriek of the animal burning alive. For some reason, this one doesn't die in the flames straight away. It goes on and on screaming.

While it is sickening to some, most of the crowd love it, whooping and hollering. Some of those in ecstasy have fallen down and are now completely out of it.

Then the poor creature falls silent, and so do the crowd. The tribal high priest is doing his silent staring act again. This time it goes on for at least a couple of minutes. His crowd control is incredible, but after a while he senses he can't hold them any longer, so we get the "Molech. Demands." His wild eyes stare as he stretches the moment of terrifying silence across the entranced crowd. His face is twisted into a manic smile and a trace of saliva dribbles from his mouth. Then the hands shoot into the air again as he screams, "Another".

We're back to everyone shouting again. The third man steps forward, again holding a white bag with the animal wriggling inside. Naamah leans across and

whispers to me, her voice almost lost in the roar of the crowd, ‘This is my husband. He knows this animal sacrifice is gruesome, but we could have come earlier and—’

She is interrupted by the old woman, who cackles and pokes Ahlai sharply in the ribs, her eyes bright with relish. ‘There’s a baby in there!’

‘What?’

‘There’s a baby in there!’ she repeats, her toothless grin wide, her glee unmistakable.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 39 Iron Age Dreaming

Ahlai goes white as realization dawns, her breath coming in short, panicky bursts. Her eyes go wide with terror. ‘No!’ she whispers, ‘No, no, no...’

‘Oh, there is,’ the old woman confirms, nodding with satisfaction. ‘The last one is always the child chosen by the gods.’

Naamah is frozen, her head in her hands, fingers gripping her hair. Then she lifts her head and wails, raw and broken, ‘No, Kana-Il!’ Her voice rises, a desperate shriek that cuts through the din. She throws her head back and screams at the top of her voice, ‘Kan! Stop!’

But there is no chance of her being heard above the fevered tumult of the crowd.

I’m back up on tiptoe now, desperate to see what is happening. My whole body is shaking, my blood running cold. I strain forward, my heart hammering, but I can’t quite see. The man is hesitating, shifting his weight, his head jerking from side to side. He’s looking around, his knuckles white where he grips the bag. He’s close to the statue.

Too close.

He inches nearer. Even from here, I can see that he is trembling. And the bag is writhing in his arms as the baby kicks violently inside it.

The moment stretches unbearably.

Then suddenly, he bolts forward. The crowd gasps as he lunges toward the flames—then veers sharply at the last possible moment, tearing past the statue. Without slowing, he leaps off the back of the platform and vanishes.

I lose sight of him. Chaos erupts. The crowd surges like a living thing, a wave of bodies pressing forward. The wizard guy at the front bellows something, his voice sharp and commanding. At his order, a group of men in uniforms break away, pushing through the crowd, giving chase.

Ahlai has collapsed onto the ground, her shoulders shaking, her hands clutching at handfuls of dirt. I drop to my knees beside her, gripping her shoulders. 'Don't give up yet,' I urge. 'Your father has run off with the baby.'

She doesn't respond.

Naamah stands, wide-eyed, scanning the sea of faces, searching for her husband. But it's hopeless. There are too many people, all shifting, moving, shouting. She twists her fingers together, her lips working in terror.

The noise begins to die, until the restless murmur of the crowd fills the silence like an uneasy wind.

The minutes drag by. We hardly dare to breathe. *Please, I think, let him have escaped. Let him be gone. But where would he go? How far could he possibly get?*

Dread coils, cold and heavy, in my stomach. I don't want to think about how this will end.

Fifteen minutes. Surely he must have made it. They haven't found him. Maybe he's hidden. Maybe—

Ahlai stirs, her face streaked with dust and tears. Naamah is rigid, staring toward the front.

Then we see them.

The high priest stands tall, his robes swirling as he gestures sharply to two men. They bow and stride away. A moment later, the drums begin.

The first deep, hollow beat rolls through the night, and the crowd sways as one. The rhythm pulses, slow and steady at first, pulling them into its grip. The hypnotic

sway deepens. The tempo rises. It quickens, quickens, until it is pounding at an insane, fevered pace. The people are moving, shaking, caught in its spell.

Then—silence.

The high priest stands motionless, in his silent, staring stance, arms raised, fingers outstretched like a puppet master commanding his thralls.

And then, the dreaded words:

‘Molech. Demands. Another!’

The same routine—the hands fly into the air. The crowd explodes in wild exultation. The frenzy is back, sweeping through them like a firestorm.

And then I see him.

Kana-Il.

He’s being shoved up onto the dais.

My heart lurches. The world tilts.

So they caught him. Of course they caught him. It was too much to hope for.

Naamah sees him too. She sways on her feet, ashen-faced. Ahlai is still on the ground, a hollow shell. It is better if she stays there.

‘Look!’ The old woman points, her claw-like hand gripping Naamah’s arm.

‘Your husband, is he?’

Naamah does not respond. Her eyes are unfocused, blank with terror.

The old woman shakes her. ‘He’s a good man, your husband,’ she says fiercely.

‘I’ve seen this before.’

‘What?’ My throat is dry.

‘See his hand? He’s gripping the child’s throat.’

I stare, uncomprehending.

‘He’s going to strangle the chi—’ She breaks off, gasping. ‘There! See! He’s done it. The child isn’t struggling any more.’

I look. It's true. The bag is still now, the frantic kicking silenced.

Kana-Il bows his head. Slowly, he bends forward, his forehead pressing against the bundle in his arms. He holds it there. Too long.

This is agony.

The crowd is restless. Impatient. Murmuring turns to jeering. They realise they have been denied the screams they came for.

One of the high priest's men—hulking, armoured, brutal—moves toward Kana-Il, but before he can reach him, Kana-Il surges forward. He does not hesitate. He lays the white bag, limp and motionless, onto the outstretched bronze arms of Molech.

The bag drops.

It vanishes into the roaring flames.

I turn, reaching blindly for Naamah. She is unsteady, swaying, lost. I pull her into my arms, holding her close. She sags against me, her heartbeat wild and erratic, her sobs wracking her fragile frame. We cling to each other, trembling, grief-stricken, shattered.

