

It felt good to sing. The bitter, ugly war was over. It had been a while since she had felt she could laugh, and even now Aksah had to shove the sad thought aside, lest it taint this bright moment. She had spent months grieving, but they were in Shiloh, and the Ark of the Covenant was here. The harvest was over and it had been a good one. It was time to celebrate.

And time to forget.

Laughter rose from the circle of young women as they began to move in the steps of the dance. Aksah hung onto the hands of the maiden in front and the one behind, as she too began to pick up the familiar moves. Left foot over right, a hop and then right foot over left, they all let go for the twirl, hands reached and clasped again in the giant circle, two graceful steps to the right and the movements repeated themselves, faster now, and the songs and laughter soared. Nearby, someone played a harp, and someone else played the flute, nearly drowned out by the happy calls of the circles of dancers.

The women moved in toward each other, the circle tightening, their hands raised as if to grasp a piece of the sky, the sun bright on their faces and then the steps took them back again, the ring widening, their arms stretched as far as they could go and still remain linked. The circle began to move again, their laughter and song a cheerful thing.

No doubt there were others here who hid their own sadness behind the smiles. Aksah did not know most of the girls in her circle, might not see them again for a year, but today they would laugh and dance. It was not so easy to recover, but this was a start, and she would learn again to be happy.

*Do not think about your brother, she told herself, do not think of his wife and little children widowed and orphaned for such a foolish war. Dance now, and be glad you are here in Shiloh, where the Ark is, and where God's favor resides again.*

She made herself listen to the notes, the plinking of the lyre and the trill of the flute, like the birds soaring in the sky overhead. Flute and birds, singing together. The low hills flashed around them as the circle moved, gaining time in the joyous songs, white rocks poking up from the green, the brown tents of the travelers for this once-a-year celebration, tents that dotted the valley and climbed the lower levels. Soon the summer heat would come and the flowers would fade, but today they were all abloom.

Aksah let the colors replenish her as they flashed past, pinks and purples and whites melding into a quilt of springtime.

The circle slowed, and the colors took shape, bushes being bushes again instead of a wash of green, flowers turning into clumps instead of streaks of brilliance. Her eyes were filled with the brightness, the floating music seemed to lift her heart with her feet.

She watched groups of people climb along the tiered hills of grapevines that surrounded Shiloh. Brightly colored robes appeared with each spin of the circle. Men and women, children, wandering through the rows, each turn putting the little families in a different place.

In the distance, the tabernacle curtain came into view, then went out of sight, then back again as she twirled and moved in the dance. Israel's holy house, the very reason they were here, the grey smoke of the sacrifices rising to the blue sky like the music.

The circle wound around again, each scene filling her eyes fresh, untainted by the war's woes. Aksah clapped with the music and whirled again, hardly needing to count in the so-familiar steps.

Near the hill's top, between the rows of staked vines, shadows moved. She lost them as the dance continued, but there they were again, ahead of the small groups climbing up the terraces.

Shadows in the grapevines, vines in places tall enough for a man to lurk, and to spring. Men with the right to capture a virgin, and steal her away.

Men who had shown utter disregard for women.

The back of her neck prickled as the dance slowed to a stop, and the music ended. She smiled at the dancers with her but the smile was strained, and Aksah turned in haste to find those shadows. To be aware was to be ready.

The tiered grapevine rows where the dark outlines had been were hard to identify, now that she was still. No matter which hill she checked, there were no shadows lingering among the thick stalks with their tiny young green clusters, no ominous forms hovering like vengeance.

Despite that, she found no comfort in the lack of movement beneath the tall staked vines on the narrow tiers cut into the hillside, no comfort that there were no rustles through the crowns of fresh leaves other than what the breeze made. The prickles across her skin grew stronger. A warning, a reminder that any virgins at the circle dances were fair game for the men who managed to capture her.

