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Nisan 22

Day after Feast of Unleavened Bread

*Samuel*

Samuel fidgeted at the low table and looked out into the courtyard where the women were cooking and baking bread. “After only a short walk outside, I slept for hours.”

“You were senseless until the third day.” Ima dumped vegetables and lentils into the pot Mara stirred. “Praise HaShem. Death has passed over our door. For today, I am content to see my son leave the sleeping mat.”

Samuel broke the last *matzoh*, but the unleavened bread did not satisfy his hunger. “I long for the sweet, yeasty smell and taste of a leavened loaf slathered with honey.”

“I am glad your hunger has returned.” Mara slipped him a shy smile. “The feast is complete, and my father has agreed to sup with you and your father this very night. We are preparing

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a special meal.” Mara’s voice trembled with what sounded like both excitement and worry.

Perhaps Samuel was hearing the echo of his own worries in Mara’s tone. Hopefully, Mara’s father would remember the supper meeting. He blamed Mara when her birth took his cherished wife’s life. Seeking solace in strong drink, he so often crushed Mara’s spirit with broken promises, belligerent words, and more recently, bruising blows.

She tried to hide the marks of her father’s attacks and ran for refuge into the arms of Samuel’s mother. When their betrothal was confirmed, under the Law, Mara would be his wife and he could and would protect her. His stomach knotted—into a double twisted Solomon’s knot. To secure a betrothal was one thing, but it was quite another feat to secure the bride-price.

Mara scooped a small portion of lamb stew into a bowl and set it before him. “Taste. Does the stew need more salt? More leeks? More wild garlic?” She wiped her hands on her apron and returned to Ima at the cookfire. “Do not worry. My father never forgets the promise of one of your mother’s meals.”

Ima put her arm around Mara. “Your mother taught me to cook.”

Mara rested her head against Ima’s shoulder “I never knew. My father never speaks of my mother.”

“She would have been so pleased with you.”

Samuel dipped the matzoh in the stew and took a mouthful. “Beloved, this is wonderful.” The stew was bland, but at least not burnt. “Ima, you taste.”

His mother ladled a sip. She would show Mara how to make a meal fit for the table of the high priest, all the while offering the gentle encouragement she so desperately craved.

“When I was your age, cooking was merely a chore.” Ima

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turned to Mara. “For your mother, meals were an expression of deepest love.”

Ruth wiped tears with the edge of her apron. “I miss her so.” She sighed. “Come, Mara, let me show you some of your mother’s secrets for a savory stew.”

“Show me all of her secrets.” Mara bent over the stew and wafted the fragrant steam toward her nose.

“Not tonight. We will have a lifetime to share them.” His mother and Mara huddled over the pot, taking turns spicing and tasting. “After your betrothal, you may call me Ima. HaShem knows you are already a daughter to me.”

An evil foreboding slithered up Samuel’s spine. “Abba will be home soon. Mara, you should make sure your father is on his way.” His tone sounded more unsettled than he intended. This evening, nothing must go awry.

Mara flashed him a look full of mischief. “Do not fret. When I was home earlier, I hid the wineskin and left a pitcher of cold well water on the table.”

Samuel could not keep the astonished look from his face.

Mara moved to him and touched his cheek. “Beloved, let there always be plain speaking between us. My father is a drunkard.”

Ruth handed Mara a linen-wrapped parcel. “Here, tempt your father, Tobiah, with this warm matzoh.”

“I will not linger.” Mara scurried past Abba returning from his day’s work.

“Wife, cover yourself. A messenger came to the woodshop. The high priest and his sons are on their way here to make amends.”

Ima arranged her veil. “They have tarried for many days and many nights. Why should this night be different from all the other nights?”

Her mother-lion eyes flashed warnings toward the door.

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She would not readily forgive or forget the beating her wounded cub had suffered. “The high priest offered to pay lost wages, but no recompense for Samuel’s suffering.”

Abba placed a hand at the small of Ima’s back. “This dispute must be concluded quickly. We cannot stand against the House of the High Priest. We must seek peace.”

Samuel rose and brushed away the matzoh crumbs.