Ahlai stirs. Slowly, haltingly, she rises from the ground.

Her face is pale, streaked with tears. She looks at us, her lips parted, her breath shaky.

She opens her mouth to speak, but there is nothing that can be said.

She turns, shoulders squared, and stumbles away in the direction of home.

I wake, mentally and physically exhausted. It is 3.00am. My pillow is still wet with tears. I reach for the notepad and pen.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 40 Proposal

I was late waking up. I feel nauseous and panicky. I don't know whether it is the meeting with Dr. Pradesh or the nightmarish dream I had last night. I am struggling now to recall anything much about it. I know I made copious notes at three in the morning. That and a deep seated horror is all that remains. Everything else has evaporated like morning mist. My stomach flips, but the reason has vanished.

I am late setting out for the hospital. The traffic is worse than ever, and I struggle to find a parking place in Royal Bournemouth Hospital car park. There is building work going on, and they have been closing off various bits of the parking area each week. I finally get to ICU and have only about three quarters of an hour with Freya before the meeting.

She is awake when I arrive, offering me a faint, fragile smile. But her haunted eyes carry a frisson of fear that brings a choke to my throat.

‘Would you like me to brush your hair, my love?’

She gives the smallest nod, and I spend some time smoothing my fingers through her tangled strands, lingering over the softness, before I take up the brush. In these moments of extreme sensitivity, touch carries a depth beyond sensation, something ineffable yet tangibly real. She releases a quiet breath and then she lets her head settle into the pillow.

I have brought one of her favourite books today. It's ‘The Velveteen Rabbit’. I find it appropriate on reflection that she should have settled on this over the last few years. It has a simple message. Love wears us out and sometimes breaks us, but it is that

same love that finally makes us real.

I read it slowly so that she can take it in, although I'm sure she must know the story almost by heart. I can see she is listening, because every now and then there is a small nod, or a faint smile touches her face. After a while we are at the becoming. I read the sentence, 'You were Real to the Boy because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to everyone.' I look across at her face, and I can see a tear rolling down her cheek. I pause, unable to read on for a few moments, then slowly complete the story. I close the book and fall silent.

With great effort she turns her face to me, and we are looking into each other's eyes. It is a moment I know I want to hold on to, so I concentrate on the feeling of overwhelming love and tender togetherness.

'Sorry...' The nurse is whispering at the foot of the bed. I look up and he says, 'Dr Pradesh has asked me to fetch you.'

I wipe the stray tear from Freya's cheek with my finger, and stand to leave. 'I'll be back darling.'

---oOo---

Dr Pradesh is seated at the small table in the consulting room. Another man is there—I saw him yesterday in discussion with the lead nurse. The one with wild hair. He is obviously someone senior because Dr Pradesh seems to defer to him.

'Mrs Turnham,' Dr Pradesh says, gesturing to him, 'this is Mr Hawkwood.'

The man jumps to his feet, his eyes alight, 'Mrs. Turnham, I've reviewed Freya's case, and I must admit, the complexity of her condition is—fascinating, though highly unusual. I have to say the boundary of the—'

Normally I would never do this, but I am at my limit already. I cut in, 'Mr? Not Dr?'

'Ah yes,' he says, a flicker of impatience crossing his face. 'Yes, well I was! Am, I

suppose! But fell in love with surgery. So “Mr” it is!’ He gestures wiggly finger air-quotes. ‘But just Hawkwood will do! I’ll not tell you what they call me up at Oxford though!’ His eyes briefly flash a slightly manic humour, then return to the case files in his hands. ‘Now, the thing is -’

Dr. Pradesh intervenes gently, her voice steady as she helps steer the conversation with a more measured tone. ‘Surgeons drop the “Doctor” title. It’s just a historical convention really. But we are not proposing surgery for Freya. And Mr Hawkwood is...’ she breaks off and turns to him. ‘What is your title exactly?’

Hawkwood shakes his head dismissively, ‘Oh, I don’t know, “Research something or other”. It changes every month!’

Dr. Pradesh smiles indulgently, ‘Yes, I remember, Principal Investigator heading up the team developing novel methods of drug delivery in...’ she consults the business card he has passed to her, ‘... in University of Oxford’s Department of Engineering Science.’

‘Cards on the table, Mrs Turnham!’ Hawkwood says fixing me with an unsettlingly enthusiastic gaze. ‘We’ve completed the Phase 1 trials for a new method of drug delivery. We are just starting Phase 2 now. The problem with this blasted *Acinetobacter baumannii* is that it actively expels the tiny amount of antibiotic that actually gets to the infection site. The efflux pump -’

‘Perhaps too much detail, John,’ Dr. Pradesh murmurs.

I push out a breath in a big sigh, exchanging a meaningful glance with Dr. Pradesh. She nods, discreetly.

‘Let’s move on to what a possible Phase 2 process might mean for Freya,’ she says.

‘Ah yes! So having reviewed Freya’s case, she fits very well into the target cohort. Three hundred patients with entrenched infection will comprise the group with whom

we will undertake a brand new nanotechnology based drug delivery method. The way it works so effectively to clear infection is this,' he looks at me to make sure I am following.

'Go on,' I say.

'A nanoparticle is about 100 times smaller than the width of a human hair. We coat the outside of the particle with the antibiotics—in this case we would be using the same antibiotics that Freya is already receiving via the IV line.' Hawkwood is gradually speeding up as he gets into the topic. 'Then we attach aptamers to the nanoparticle—short, synthetic DNA or RNA molecules that specifically bind to bacterial targets—'

'Sorry, I'm not following,' I say, lost in the jargon.

Dr. Pradesh comes to the rescue. 'Aptamers are like a key that fits into the bacteria's lock. The key only opens the lock it is designed for. The aptamer affects nothing in Freya's body other than the bacteria that is causing her sepsis.'