Aksah looked around at all the women from the dance, all the climbers wandering up the paths between the levels of vines, families enjoying the day and the place, all the musicians, then below at the valley encampment filled with people, any of whom could rush to the rescue of a snatched woman at a moment's notice. Only a fool would attempt to seize someone from this busy gathering.

Of course, the men of Benjamin's tribe clearly were fools, to have allowed such a horrible thing to come down upon their heads. What would possess a whole tribe to defend a city of violent men? They brought this war just past on themselves. They had been asked to hand the murderers over for justice, and what was their reply? To fight in defense of those very ones!

What kind of people defended those who would torture and kill? She had asked herself that question over and over for the past few months. The only answer she could find was that Israel's entire tribe of Benjamin had found no crime in the crime, no murder in the murder.

Men might grieve over the nation nearly down to eleven tribes from the original twelve. She would grieve over the poor, dead woman, a woman of Judah's tribe like herself. The concubine of a man who thought so little of her that he pushed her out into a crowd of fiends just to save his own skin, and abandoned her to a terrible death. In Aksah's opinion, six hundred men left of Benjamin were six hundred too many.

Permission had been given for two hundred of Benjamin's survivors, the only men who had not already been found brides, to steal their maiden wives from this celebration. They were nearby, those remaining men, searching for stragglers among the dances. It behooved all of the young women here to be very careful.

She had vowed to be alert, promised herself *she* would not be caught, but her sisters were a worry.

It was a pity, Aksah thought, that even four hundred brides had been found for a portion of Benjamin's entire once-populous tribe. The crime behind the war was beyond horrible. Let Benjamin's name die off now. She would grieve over her brother, her valiant brother who joined the army and died defending justice.

And the woman. Yes, she would grieve over the dead woman, stranger or no.

Blankets lay spread on the level sections of the vineyard just away from the rings of dancers, and baskets had been opened, provisions arranged for any who might be hungry after their efforts. Flat pieces of bread, crocks of soft cheeses and curdled milk, and cakes of dried fruits from last year's harvest. Skins of water and wine joined the feast, ready for the thirsty. Dried strips of meat, too, were placed on fresh cloths.

Men standing guard remained clustered to one side, talking and laughing instead of their usual protective stance, their casual demeanor replacing the expected alert, watchful pacing. Were they *giving* the Benjaminites a chance? Her gaze tracked across, away from the men playing at guarding, past the forming circle, toward the staked vines.

No one looked alert, no one appeared concerned.

Aksah took one last look up at the tall stands of green vines layered across the hillside before turning to the banquet spread out on the wide level place. This opening where the hill flattened before climbing again had been the perfect location to gather for dancing. No doubt during the harvest the farmers did their separating and drying of grapes into raisins here, but today it held women and musicians and dances.

As she sank down on the ground with her piece of bread and the raisin cake, Aksah found she was no longer able to join in the celebration with the abandon of the rest. Somehow, the hill behind her seemed populated with eyes of men waiting the chance to leap out and grab.

Her younger sisters plopped down abruptly on either side of her, pulling her out of her thoughts so quickly she dropped her raisin cake. "Oh!" Aksah clapped her now-empty hand over her pounding heart. "You startled me! Dinah, Deborah, where have you been?"

"Wandering," Dinah said. "With so much to see, we cannot just sit inside the tent, you know. We have not seen some of our friends for a whole year."

"Longer even," Deborah added. So identical, it was hard for anyone who saw them the first time to tell them apart. They all shared the same soft brown color hair, but that was the only identifier of the family link. While Aksah's hair was curly, the twins' was straight. Her eyes were an odd color, hard to determine in the copper mirrors, but it seemed brown sometimes, a paler blend of deep green and grey others, usually when the sun was shining. The twins, though, their eyes were brown, easy to conceal what they were thinking, like now, when they looked at her with innocent faces.

How far from the main congregation had they gone in their wanderings? Groups of silly young women may well have strolled within the grasp of the Benjaminite men. Even now some girls could already be rushed away, and no one would guess. "We were supposed to be careful! Do you not know it is possible men of Benjamin might be around?" Aksah did not mean the words to come out so harshly, but those shadows made her skin prickle, and it was impossible to look at her sisters' carefree faces without feeling the need to push some sense into them.