“Husband, meet them at the door, but please do not invite them in, for then we must feed them.” Ruth took a short paddle outside, lifted the bread loaf from the hot cook-stone onto a platter, and returned inside. “This evening we settle Samuel’s betrothal. This supper is far too important to allow evildoers to interrupt our plans.”

The mutterings of a gathering crowd outside were pierced by the braying of an angry donkey. The high priest had arrived.

“Come, Samuel, son of Abram. My sons would speak with you.” The high priest’s voice carried through the door.

Samuel grabbed his walking stick and hobbled toward the threshold. Sweat beaded his brow. He ground his teeth against the lightning bolts of pain blazing down his legs.

Samuel set his walking stick in the shadow of the doorpost. His father took a place behind Samuel’s weak side. “Lean against me. They will not see.” Abba reached for the latch and swung open the door.

The high priest’s sons stood clustered at the threshold.

“Your father remains out of earshot on the road, seated on his donkey.” Abram’s level voice betrayed no anger, no judgment. “He expects you to act for yourselves.”

Jareb nodded. “Abram, you spoke rightly to our father. We are men not boys and though fury flared on *all* sides...” Jareb turned, played to the gathering crowd, calling to mind Samuel’s well-known hot temper. “We must make settlement for Samuel’s injuries.”

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All the townsfolk were here, and Samuel knew every face. Some pretended to pass by. Some pretended disinterest. Others were openly curious. Secrets were never safe in a small town such as Shechem.

Samuel watched Jareb check the faces of those gathered. As eldest son, one day he would be put forward for the position of High Priest. If he wanted to be confirmed, he must keep the people's favor.

"Our father has pledged fifty days wages to compensate for Samuel's lost work. An expense we three will divide."

Achor's face was the embodiment of compassion. A mock expression that did not read true in his cold-blooded eyes. "In addition, I personally will offer thirty pieces of silver." Achor's tone dripped with the pride of privilege. Not a drop of repentance in his voice.

Ima gasped. "Praise HaShem." Her whisper carried across the tense silence. "Thirty pieces of silver." She clapped. "The bride-price."

Samuel cringed. One more private matter unveiled before all of Shechem.

Achor turned toward the crowd. "The additional coin will also ease the burden of any *ever-lasting* infirmity."

Enosh laughed. That strange giggle.

Samuel's memory of his beating flooded in. *Enosh's high-pitched giggle. "This beating may put Samuel off women altogether."*

What a strange thing for Enosh to say.

Samuel's sour stomach burned and churned. Achor had brought Samuel's ability to provide for a wife into question. "There will be no lasting injury. I will not take one silver coin beyond the fifty-day wages. And no payment is required for my defense of a young woman's honor."

Achor's expression was more disdain than denial. "Of

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course, you were not present when the girl and I met in the field, so you have no certainty she did not offer herself.”

“She pushed you away. I saw.” Samuel clenched his fists, barely keeping himself from lunging at the liar.

“Everyone in Shechem knows of your quick temper and your quick fists. Always ready to defend the poor against the wealthy, the weak against the strong. This time you mistook the scene. The girl’s push you saw was playful ... a challenge for me to pursue.”

An awl bored into Samuel’s stomach, and a vise clamped his chest. “You lie.”

Samuel took a step toward Achor. “You would destroy the honor of an innocent girl. You would sully her name.”

Abba gripped the back of Samuel’s robe. A warning to hold his tongue. Further protest would spark the town gossips and feed the fires of doubt.

Achor clasped Samuel’s shoulder as if he were offering friendly advice. “Who will believe the drunkard’s daughter against the word of a high priest’s son?”

Samuel twisted away from Achor’s grasp and spoke to the people. “HaShem knows the truth and He will not let Achor’s false witness go unpunished.”

Abba pointed a finger at the three brothers. “One day your sins will be laid bare.”

Uncertainty flitted across Achor’s face. He shrugged. “Jareb, Enosh, bring your shares to me.”

The two brothers added their coins to Achor’s money sack and stepped back into the crowd. Achor handed the sack to Abba.

Samuel turned a shoulder to Achor. “Your debt is paid.”