'We'll use aptamers that are short, synthetic RNA molecules, we could use DNA but in this case it is RNA, which we have created in the lab to bind to the surface of *Acinetobacter baumannii*...' Hawkwood trails off realising that once again he is speaking in an alien tongue.

Then he attempts to ramp up my enthusiasm again with, 'This is really exciting and completely ground-breaking therapy. If it works as we hope, then it would completely—'

'So it's research!' I cut in. 'I'm not allowing Freya to be a guinea pig!'

Hawkwood looks disconcerted, and evidently realises he's oversold the scientific innovation angle!

'I want to reassure you, Mrs Turnham—'

I cut in again. It's becoming a habit, but Hawkwood has the battery bunny problem. 'So there's no risks!?' My tone is mildly sarcastic.

‘I can’t say there are no risks exactly, but—’

‘So what are they?’

‘Perhaps I could go through the risks, John?’ Dr Pradesh thankfully intervenes. She looks at me searchingly for a moment, then continues. ‘A wide variety of risks, but I will try to prioritise them beginning with the least serious or least likely.’ She raises her eyebrows requesting consent to continue.

‘Thanks. Okay.’ I reply, relieved that we are back to normal speed talking.

‘First we have to stop Freya’s current treatment—’

‘Which isn’t working anyway,’ I cut in.

‘Indeed. Secondly, emotional wellbeing, both yours and Freya’s, since the chances of the therapy not working is probably quite high.’

‘Right,’ I say warily.

‘Then there is the lack of long term data. Even if successful, we cannot predict any possible long term consequences.’

I don’t like the sound of that. Unknown long term consequences. She is waiting for a response so I reply. ‘I understand that too.’ I am beginning to feel that I cannot put Freya through this.

‘And then perhaps the three most worrying risks. Immune response, toxicity and infection spread.’

I take a deep breath letting it out in a heavy sigh. ‘Go on then. What do they mean?’

‘Immune response—Freya’s body may well recognise nanoparticles as foreign bodies and mount a huge immune reaction which would make her condition significantly worse. Toxicity—her body may well not clear the nanoparticles from her organs which could cause unknown complications. Finally—Infection spread—the presence of nanoparticles could actively spread the infection to parts of Freya’s body

that are so far unaffected,' she concludes.

It all sounds like a prolonged death sentence to me. I just cannot envisage putting Freya through more pain, and all for nothing.

'However,' interjects Hawkwood, desperate to change the mood music, 'the Phase 1 trials show the technique to be broadly safe.'

'Broadly safe?' I say, with undisguised scepticism. 'How many in the trial?'

'Thirty five.'

'And a 100% safe record?'

'No. In one subject the nanoparticles took longer than expected to expel. That was found to be down to a compromised liver function. And two subjects where the nanoparticles were expelled immediately due to an overactive immune response.'

'So almost 10% unsafe?'

'Not unsafe exactly, but certainly not to expectations.'

I realise I don't need to think about this. I have got to the point of accepting that Freya is lost to me. I know now that I cannot go through what is a confirmed to be a dangerous experimental process, with probably long term worries even if successful.

I look down at the table top, eyes unfocussed. Hardly thinking. 'No, I don't think so.' My voice is flat, final.

'You don't have to pay!' Hawkwood protests.

I look at him with increasing despair. I should be outraged, but exhaustion overwhelms me and anyway, what he is doesn't matter. 'It's nothing to do with money!' I say through gritted teeth.

Dr. Pradesh looks uncomfortable as the discussion begins to come apart.

But Hawkwood jumps straight back in with, 'Well that's a good thing, because it costs several hundred thousand pounds per subject anyway. It's not the price of the gold, it's insurance, regulatory stuff, monitoring, reporting, it just goes on and on.'

I freeze, not daring to move. ‘What do you mean, gold?’

‘Nanotechnology in this case is using very fine gold, particle size ... ‘

His voice trails away as I put my hand on his arm.

‘Stop,’ I say. Hawkwood and Dr. Pradesh exchange glances. The moment stretches into a profound silence as unheard, George’s soft Scottish burr fills the room. “They are more to be desired than much fine gold.”

And that parting shot from George that I never understood, echoed into my mind, “Desire fine gold’.

I look at Dr. Pradesh, ‘Yes.’

Narrowing her eyes, she tilts her head, ‘Yes?’ looking for an explanation.

I nod slowly and definitely. For the first time since Freya last played “Consolation”, I am totally at peace. I look at Hawkwood and give him a smile. ‘Yes,’ I repeat for his benefit.

Ever the sensitive type, he fist-bumps and says, ‘Alright!! Let’s go for gold!’

Dr. Pradesh actually indulges in an eye-roll. Totally unprofessional.

---oOo---

I am on my way out, and stop by the chapel. I cast a glance into the various rooms in ICU as I walk down the corridor, but Martin is nowhere to be seen. I’m disappointed. He’s been a rock, and I wanted to share my decision with him. I walk back to Main Reception and buy a writing pad and some envelopes.

Hi Martin!

Great news about “Fine Gold”! We’ve been offered a place in a drugs trial—they are going to stick the antibiotics on the outside of tiny bits of gold!

I know! It’s mad isn’t it.

But obviously what God has come up with. I have to hope, anyway.

See you soon.

Melissa

I fold the paper into the envelope and write “Martin” on the front. Then leave it on the table at the front of the chapel.

---oOo---

Driving home, a bone-aching weariness engulfs me. I have to stick my hand out of the window to get it really cold, and then put it on the back of my neck in order to stay awake. My road positioning is all over the place, and I get hooted at a couple of times. Am I right to be pinning all my hopes on one word—gold? I feel like I am hanging on to a sliver of hope which is all that is stopping me plunging into black despair. Each night has stolen my rest with its shadowy nightmare, and every day has stripped my resolve with its glaring reality.

I decide I’m too tired to cook, so I pick up fish and chips on the way home. I don’t usually like the smell of stale chips in the morning but I’ll live with it. And it eat it out of the little cardboard box, so no washing up.

I need to read my notes from last night’s dream. I’ve written about ten pages. I don’t even recall doing that. It takes me only about five minutes to be plunged back into the experience again.

