

THE MIDWIFES ESCAPE: FROM EGYPT TO JERICHO

Chapter One Asenet

For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt.—Exodus 12:12

I woke to the sounds of someone moving stealthily in the room. Light footsteps, soft but muffled breathing. Both getting nearer. I rolled onto my side and reached out for my husband, but he was not in our bed. I was annoyed but not panicked, for he often stayed out late drinking in the spring when the weather was temperate. I took a deep breath, but the usual sweet scent of plumeria blossoms was tainted with something foul.

I sat up and looked around. The full moon sent shafts of light through the open windows and I saw, not my husband, but his brother Maratti. “What are you doing here in the middle of the night?” My voice rose with alarm. “Why aren’t you at the palace?”

Maratti squatted down beside me and whispered, “Shush. We don’t want to wake the others.” His voice shook and he swallowed several times.

Before he could say more, I grabbed his arm. “What is wrong?”

He took a deep breath. “Something terrible has happened. Just after midnight, the guards around me began to collapse. At first I thought they were falling asleep or had been taken ill. But when I examined the nearest one, I realized he was dead.”

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“Dead ...?” I gulped. “Are you sure?” My horror was so great I could barely speak.

He gently put his hand over my mouth. “I don’t know, but please stay quiet until I finish. Almost immediately I heard screams from the survivors in my regiment, and we could hear cries from the city below.” He looked down at the floor and was silent for a long moment. “People—apparently only firstborns—are dying all over the city.”

I pushed his hand away. “No. I don’t believe you. It’s impossible.”

“It may sound impossible, but it is happening.” He slammed his fist against the floor. “Survivors are panicking, so I ordered my troops with families to go home and guard against looters. The rest should remain at the palace.”

It took only a moment to realize the implication of his words. “Where is my son?” I started to weep when I saw that both my husband and son were missing.

He put his arm around my shoulder and replied in a soft voice, “My brother was likely struck down at the local tavern. Your boy was already dead when I got here.”

“I still can’t believe it. What happened to his body?” I accused him.

“Asenet, I couldn’t leave his body here for you and your daughter to find in the morning.” He choked on the words. “I used one of your father’s wheelbarrows to move him to the marshes and buried him.”

“This a nightmare.” I sniffed back tears. “But what would only kill firstborns?”

Maratti sighed. “They say the Hebrews’ god is punishing Pharaoh for not letting them go to make sacrifices in the wilderness.”

“So this is one more of Moses’s curses? Like the locusts and frogs?” I was angry now. “What did we ever do to him?”

“Asenet.” His voice hardened. “This is nothing like the locusts and frogs. This time your son, and a great many of Egyptian sons, including the Pharaoh’s, are dead.”

I sobbed silently. “What happens now?”

“I think Pharaoh will relent and let the Hebrews leave. But I also think he will change his mind once they are gone.”

“So you think the Hebrews, and anyone who wants to go with them, need to leave as soon as possible and get as far away as possible.”

“There are now many Egyptian households that stand desolate. Their masters and mistresses are dead, and their slaves have fled. At dawn the looting will begin.” Maratti stood up. “Hittites were conscripted into Pharaoh’s army long ago. Now that Egypt is laid low, it is time to collect back wages.”

“What?”

“Was I paid for guarding the palace? Was my brother paid for overseeing the Hebrew slaves?”

I scowled. Both men were well fed by Pharaoh and had their choice of slave women for their pleasure. Maratti may not have used them, but my husband boasted of it.

“Think of your most recent midwife clients, the wealthy ones,” Maratti whispered. “How many of them paid you in full?”

I remembered how angry I felt when morning came and I realized the gold ring I’d been promised was only copper. When I grimaced and remained silent, he said, “I thought so. Now, while the moon is full and many people are too frightened to go out, you must visit the homes of these cheaters.”

“So many people will be looting, it will be chaos,” I protested.

He gave me a stern look. “You know where they keep their valuables. If everyone there is dead, then take what they owe you.”

“Come with me.”

He shook his head. “I must stay here to protect your home and your family.”

I almost said *what remains of my family*, but Maratti was right. Father was too old to fight off looters, and my daughter Shifra, was on the cusp of womanhood ... I didn't want to think what evil men might do to her.

Wrapped in my dark cloak, my emptied midwife's satchel over my shoulder, I stayed in the shadows as I headed for my most recent clients' mansion. How many times had I been woken in the night to grab my satchel and attend a birth? Hundreds at least, maybe over a thousand. It almost felt like that ... almost.

I couldn't think about what had happened, was maybe still happening, in all these houses. I thought back to my midwife training, to the excitement and the trepidation, the joys and the sorrows—thankfully more of the former than the latter. My grandmother had been my mentor, teaching me and my older sister with expertise and patience.