Achor took a small pouch from his bosom and dangled it in front of Samuel’s face. “Thirty pieces of silver.” He dropped the pouch at Samuel’s feet. “Enough for a bride-price.”

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Samuel's jaw clenched, his blood boiled. He wanted to beat Achor as he had been beaten. The growing silence felt heavy with hate, heavy as death. "I will not take your silver." He took a deep breath and bridled his temper. "Never. Ever."

Mara's father pushed through the crowd and headed for the money sack. "But I will."

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### *Mara*

Mara's father stretched out his hand to take hold of the money sack Achor had dropped at Samuel's feet. Horror surged through her veins.

"The silver is not yours." Mara grabbed her father's arm, but he flung her away. She could not let him take the money.

Her father held the edges of his outer robe and stood tall. "Samuel lost wages, but Achor owes me for the sullied name of my daughter."

Mara wished her father loved her. "I told you. Samuel preserved my honor. If you take the silver, it seals the suspicion I was defiled."

Her father's eyes changed, alight with greed and need. His lips smacked as if he could taste the barley beer the coins would buy. "You are right, daughter." He pointed his finger at Achor. "This must be a bride-price. You must marry my daughter."

"Nooo." Mara sank to her knees.

"Never," Samuel shouted.

"Nooo," Ruth whispered.

Abram's lips tightened. Mara knew that look—he was harnessing his temper. The well-known temper of his youth rivaled Samuel's.

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Achor flashed her a look of hatred. “Old man, bring her to me.”

Her father hauled her to her feet, closer to her attacker. Once again Achor took her by the chin, but she pushed away and refused to meet his eyes.

“She is comely enough.” The lust in his voice made her arms prickle as if a thousand dung beetles scurried toward her neck.

Achor crossed his arms. “If my father approves the match, I will marry her.”

Samuel stepped up next to her. “But I was going to speak to her father this very evening.”

Abram nodded. “It is true.”

“And where is Samuel’s bride-price?” Achor pointed to the sack of coins on the dirt.

Mara clutched the back of her father’s robe. If only her father would consider her heart. “I beg you, *Abba*. Do not do this to me.”

“Now, for the first time in your life, you call me *Abba*, not Father, feigning you are a dutiful, loving daughter.” He flung Mara to the ground.

The crowd began to stir, snigger, snipe.

The high priest dismounted his donkey and approached Achor. “What goes here?”

“This woman’s father demands I marry her to restore her reputation. If you approve, I am willing.”

Father crossed his arms. “I demand the tradition to delay betrothals during the counting of the weeks of Omer be set aside. My daughter’s honor must be restored.”

Achor leered at Mara. “And the wedding must take place before the third full moon.”

Mara knelt in front of the high priest. “Mercy, sir. I am not willing.”



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The high priest motioned for Ruth to help Mara. She moved Mara a respectful distance away from the men and whispered, “Do not speak.”

Samuel glanced at her, then turned to the high priest. “Sir, Mara is yet a girl. She is too young to marry. In two years, I will have the bride-price. She and I both want to be wed.”

“Under the Law, the girl’s will is nothing.” The high priest glared at her father. “Only Tobiah can, and should, consider her heart.”

Mara turned pleading eyes to her father. If this abomination of a betrothal was sealed, she would never again call this selfish man father. If she spoke of him at all, he would be Tobiah.

“As a dutiful father, my place is to negotiate a fortuitous match.” Tobiah lifted his hands and moved them as if balancing scales in the marketplace. “The woodworker’s son, or the son of the high priest. The bride-price now, or possibly in two years. Possibly never.”

Mara’s stomach sickened at the wheedling in Tobiah’s voice. All her life this sot had craved attention, be it for gain or for shame.

“A word.” Ruth approached Tobiah. She leaned close and spoke with quiet strength. “Remember. Your betrothal to Rivkah was a love match. Your beloved wife would not want you to bind her daughter in a loveless marriage.”

“Rivkah is not here to object.” His voice curdled with bitterness. “Mara’s birth stole my wife from me. You were there. I will never accept your son as a suitor for her.”

“Then, I will speak for Mara in her mother’s stead.” Ruth’s tone was edged with iron. She looked back at Abram.