I’m suspended in that moment again. Naamah’s wail, Ahlai’s face, as we see the little white bag tumble into the flames. I’m shaking, almost reliving it again. But horrifying though it is, that one event has humbled the demands of lesser things—and revealed the singular truth that redeems the chaos from which it emerges.

I close the notebook, and hope that my dreaming is over. Much more of this and I shall just fall apart.

I sit in bed. Celia’s candle is lit. I force myself to be still, and after ten minutes or so, it seems to be working. My hands have stopped shaking. My mind isn’t continually circling any more.

I blow out the candle. Maybe I shall sleep tonight.

-----oOo-----

Chapter 41 Dreaming

It's dusk. I am climbing a rough wooden staircase attached to the side of a house. I can hear animals on the ground floor, but otherwise all is quiet, apart from occasional barking between a couple of far away dogs. I clutch the railing to steady myself as I continue up.

At the top, I step onto a flat roof, its edges bordered by a low wall. The view is good from here, but something about it feels familiar. It takes a moment, but then I realize—I've been here before. Only now, the buildings are larger, more substantial, and there are far more of them. In the distance, I spot a large wooden building with two towering yellowish pillars at the entrance. It is set in a large courtyard, lit by torches throwing flickering shadows in the semi-darkness.

Then I notice the two men on the roof. There's a tense exchange between them, though it doesn't sound like an argument. The older man paces restlessly, shaking his head, muttering to himself, shrugging his shoulders. The other man is agreeing with him, though he appears quietly resigned to whatever their problem is.

As I watch, the calmer man lowers himself, sitting cross-legged on a mat in the far corner. A brazier burns nearby. This must be their workspace. Writing materials are scattered around—reeds, ink, a few sheets of parchment, some with writing, others blank. A cluster of five clay oil lamps cast a warm yellow light on their faces.

As I watch, the younger man takes a fresh sheet of parchment and begins writing, following the older man's slow dictation. I edge closer along the wall, but they are too absorbed to notice me.

I hesitate, unsure if I am supposed to be here. Minutes pass.

‘We should eat,’ the younger man murmurs at last.

The older man looks up, scanning the rooftop—then his gaze lands on me. He squints, as if uncertain whether I am real.

‘Hello,’ I say.

He jabs the younger man in the ribs, prompting him to spring to his feet. Crossing the rooftop, he stares at me intently.

Mid-thirties, medium height, but with an elegant, upright posture—he’s well-dressed, carrying himself with the ease of someone from a privileged background. He’s quite relaxed, looking me up and down. I shift uncomfortably beneath his gaze.

‘You... you don’t belong here, do you?’ he murmurs, almost to himself.

He then makes a strange gesture, touching his forehead with his fingertips and then extending his hand, as if he is showing me something on his palm. But then smiling, he says, ‘but you’re welcome. Come sit by the fire.’

I mirror his gesture and say, ‘Thank you. I am Melissa. I have a message for you.’

My own words surprise me. Do I even know what the message is?

‘Baruch,’ he replies, dipping his head in a small bow. Noticing my glance toward the older man, he adds, ‘And this is Jeremiah, the man of El Elyon.’

Aha. A little light flickers in my head as I step forward. I repeat Baruch’s gesture, hoping the etiquette is correct.

Jeremiah offers the faintest smile—just enough to suggest I haven’t completely misstepped. He looks to be around fifty, his beard flecked with grey, his eyes shadowed with worry.

‘You have a message for me?’ he asks.

Before I can answer, Baruch interjects. ‘I’ll prepare some food for us all.’

As soon as he has gone, Jeremiah asks, ‘Are you from Adonai?’

I hesitate, caught off guard. So I answer honestly, ‘I don’t know. Are you?’

He exhales, a grim edge to his voice. ‘I hope so—especially now.’

‘Why now?’

His shoulders slump and his expression saddens. ‘We are in crisis. The Babylonians are threatening to invade, and unless the nation changes course, Adonai will let it happen. The people are rootless, the army is weak, and the king...’ He shakes his head. ‘Self-indulgent. And a fool.’

Of course, I’m aware of Jeremiah. Bear in mind, I was raised in a Christian family, although I have to say the book of Jeremiah was never my go-to for inspiration! Apart from the overused ‘I know the plans I have for you...’ and all that. Everybody, but everybody, clings to that one. And right now, so am I!

‘So what’s the situation then... with you, I mean?’ I ask.

Jeremiah sighs deeply. ‘Well I’m called to bring El Elyon’s message to the king, so Baruch wrote out what I heard spoken. It was not insignificant—about twenty thousand words, a scroll of five full parchment sheets. Everything, as far as I can tell, that El Elyon wants the king to understand.’ Jeremiah’s face darkens.

‘I took it to King Jehoiakim. He looked at me and said, “Jeremiah. Great!” being sarcastic. And then he read just the first page, and he said “Thanks, but no thanks!” and tossed it on the ground.’

Jeremiah is getting upset as he says this. ‘Then he stepped on it!’

‘I went to pick it up, but he grabbed it. Then he said, “Let me show you what I think of your precious predictions about the future.” He called one of his flunkies, and told him to chop it all up! Then he set fire to it, laughing the whole time.’

‘So...’ The old chap looks at me, his eyes sad and bright, his mouth set, ‘... I’m having to write it all out again—’

Baruch, reappearing with three mugs, cuts in dryly, ‘Actually, that would be me!’ He puts them down on the mat, and disappears again. He turns to me and says, ‘The scribe!’

Jeremiah sees my concern and he lowers his head as if in shame, and continues speaking quietly.

‘Sadly, my people run after Baal. They can’t bear the challenges of El Elyon—lifting the poor, opposing the elites, trusting for the future, living in purity, welcoming strangers. They prefer Baal with his feasts, temple prostitutes, and disregard for the needy. They want Asherah, the so-called queen of heaven, with her empty promises of pleasure and fertility. They can’t grasp the mind of El Elyon. They only understand gods like themselves—vengeful, selfish, needing to be bought and appeased. El Elyon is beyond us, of course, but with His help, we change. But that doesn’t appeal to my people.’