"So?" Dinah picked up the dropped raisin cake and glared at it before tossing it far away, to land in a prickly bush. Chileab had always said she could throw well—for a girl.

Aksah dared not think about Chileab now. "Do you want to be captured?"

Dinah got to her feet and gave Aksah that superior stare that never failed to rile her temper. "We want to have fun. You worry so. I for one do not intend to spoil our celebration time. We will not be back for another whole year. We are supposed to be joyful, so joyful I will be. Whether you like that or not!" There it was again, that foolishness, the belief that nothing could go wrong because she had decreed it. She put a hand on one thin hip, staring at Aksah as if looking at a much younger sister, instead of at the oldest of the six remaining children. "We are at Shiloh. We come here every year. What could be more safe than to be at the celebration?"

Was she ever that young, Aksah wondered? "Did you pay no attention to what was going on this last year? The woman who was murdered? The revolt? Did you forget about the war? Dinah, do you not realize how desperate the men of Benjamin are? There are two hundred men who would stop at nothing to get themselves a wife before their tribe dies off. Do you remember how close Benjamin came to being wiped away? Those last Benjaminites were given permission to raid the virgins here at Shiloh for wives. Each of us girls here are in imminent danger of capture."

Dinah's eyes lit up as if illuminated by the many-branched candlestick their mother had. Aksah groaned aloud. "But is that not exciting? How romantic to be swept away and wed. Much better than waiting at home for the marriage broker or our parents to decide for us."

"No, it is not!"

The words were in her mind, but they did not come out of her mouth. Aksah turned to gaze at Deborah, the surprise speaker. It was not often that the twins disagreed. Deborah may not like everything Dinah did, but it was rare for her to do so in front of others.

How strange that two so identical people could be so very different.

Aksah looked back at Dinah for her reaction, but for once she was unmoved by her sister.

"Come now, Deborah, surely you have to realize that this is exciting. Every year we come to Shiloh, and every year it is nothing but the same circumstances, the same sacrifices, the same readings from the Law. This is the first time we have ever come when something interesting might happen."

Aksah's mouth fell open. To reduce holy days to something boring? "Dinah! Can you not appreciate what a privilege it is to come here to Shiloh? Do we have a copy of the Law in our village yet? No, we do not. If you are going to learn, you had better pay attention while we are here."

Dinah's shoulders slumped. "Oh, look at you two. Aksah, I know you enjoy the circle dances much more than you do sitting and listening to the priests speak on and on. I saw you dancing just now. Do not become all pious on me."

Aksah felt as if her sister had just punched her in the chest. "How can you say that about me? I do like listening, I try to remember. I am well aware that when I get home, all I will have to draw from is what I retain. I like dancing, of course I do, but I dance because of the joy I get being here. I wish you felt the same."

Deborah cleared her throat quietly, just like she did everything. "Dinah, I like being here and listening, too. I do not come just for the circle dances. We can have circle dances at home, there are certainly enough young women in the village for that. But Aksah is right, our village does not have its own copy of the Law. Maybe soon, but not yet."

This time, Dinah did stamp her foot. "I can quote it better than either of you when we are questioned by our father. Just because you are not as smart as I am and have to listen harder does not mean that I am not listening."

Aksah recalled any number of times when Dinah had given their father the wrong answer when he was questioning them on the Law to see how much they learned.

Unfortunately, she also remembered the more frequent times when the only one who had the right answer, and to the most difficult questions, was Dinah.

It was most annoying.

"This will get us nowhere," she said, forcing herself to be quiet and not raise her voice here at the festival. "I just do not want any of us to be captured by the Benjaminites. They are not men we want to be with. I, for one, do not believe they learned anything from this war. They all ran up into the crag of Rimmon, and hid there like the cowards that they are."