He ushered Mara and Ruth before the high priest. “Before you confirm this contract, I would ask that you hear my wife. It is customary the mother has some say bargaining for the bride.

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My wife was the closest friend of this young woman's dead mother."

"Speak, woman, in her mother's stead." The high priest's face was gentle, open, as if he craved a voice of reason in the midst of the burgeoning chaos.

Ruth bowed her head, eyes lowered with respect. "Please, if this marriage is to be allowed, my *daughter*..." Her voice faltered. She took a deep breath. "My daughter is too young. Would you allow your son to take a child to the marriage bed like the pagans?"

Achor rushed forward. "I will not take a child to my bed."

"She has not yet seen her first moonblood. By that time, Achor may be taken with another, and Mara would no longer be first wife or first favored."

Achor loomed over Ruth, his chin almost touching her brow. "That is no reason to delay the betrothal."

Tobiah stepped to Achor's side. "Or to delay the payment of the bride-price."

Abram edged Ruth behind him. He looked at Achor, then the high priest. "A betrothal span shorter than one year will suggest a child may be on the way."

"Her father has already admitted that likelihood by requiring me to marry her."

Snickers and snatches of vicious gossip buzzed around Mara. She did not look down, did not shrink. She stood tall and met the eyes of each woman who would dare defame her. Then she shot Achor a look full of defiance.

Ruth spat at Tobiah's feet. "Rivkah would forswear what you have become." She turned to the high priest. "Please, sir, the bride-price coins, *the mohar*, should not be held by Tobiah. Everyone knows he is never to be trusted with money. If Achor would ever divorce Mara saying *Return to your mother with your mohar*, she would have neither mother nor mohar."

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Mara pressed her hands to her cheeks. Ruth. Well-spoken and valiant. Mara's mother would have wept with pride.

The high priest nodded. "Her bride-price will be held in the city treasury."

Her father yelped. "I must have compensation for the cooking, cleaning, and other chores my daughter does now and will do in my old age."

"If you agree to an immediate betrothal and a wedding two weeks following her first moonblood, you will be given a generous sum each year we are married." Achor negotiated her *ketubah* as if he were haggling over a contract for a slave, not a wife.

"And if you divorce my daughter?"

"If she displeases me, she will be given her *mohar* and sent back to you." Achor leered at Samuel. "But I assure you, in time, she will anxiously await my visits to her chambers. She will give me many sons."

"Good. Grandchildren are a blessing." Tobiah clenched forearms with Achor and turned to the high priest. "We are agreed."

Samuel wedged himself between Achor and Tobiah. "It will not go well for either of you. This betrothal will bear the fruits of false witness and a frightened, unwilling bride."

The crowd grumbled, loud and long. But Mara was not sure if they were with or against Samuel. With or against her.

"Silence." The high priest lifted his hands. "The *ketubah* will be drawn up but remain unsigned until the sun sets tomorrow. If Achor and Tobiah are still in agreement, I will witness the wedding contract and the betrothal will proceed."

The high priest turned and walked away. The crowd slowly parted before the high priest. No one greeted him. No one bowed. He mounted his donkey. Achor and his brothers joined their father, readying themselves for the walk home.

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Abram drew Mara and Ruth close to his sides.

“The bride-price.” Tobiah raced forward and reached for the money sack on the ground.

“Leave it.” The high priest’s command cut across the gathering. “The marriage contract has yet to be sealed.”

“But the silver might be stolen.” Tobiah’s hand edged toward the money.

“Who would risk the loss of his hand?” The high priest mounted his donkey.

Tobiah stepped back.

The high priest rode away.

Achor approached Mara and stood much too close. His vile gaze traveled from her sandaled feet to her burning cheeks.

He kissed his fingers and flicked them toward her. “You will be a woman soon enough.”

Samuel shook both fists in the air. “If you persist with your evil plans, you will not escape the wrath of the Lord.”

Achor mouth twisted into a cruel smile.

A wave of hot dread ran through Mara, draining all warmth in its wake. She crumpled to the ground. Pebbles pressed into her cheek. The sack of coins lay just in front of her face. Her world went black. Black like Achor’s sin.