‘Nearly fifty years ago, we had the worst king in living memory—Manasseh. He became so ensnared by Baal that he completely lost it. In the end, he was so fearful of Baal that he sacrificed his own children in Gah Hinnom! There have always been rumours of that going on, ever since we took the city hundreds of years ago. Even King Ahab did it, they say. But since Manasseh, it’s been on the increase. Of course, the law of El Elyon forbids it, but like my prophecy, the law is just trodden underfoot now.’

My blood runs cold as the import of his words sinks in. The horror I’ve witnessed isn’t a singular nightmare—it has been happening for centuries. My stomach twists as I imagine the cruelty repeating itself, over and over, generation after generation. The thought of children—innocent, helpless—sacrificed in fire, year after year, shakes me to the core. How could this have continued unchecked, for so long?

The screams, the terror, the fear-driven obedience—my mind reels. How many souls were lost to this madness? The evil power of it grips hold of me, and I feel helpless

in this sudden dark awareness of a brutal world. This isn't just a distant past; it's an inherited sickness that has poisoned everything it touched.

Jeremiah murmurs, 'I know the end will come soon. My message from Adonai predicts it without doubt.'

'But why now? Why not back in Manassah's day?' I ask.

'We lost the protection of El Elyon forty years ago, and the Babylonians have been growing stronger ever since. They won't invade until they're certain.'

'Will your people be able to hold them off?'

'Not a chance! We're heading toward genocide. The bodies will pile high in the Kidron cemetery, and the rest will be thrown into the Gah Hinnom valley. It will be remembered for generations as a place of shame...'

I'm confused. 'Wait a minute,' I interrupt, 'are you saying El Elyon will slaughter these people and throw them into the valley?'

Jeremiah looks shocked. 'No! Of course not. He has given them a way out. Those who leave the city and surrender to the Babylonians will live. But staying in the city—no! A plague is coming and many will die. And then the Babylonians will invade.'

'Why would He allow that?'

'They want to walk their own way. Without Him. He has to let them, so they can see where that path leads. Then, when they're tired and broken, they'll want to return to him, and he can win them with love.' Jeremiah looks at me, his face alight, 'He is into mercy and reconciliation. His plan is all about leading up to total restoration. One day... oh, one day...'

Jeremiah struggles to continue, then lapses into silent contemplation. After a while tears begin to flow down his cheeks, and his expression becomes one of total tranquillity. It seems that his thoughts have become inexpressible.

We both sit in silence for a long time, each lost in our own complicated world of

desires—what we want, or should want, or wish we wanted—and whether instead, we'll receive what we need, or deserve, or maybe whatever grace will give.

After a while, my mind is furiously repeating over and over, *I want to understand... I want to understand.*

But what slowly emerges is man's careless pathway to misunderstanding. The well trodden track of self interest twists through the blur of history, amid the confusing kaleidoscope of clashing views, and coerced by the social generators and filters of attitudes and assumptions, and reliably taking the wrong turns every time, it seems.

And I find that *I want to understand* has become *I want to know you*. Over and over—my defence against hopeless despair.

And it dawns—the realisation that we have always, throughout time, understood God in the image of man. We fail, we are untrustworthy, we are vengeful, we are self oriented, we are capable of repression, racism, violence, genocide. And deep down, we think you are too.

And *I want to know you* becomes *I want to see your face*.

And then...

He is revealed.

In transcendent power and exquisite loveliness—Abba—a Daddy to my infancy.

It is a moment of infinite security. I know I am loved beyond comprehension. And within less than a second, I'm weeping because I have always misunderstood you, never trusted you, ignored your pleadings. I need to stay here for a moment. While my perception is clear, and where the air is thin.

But the longer I stay, safe in the centre of his love, the sharper it becomes. Until it is too much. The contrast between this reality and the half life I have lived.

After a few minutes, I feel an arm around my shoulder. Jeremiah, it appears has a

softer side. As he simply holds me, all the trauma of Gah Hinnom, and the terror of the hospital ward drains out of me. Slowly my sobbing subsides and I catch my breath. I sit up straight, wipe my eyes with my sleeves and try to give Jeremiah a reassuring smile.

We are face to face, gazes locked.

I say it before I know it, ‘There will come a day when men and women worldwide will believe that El Elyon is going to burn men and women in Gah Hinnom. Thousands of millions of men and women burned alive.’

Jeremiah is frozen, then after a while slowly shaking his head in disbelief. ‘What?’

‘What have you written about Gah Hinnom?’ I demand.

At that moment, Baruch returns with three bowls of soup, and puts them down on the mat along with spoons and a half loaf of bread. The two men both bow their heads, evidently in a silent prayer each, and then reach for the food. It smells delicious.

‘Sorry, I just caught what you said,’ Baruch begins, ‘What was written about Gah Hinnom?’

I nod, wondering where this is going. Both men are scooping mouthfuls from their bowls. The food is simple but warm—a stew with lentils—and there is slightly charred flatbread with it. I can’t eat yet. I’m at the edge of something.

Baruch chews thoughtfully before continuing, ‘It was mentioned in two places. Of course, it will all have to be written again.’ He sighs, examining one hand and noticing a smudge of ink on his fingers. ‘We’ve only just begun the rewrite.’

I take a sip of the drink Baruch brought—something fruity. I nod for him to continue.

Baruch looks to Jeremiah for permission. A brief silence passes as Jeremiah breaks off a piece of flatbread and dips it into the lentil stew. Then, with a slight nod, he gives his consent.

Baruch continues, ‘We wrote about how Jeremiah was instructed to take the city

elders down to the cliff that overlooks Gah Hinnom and tell them there would be so many dead bodies that they would have to be thrown into the valley. Far too many to bury! And wild animals would eat the carcasses. It would be renamed the Valley of Slaughter.'

I take another sip, tiny this time. My appetite has all but disappeared. Jeremiah seems to be focussed on stirring his stew to cool it a little. His face gives nothing away.