"Now, Aksah, that is a little too harsh," Deborah said in her quiet way. "There were only six hundred of them left, how were they to know that they would not be slaughtered to the last man if they were to show themselves?"

"Not one of them turned over the men of Gibeah after that horrible thing," Aksah said fiercely. She suddenly realized her hands were clenched, and had to make an effort to release them. She did that, it seemed, every time she thought about that poor woman, turned loose to a crowd of violent men. "Chileab died in that war! We never even got his body to bury! This war would have been avoided if the men of Benjamin had had the decency to turn over the guilty ones. But, no, they pretended nothing bad had happened and ignored all the summonses from the rest of the tribes. A whole tribe, all of them, who could not see a murder when it was right in front of them!"

She was doing it again, letting her emotions and her anger run away with her.

"Well, it is all over now," Dinah said with her usual ability to ignore what she did not want to face. "I know Chileab is dead, I miss him too, more than you realize, but really, Aksah, the war is over. We won. I cannot bring Chileab back, but neither will I let myself stop living. And if I want to dance in the circle dances, I will!"

"If you cannot think of me or of Deborah, try to think of Mother and Father and what they would feel if you were suddenly swept away to Benjamin." If they were going to make it through this visit to Shiloh with the family intact, someone had to take it upon themselves to keep an eye on the girls. As the second oldest child—second oldest *surviving* child, she corrected herself—not to mention the oldest daughter, that duty naturally fell on her. She suddenly realized one of them was missing. "Where is our youngest sister? Was she not to be with you?"

Dinah looked over at the nearby blankets with their rich spread. "She was just here. I do not know where she went. She cannot have gone far."

Aksah stood and scanned the ground, up toward the vines growing along the hillside, across the small plain where they sat, where dancers mingled, instrument players talked and

laughed, and baskets waited for the hungry, and down the lower slopes filled with more vines. Rachel loved flowers, but she was nowhere to be seen near the blooming bushes or the budding clusters hanging from the propped branches.

Rachel was ten. The Benjaminites would hardly be interested in her. Would they? “Help me find her!”

Deborah rose from the blanket with her normal deliberation and turned to gaze up the hill, while Dinah stared down into the valley. Before Aksah sucked in a breath to scream Rachel’s name, Dinah said, as calmly as if they were safely in their house, “There. See? She found Mother.”

Indeed, down at the edge of the wide valley holding the temporary village that sprang up each spring, a small familiar form stood by the much-patched tent that belonged to her family. The figure was gesturing at the open door, as if talking to someone just out of view inside.

Aksah refused to let herself feel guilty over her initial panic. Whatever the shadows on the hillside had been, the fact remained that Benjamin had received permission to stalk this celebration, and she had seen *something* up there. It might have been a wild goat, of course, or a deer, or . . . one of so many things.

Olive trees grew in clusters toward the valley where the tent city nestled, the white flowers of the blooms that would become fruit just beginning. Whenever the breeze came up, the leaves showed their silver undersides in a ripple of color across the tree. The last blossoms of spring dotted the brown soil here and there in tufts of yellow, white and pink, bobbing cheerfully among their stalks of green. It was deceptively peaceful.

“Aksah?” Dinah’s voice had an edge to it, as if she had spoken more than once.

“What?” Aksah dragged her thoughts from the patched tent.

“You were not listening! I knew it! Well, I will tell you again and this time you had better listen.” Dinah’s arms were propped again on her slender hips. “During the speeches or not, if I want to walk in the hills, I will. If I want to dance, I will. If I want walk with the young men, and pick flowers, or find a husband, I will do so as well.” She pushed her thick soft brown hair away from her face with a rough gesture of irritation, as if it were either push it back or pull it out.

Before Aksah could think of a retort, Dinah continued, “It is not up to you to tell me what to do because you do all the same things. I might think you want us to stay in Father’s house, unwed, just because you have not found a husband yourself!”

With that, she turned her back on her older sister, grabbed Deborah’s hand, and stomped down the sloping path toward the tents.