

“I don’t want to leave Egypt, Father.” My tone was probably too petulant to address him, but I was confident that Shifra and I could support ourselves with our midwifery skills.

“How dare you speak to me, your father, with such disrespect.”

“I do respect you, but no matter how difficult it might be to stay behind, it would be better than spending years trudging through a desert wilderness to reach the Hebrew’s promised land.” My voice rose as I continued. “We’re not Hebrews. We don’t worship their god. They probably won’t even let us come with them.”

His expression softened. “I can understand you not wanting to leave your husband and son’s bodies behind, but I won’t be separated from Pua’s family.” I understood that my sister had given him a grandson, while I became barren after Shifra was born. In addition I was unlikely to acquire a new husband at my age, especially since I was already raising another man’s child. I admit that I neither mourned nor missed my late husband, and I even had mixed feelings about my son, who had been growing up to mirror his father’s worst habits.

“And now we’re going to somehow cross the Sea of Reeds,” I protested. “But I don’t know how to swim. I’ve never even bathed in the Nile.” I’d heard too many stories of crocodiles and hippos attacking people.

Grandfather must have recognized my panic. “You heard Maratti explain that the usual trade route to Canaan goes along the Great Sea past a series of Egyptian forts, where this many escaped slaves would surely be killed or captured and returned to Egypt.” He gave me a gentle hug. “There is no safer way to go.”

Maratti walked up and interrupted us. “Don’t worry, Asenet. Moses will have the Akkadians, who know these marshlands, show us how to safely cross them in large numbers.” He leaned down and said softly, “Come with me. Please don’t stay behind.”

My spirits had risen at the confidence in his voice, but his entreaty made me feel happier and more wanted than I could remember ever feeling. I was too overwhelmed to speak, so I looked into his eyes and nodded.

His eyes lit up, and then he continued his explanation. “The wheelbarrows and wagons will go first, well spread out, along with the donkeys and goats. Together they will crush the reeds down to form a mesh solid enough to walk on. To cross the fastest, we will walk in groups, not single file.”

“We begin at dawn,” Grandfather declared firmly, either ignoring or not noticing my interaction with Maratti. “The tide will be high, but the sea is shallow here, so as the tide goes out, it will remain shallow while we cross.”

Thus my family were among the first to step into the water, even before the sun rose, just behind our Akkadian guides. I grew anxious as the waves rose above my waist, but the water was warm and tranquil, and I calmed when I saw the wheelbarrows and wagons floating. Now it would take little effort to guide them along next to us as we walked. Soon the donkey and goats were swimming beside us. I worried they might swim away, but I was reassured when I saw Eshkar and Gitlam swimming over to herd them back. Of course they could swim; their father and uncle had been fishermen. I told myself that the Akkadians in front weren’t worried, so I should focus on finding a secure foothold on the reeds below.

But my anxiety returned when I looked up to see Eshkar splashing Shifra, and she him, under the guise of teaching her to swim. I wanted to keep an eye on her, but I had to concentrate on staying upright and following those ahead of me. All I could do was keep my spying to a minimum, but my worries and frustration increased when I saw him holding her body afloat as she practiced paddling with her arms and kicking her feet. Right then I could see his hands, but I couldn't watch them every moment, though she did seem to be enjoying the lesson.

To make matters worse, Father walked alongside me. "Spying on them won't achieve anything, Asenet." He gave me a knowing smile. "Except making you lose your balance."

"But she's still a child," I protested.

"Not for much longer."

I didn't answer him. I couldn't help but notice how mature her body looked under her wet shift and I suspected that Eshkar had as well. Which was why I was troubled.

"I think they would make a good match," he continued. "As my apprentice, he is likely to take over my wainwright business, and then she could continue to live with us after the wedding."

I scowled at him. Father was in his mid-forties and I didn't like recalling that he would soon be too old to work. I liked even less being reminded that a bride leaves home and goes to live with her husband's family when they marry. "You want me to encourage them?"

He shook his head. "Just don't discourage them."

Before I could reply, I finally did lose my footing. But he caught my arm before I could slip beneath the waves. I kept my mouth closed, and as we continued on together I became distracted by the sight of an elderly woman with long white hair riding a donkey ahead of us. Carrying her weight, the donkey was too heavy to swim and struggled to keep its head above

water. I made my way to her and helped her dismount, after which the donkey easily began swimming. The woman, taller than me, took hold of the donkey's lead with one hand and walked alongside him. To my surprise, she reached out with her other hand, grabbed one of mine and pulled me toward her. Then, our arms intertwined, we trudged together along the muddy ocean floor.