'Jeremiah was beaten up after that,' Baruch adds, dipping another small piece of bread and popping it into his mouth. 'Things got very nasty.'

Jeremiah looks up at Baruch, and they exchange a glance. He takes a sip of his drink.

'And do you mention the valley again?' I ask, trying to keep my voice even.

Baruch nods. 'Yes. The same message was repeated, again to the elders of the people and the priests.'

I hesitate, not quite sure how to proceed. I glance at Jeremiah trying to assess how this is going to be taken, but his face is unreadable. So I just push ahead, hoping for the best.

'Forgive me, Jeremiah, but I have to say this.' I pause, still unsure, but he raises his eyebrows enquiringly. 'You need to make completely sure that you are hearing El Elyon correctly concerning the valley,' I say, my voice quieter now. I set my cup down, and meet his eyes. 'Please, Jeremiah, go to him again and ask what he thinks about the idea that in future, he himself would burn people in Gah Hinnom.'

For a moment, no one moves. The brazier crackles as a faint wind blows across the rooftop.

'Are you saying that I may have misunderstood the message?'

At this point, I am convinced that God never dreamt that children would be burned alive in Gah Hinnom, let alone condoned it. But I am not confident enough to

say that. Not to Jeremiah, this faithful broken man of El Elyon. So I make do with, 'No, not that you've misunderstood. Only that you haven't been explicit concerning what El Elyon thinks about the live sacrifice of humans.'

Jeremiah slowly shakes his head. 'Well, I don't know that he will give me additional words to say about that, but I will ask anyway.'

'Make sure he tells you what he actually thinks,' I urge him.

Baruch stands and collects the empty bowls. 'It's a good job we've hardly started writing it out a second time! If you'd shown up two weeks later, I might be faced with writing it all out three times!'

'Well, we'll see.' muses Jeremiah with the first broad smile I have seen, 'It could be that this is why the first version got the thumbs down!'

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Chapter 42 Hawkwood

It is a bit of a circus! I am sitting in an individual ward and Freya's bed has been moved in here. I'm saddened to see she has been put back onto the ventilator. Despite my strong feelings that this is the right decision, I am still a bit nervous. Dr. Pradesh has explained the procedure carefully to me. It is actually quite straightforward. No doubt Hawkwood will liven things up a bit. There are a small group of students who are observing, along with two other doctors. There is also a young woman with slightly green hair assisting Hawkwood now, apparently a "trial technician".

I'm surprised to discover that Hawkwood is keeping a personal watch on Freya—especially given that the Phase 2 trial spans nearly three hundred patients. I bring it up with Dr. Pradesh.

'It is because Freya's lung infection is quite widespread, hence the inhalation therapy. And the infection has entered the bloodstream with the sepsis just on the point of beginning to damage internal organs, hence the simultaneous intravenous delivery,' she explains.

'Oh, so are the others in the trial more or less advanced?'

'I understand that the largest group are more advanced with critical organ damage already occurring. The next group comprises patients whose infection has not yet entered the bloodstream. And a much smaller group—only twelve—at that crossover point.'

I watch Freya closely—she must feel like a lab rat. Sure enough, fear flickers in her eyes, no doubt stirred by the crowd of observers. She understands this isn't without

risk. I lean in to reassure her, but she clings to my hand, unwilling to let go.

Dr. Pradesh leans in with a gentle murmur, ‘Don’t worry, Freya, we’ll take care of you.’ Then, to Hawkwood, a quiet, ‘Midazolam.’ She slides the syringe into the cannula, pressing the plunger in a slow, steady push. As she follows with a saline flush, Freya’s grip loosens, her fingers unfurling, and her eyelids drift shut.

Hawkwood pivots toward me, eyes alight with enthusiasm. ‘Now we get to the truly fascinating part,’ he announces, turning slightly to flash an eager grin at the assembled students. ‘By all means, stay if you like—I think you’ll find it absolutely riveting!’ He rubs his hands together, practically vibrating with anticipation.

I hate to disappoint him, but my nerves are already starting to fray. Hawkwood, I gather, is a brilliant scientist, but emotional nuance doesn’t seem to be his forte. And I suspect that he’s about to launch, full throttle, into gory details that I have absolutely no desire to hear.

‘Actually I think I will just take a breather,’ I reply.

He looks disappointed. ‘Okay, well I’ll need about thirty minutes.’

I nod to Dr. Pradesh and slip out. I make my way to the chapel hoping to find some quiet. Martin is sitting halfway down on the left talking to a young couple. The woman is sobbing and the man has his arm around her. Martin murmurs something and the man nods. I can’t hear what they are saying.

I very quietly take a seat near the back on the right. At the front of the chapel, the candle on the table gently glimmers, its golden glow cast onto the wall. Last night’s dream is very much in my mind. For me, the question of hell is settled. But I still don’t know what Jeremiah’s reaction was. On impulse, I pull my phone out of my bag. Within a couple of seconds, my internet search returns. There is something! I scroll down the page.

Yes! There it is in chapter seven verse thirty-one. I read it slowly. It is a horrified

disclaimer about burning people in Gehenna. A direct quote from the heart of God.

They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.

The other search link takes me to chapter nineteen. Verse five is almost word-for-word the same.

They have built the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal—something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.

I can't quite get my head around what precisely has actually happened though. And there's another link! Chapter thirty-two verse thirty-five. I'm astonished. It is so clear. God never ever conceived of people being burned alive in Gehenna! And it is obvious from the words that the very idea appals him!

They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molek, though I never commanded—nor did it enter my mind—that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.

So it was in there before I ever dreamed it. Was it? Before? Oh I don't know. I give up thinking about it, and at that moment Martin interrupts my thoughts.

'Hi!' he says. I look up. The young couple have left. 'Can I join you?' he asks.

I nod. He knows that it is crunch morning for Freya. We chat for a while about Freya, and I promise to let him know, maybe leave another note in the chapel, so that he knows how it went today.

Then I tell him about my dream of Jeremiah. He listens intently, fascinated yet just as puzzled as I am about what exactly transpired. I explain how, strangely, the very words I was thinking, that I was too afraid to say, as I urged Jeremiah to be more explicit—in the dream—turned out to be real, written in the actual text itself.