Most births were routine, culminating in a healthy baby and delighted parents, but as my experience increased, the most satisfying deliveries were the most difficult. The jubilation I felt when I was able to save a mother or baby's life, or both, was the ultimate triumph. My reputation grew and as I began training my daughter, I came to enjoy being a teacher in addition to a practitioner.

But not tonight. The baby boy, and his parents were all firstborns. Many of the household slaves probably were too. There would be no joy in this house, only sorrow. I had passed no one in the streets and though I'd heard cries and moans from inside some lamplit residences, the one I watched was dark and silent. I walked purposefully through the garden to the side entrance and

let myself in, waiting as my eyes adjusted to the pale moonlight. Someone who wasn't familiar with the house wouldn't know where things were in the dark.

I hurriedly climbed to the bedrooms, avoiding slaves' bodies fallen on the stairs. I shuddered as I recalled the many mothers who had died in childbirth, screaming in agony. But these people seemed to have died painlessly. Clearly any survivors had fled, but hopefully they had not completely plundered the house. I breathed more easily when I reached the mistress' room; her body lay motionless in her bed, her newborn quiet and still in her arms. They seemed to have died in their sleep.

I remembered why I was there and shook my head to clear my mind. I had seen a jewelry case in the painted cabinet near the bed. The case was there, and I stuffed it into my satchel. There was still room, so I helped myself to her finest linen tunics. I left her cosmetics on the dressing table and crept downstairs. I thought of Maratti, captain of the palace guards. Mercenaries didn't earn a salary for their services; they were paid their share of the plunder when they defeated an enemy. But there hadn't been such a war recently.

Instead of leaving immediately, I detoured into the dining room. I had eaten there while waiting for that baby to be born and had no trouble groping my way to the storage chests. First I took the jeweled goblets. Then, my hands shaking, I filled my satchel with every gold and silver plate, cutlery, and serving piece that would fit inside. But it was poor compensation for losing my son.

I was almost home when I heard a young child crying in the street. I started to circle to the next street when I heard a familiar adolescent voice telling the child to be quiet; it sounded like Father's apprentice. I waited for the wispy clouds to clear and tiptoed closer until I could see a young boy sitting in the street, our apprentice kneeling beside him. The younger child, whose

tight curls cut short to form a cap on his round head were identical to the older boy's, had to be his little brother. I couldn't leave them outside in tears, not on a night like tonight. Not when their mother was likely dead.

I ran to them and, finger on my lips, rushed them into my house. I attempted to calm them as I tried to recall what I knew about their family.

I knew their mother was a widow who raised goats for their wool and cheese. Her husband and his brother had been fishermen until they'd both been killed when hippopotamuses overturned their boat. Only their fishing nets were salvaged. That's when she'd asked—more like begged—Father to apprentice the older one as a wainwright, who might one day be as skilled in the making and repairing of wagons and wheelbarrows as Father himself. Years earlier I'd thought that my son would follow in Father's trade, but to my dismay, he preferred the power and perquisites of a slave overseer.

I put my satchel in its usual cabinet and fastened the door. Then I turned to the boys, who were shaking with fright, and probably grief as well. They looked so piteous that I hugged each one in turn. Then I spoke without thinking.

"Don't worry. You will live with us now. But first we must hurry back to bury your mother." Surely there would still be some valuables we could return with after that task was done. Thieves wouldn't enter an unfamiliar dark house until dawn.

I shouldn't have worried. The two buck goats rushed to attack me, but the boys quickly calmed them so we could dig a shallow grave in the goat pen's soft sand. Outside I counted six does, four obviously pregnant, and two kids. There was also a donkey, a good-sized wagon and a wheelbarrow. I had no idea where anything inside was kept, but the boys did. Between the three

of us, we covered the wagon floor with woven rugs, wall hangings, and bedding, after which it took all our strength to lift the heavy full-sized loom on top.

Next the boys brought out the cheesemaking pans and pots, some empty and some heavy with fermenting milk, and we carefully arranged them in the wheelbarrow, surrounded by the large spoons and other utensils. We wedged everything in tight with cheesecloth and skeins of yarn. Finally, we used most of the rope to tie the fishing nets on the donkey. I wasn't sure how we'd use them, but they were too valuable to leave behind. The boys tied the bucks to the front of the wagon and the does to the back, and then the elder startled me by running back into the house.

"We don't need any of your mother's knives, Eshkar," I shouted when I recognized what he was carrying. "I have more than enough at home."

Eshkar handed me a long butcher's knife. "These are for protection ... just in case." These were the first words he'd spoken to me tonight.