Everyone was in the water when Eshkar stopped and, his eyes wide with fear, pointed up at the cliffs behind us. To my horror, there was the Egyptian army—Pharaoh's chariots, horses, riders, and warriors—arrayed before our frightened eyes, their armor gleaming in the sun.

I wanted to run, to cry, to scream my fear, but I didn't do any of those things. I pushed forward in the water with all my strength.

“Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?” a man yelled at Moses.

The shrieks of terror multiplied. “What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?” I whispered, my throat too constricted to cry out.

Yet Moses's voice was firm. “Don't be afraid! Witness the deliverance that our god will work for you. For the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again!” Staff held high, he stretched his arm over the sea.

I gasped with amazement as a strong east wind suddenly blew in, driving back the water, its spray sparkling in the sunset. At the same time, it was now the Egyptians who shrieked in terror as the pillar of fire appeared and began moving back and forth in front of them, forcing them to remain on the cliff. All night, we had the wind at our back, encouraging us to keep moving forward as we trudged through the split waters, until at dawn the tide was so low that we

crossed on crushed reeds over solid ground. But just then the pillar of fire vanished and the usual daytime cloud appeared, shimmered above the shore ahead of us, glittering in the sunrise.

We had just witnessed another of Elohim's miracles.

At first the Egyptians were paralyzed. Then they abruptly burst out in pursuit. Into the sea they raced, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and riders. Our previous exhaustion was replaced with panic. Even the slowest broke into a run, including the old woman who raced to catch up with her swimming donkey. The tide began coming in, which floated the wagons again and enabled us to move faster. I restrained myself from looking back at our stragglers and the Egyptians, because my footing tended to slip when I did. By this time Shifra, Eshkar and Gitlam were at the front with Maratti and the goats, far ahead of me and Father.

I was thankful I no longer had to worry about Shifra drowning or getting left behind, when all around us, blue lotus buds began rising from the dark water, lifting and opening at the surface to reveal a bright yellow center set in a circle of sky-blue petals. I breathed in the lovely scent they released at dawn. I marveled at Elohim's message, for the essential role of this fragrant flower in Egyptian religion was its intimate association with the rising sun, creation, and rebirth. Its sensual fragrance was also renowned for its properties of attraction, enhancing lovemaking, and reducing anxiety. I could not deny that my anxiety was decreasing.

The water level continued to rise for hours, but I wasn't worried—not when I smelled the blue lotus flowers. The old woman and I concentrated only on putting one foot in front of the other until I lost grip on my basket of midwife supplies and could only watch in dismay as it began floating away. I couldn't reach it in time no matter how swiftly I moved. Defeated, I began to cry. But someone unexpectedly grabbed my shoulder and I opened my eyes to see the mystery

woman holding my basket out to me. As I grabbed it, she let go of me, clambered onto her donkey and made for the shore.

I was suddenly aware that I was walking uphill, and even more surprised when I looked up and there was Maratti, only a short distance away, hurriedly sloshing toward me. There were wagons now on the beach where goats greedily chomped on reeds nearby. Already men were cutting down reeds for women sitting on the sand to weave into sleeping mats. Between my relief and exhaustion, I almost fainted, but Maratti caught me and helped me toward our wagon. I'm sure I could have made it there under my own power, but under the influence of blue lotus, I couldn't resist the opportunity to be in his arms again.

I clung to him and whispered, "I was so frightened of drowning, of my family drowning, but now we're all safe."

He turned so I looked over his shoulder. "Now the Egyptians are drowning instead."

My exhaustion changed to elation. The east wind had turned and the high tide engulfed the Egyptians on foot, as well as their chariots and riders. The chariots, decorated with bronze, were too heavy to float, just as the Egyptians in their metal armor were too heavy to swim. By the time the last of our people staggered out of the water, the sea had returned to its normal state and there was no sign of the Egyptian army except for some swimming horses. The pillar of fire was on our side of the sea, providing a comforting light for those passing around waterskins and unleavened bread. Soon there were sleeping bodies as far as I could see—some on rugs, some on newly woven mats, but most just collapsed on the uncovered ground. I looked for the elderly woman who'd assisted me, but I saw no one with white hair.