Then Martin says, 'Have you found what he wrote at the end of chapter thirty-

one?’

I’ve read so much over the last three weeks that I’ve forgotten which books and chapters I’ve dipped into. I shake my head. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Ah well, that is where Jeremiah talks about how Gehenna will ultimately become a sacred place in the restored New Jerusalem.’

‘Really?’ I am astonished. That never came up in any bible study I attended!

‘Well there you are!’ Martin says, smiling.

I check my phone—I need to get back. I stand to leave. ‘Gotta go!’ I say. They are just about to start the therapy.

He touches my arm gently. ‘Well, keep praying,’ he says softly.

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As I walk back into ICU, the Agatha Trunchbull nurse sees me and says, ‘All the best for the gold dust treatment! Let’s hope it works.’ And I get a rare smile from her.

‘Thanks,’ I say, continuing on to the side room. As I enter, I am followed in by the green-haired woman. She passes a small glass tube wrapped in a thick cloth to Hawkwood. He extracts it, gives it a good shake and holds it up to the light.

‘The gold!’ he announces, widening his eyes dramatically. He opens it and carefully tips it into a small piston arrangement on the ventilator. He turns to address the students, ‘The nanoparticles are inhaled within two or three breaths. But to be sure, we leave the nebulizer in place for ten minutes or so. This results in antibiotic attachment direct to the bacteria within the alveoli. The lungs of course will clear the particles out by mucociliary action or phagocytosis.’

He continues for a while using words I have never heard, but I do catch his conclusion.

‘... repeated every eight hours for the next five days.’

At this point Freya gave a little cough. One of the students said, ‘Is that okay?’

Hawkwood smiled, ‘Absolutely no problem—there’s about six trillion very fine pieces of gold in her lungs now. So,’ he swivels on his heels to check I am paying attention, and then returns his gaze to the students, ‘how many bacteria—*Acinetobacter baumannii*—do you think there is present in this case?’ he asked, gesturing to my Freya, who is now evidently an audiovisual aid.

The entire group of students looked blank, with shaking heads and shrugs.

‘Absolute maximum—one trillion! But much more likely to be around a couple of hundred billion. So that’s thirty nanoparticles per bacteria, and of course multiple molecules of colistin and meropenem are attached to each particle.’

Once again, Hawkwood is in lecture mode—speaking far too fast using words that are far too long! At least, for me! He continues for a while until the green-haired woman re-enters with a loaded syringe. She passes it to Hawkwood.

‘Excellent! Now bear in mind the literally millions of infecting bacteria have migrated to the bloodstream, hence the condition is now sepsis,’ Hawkwood declares.

Does he even remember that I’m here? He really is perhaps a bit too enthusiastic.

‘So we’ll blast them with nanoparticles in suspension ...’ he pauses while he attaches the syringe to a small box and connects it to Freya’s cannula, ‘... using the infusion pump. The controlled injection rate reduces the risk of toxicity obviously.’

The students nod. They presumably understand what is going on.

He switches the pump on and straightens up and smiles at me. ‘There! Now all we have to do is wait, Mrs Turnham. The process gets repeated at regular intervals and we constantly monitor to see how the infection is regressing.’

I give a watery smile. This has been more trying than I expected.

‘Five days,’ he says, ‘then hopefully she’ll be right as rain!’

Dr. Pradesh touches my arm. ‘Come on,’ she says quietly, ‘we need a short chat.’

---oOo---

It is evident that sepsis is extremely damaging. It turns out that Freya almost certainly will not be as right as rain in five days time. The trail of destruction that such a widespread infection leaves is astonishing. Dr. Pradesh gently lets me down to reality—which is at best a recovery period spanning at least three months, and involving physiotherapy and close monitoring.

But I'll happily take that! I'll have Freya back!

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Chapter 43 Renewing

I finally have her home—after nearly a month. But every day, she grew stronger.

The fine gold therapy reduced Freya's inflammation within 24 hours, yet it took four more days before she was stable enough to come off life support. A week in ICU followed, monitoring her organs and guarding against secondary infections. Then another two weeks on the general ward, easing into physiotherapy and carefully controlled nutrition.

Now, she's upstairs. She had been longing for her own bed—despite it being smaller and far less comfortable than the NHS one.

I hear her now, making her way slowly down the stairs. She's still so weak.

'Are you okay?' I call. I have to resist the urge to rush to her side. It's painful to watch her struggle, but she insists she's fine—even as the staircase remains a daunting challenge.

When she finally steps into the lounge, I understand why it took her so long—one hand was occupied.

She's carrying a box.

The shoebox.

Lowering herself carefully into the armchair, she sets it on her lap. With slow, deliberate movements, she peels away the tissue paper from the first bundle, unwrapping it.

Nick's cross. With the word 'Why' is scrawled across it in stark black ink.

Looking down, ashamed, she murmurs, 'Can this be rubbed out? What I wrote?'

‘So you’ve found the answer, then?’ I ask.

She shakes her head. ‘No... but it spoils it, doesn’t it?’

I let the silence settle, stretching the moment so I can listen to the answer flow into my mind. I do that more often these days.

‘For me,’ I say softly, ‘and for you, Nick’s life will always carry the question, Why.’

She nods, her face clouding with quiet sorrow.

‘So the question Why is a perfectly reasonable one to ask, isn’t it?’ I pause, watching her eyes. The question still lingers there. Maybe it always will. For both of us.

‘But, Freya... we may not have the answer yet, but I’ve learned that there is one. And one day, you...’ My throat tightens. I swallow. ‘...you and I, we’ll both understand.’

Satisfied, she gently rewraps the cross, the unanswered—but not unanswerable—question still visible beneath the folds of tissue. Then she unwraps the next bundle—broken pieces of the cross with her own name on it.

‘Can we get a new one made?’ she asks quietly.

My heart lifts. Maybe, just maybe, her feet are on a path that will lead home.

‘No,’ I say gently. ‘The old chap who used to make them has died.’

She looks disappointed.

‘Don’t worry,’ I say, and this time, I feel the hope in my own words. ‘I think we can glue it. A temporary repair.’

She hesitates, lost between past and future, uncertain of what can be fixed and what remains broken. I take both her hands in mine, steadying her, steadying myself.

‘Freya,’ I say, meeting her gaze. ‘Just know this. One day, God will make everything new.’

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Chapter 44 Iron Age

‘Wake up!’ Kana-Il shook Naamah gently.

She rolled onto her back, turned her head, and mumbled, ‘Wasn’t asleep.’

Neither of them had had much rest, and from the sound of Ahlai’s quiet sobs in the darkness, she was awake too. Outside, the night was at its deepest, the middle watch, when sleep was heaviest.

Kana-Il’s voice was urgent but low. ‘Listen, Naamah. We have to leave. Our lives are in danger.’

She stiffened. ‘What?’

‘I’ve drawn Elihadad’s ire, and I know things—things that put us all at risk. I’m sorry, but we can’t stay.’

‘Where would we go?’

‘I have a place in mind. Somewhere safe.’

‘Where?’

‘I can’t say now. It’s too dangerous.’

She hesitated. ‘Can I have a few days? Just to say goodbye...’

‘Oh, my love.’ His voice was heavy with regret. ‘I’m sorry. But we have to go now. Right now.’

It took another ten or fifteen minutes before Naamah truly grasped that Kana-Il was serious. Ahlai, listening intently to the hushed conversation, finally spoke.

‘Mother, what shall I take?’

‘Only what you can carry,’ Kana-Il said. ‘Our neighbours will gather the rest from the hut and bring it to us later.’

In the end, each took only a single bundle.

The night was nearly moonless, just a sliver of brightness in the sky—enough to

see by, but not so bright as to make them easily visible. Moving north, they passed silently across the city, careful to avoid the temple quarter. Nothing moved in the streets, apart from the occasional stray dog or smoke drifting from a dying fire.

After half an hour, the huts thinned into scattered dwellings, and soon the city was behind them. The last few lay strung along the northern track to Luz, few and far between.

At last, Kana-Il felt free to speak. 'We will stay tomorrow night with Ben-Alashdal.'

Naamah only nodded. She was exhausted, her heart hollow with grief. Every so often, her hand reached out to brush Ahlai's shoulder—a silent offering of comfort—but the girl gave no response. Since witnessing the sacrifice, she had not spoken a word to her father.

Up ahead, a single candle burned in the window of a lonely hut. Kana-Il gave a small upward nod, signalling for them to approach. As they neared, a woman's figure emerged in the doorway. At the sight of them, she slipped silently inside.

'This is Zamira's brother's hut,' Kana-Il murmured. 'We can stay here tonight. Tomorrow, Zamira will return to the city and arrange for our neighbours to bring the rest of our belongings. Meanwhile, I will go to Ben-Alashdal's to collect the donkey.'

'Donkey?' Naamah asked, her voice dull with weariness.

'Yes. I left one there the day before yesterday. I didn't trust Elihadad—and there were rumours...' He trailed off as Zamira reappeared at the door, her expression unreadable, ready to receive them.

Naamah frowned. 'Why are you here?'

Zamira's eyes gleamed in the dim light. 'Come,' she said simply, taking Naamah's hand. Then, turning to Ahlai, she added, 'You too.'

Without another word, she guided Naamah inside, her grip firm but warm.

Ahlai hesitated for a moment, but Zamira gave her a gentle push, ushering her forward. Kana-Il remained outside, watching as the door closed behind them.

Within seconds, a sharp shriek rang out from inside. Kana-Il's face broke into a wide smile as he stepped through the doorway.

Ahlai stood clutching Yasub-El, arms wrapped tightly around him, their faces pressed together. Tears streamed down her cheeks—again.

Naamah turned to Kana-Il, breathless. 'What happened? Tell me!'

'I was running up the scramble path,' he said, still catching his breath, 'and I ran straight into Zamira. We both went down, I dropped the bag, and Yasub-El just rolled out. She dropped the newborn goat that she was bringing down to sacrifice.'

'The firstborn,' Zamira added quietly. 'The weak one.'

Kana-Il shook his head, marvelling. 'It was incredible. Somehow, she just knew. Without a word, she grabbed the baby and ran into the bush. I shoved the goat into the bag.'

Zamira's eyes were still bright with the memory. 'We never even spoke,' she murmured.

Naamah reached out tentatively to touch the child, as if afraid that he might disappear. She gently stroked Yasub-El's downy cheek with the back of her fingers, and at the softness of his skin, she gasped a quiet sob.

'You're safe now,' she whispered, almost to herself, as if she could scarcely believe it. She looked down into his face as his eyes closed for a moment, the long dark lashes resting on his cheeks. 'Safe,' she repeated, her voice shaking.

Ahlai turned, still holding him close, as if she could hardly believe she had him back. Then, her face wet with tears, she laughed—exultant, crazy, wild. She spun around and catching sight of her father, with a huge smile spread across her face, she cried, 'He's here,' she took a deep breath, 'because of you!' Then she turned,

remembering Zamira, ‘And you.’

Looking at Kana-Il, Naamah nodded. Unable to speak, she reached across and took Zamira’s hand again. After a few moments, she took a deep breath and said, ‘None of this would be possible, without you.’

She reached again, this time across to Yasub-El, and smoothed his hair. He wriggled slightly, and then deeply offended at being disturbed, let out a loud complaining wail. The sound was so alive, so vital. ‘Listen to that! So beautiful,’ Naamah laughed.

Ahlai held him out. ‘Take him, Mum.’

As Naamah pulled him close, swaddling him with love, Ahlai wagged an index finger. ‘If that’s beautiful, you can feed him tonight!’

She, pressing her nose into his hair replied with a smile, ‘Sadly not possible!’ She gently kissed him on the forehead, and serious now, murmured, ‘Oh little one! We thought ...’ Her voice broke—she couldn’t finish.

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