

MIRIAM, MESSIAH

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The baby was dead.

Hanani cut the cord quickly and handed the limp form to Miriam. Then she turned back to the laboring woman and began to massage her stomach.

“Push” she said firmly. “You’re not done yet.”

“What is it?” the mother asked. She gasped then and clutched at Hanani’s hands. Her face shone with sweat and lamplight.

Rachael, Miriam’s eldest sister and her mother’s helper here, held the woman up on the birthing stool. “Later, Adah,” she said. “Push now.”

The woman began a wail, a deep keening note that blocked her breast and filled the dark corners of the room with pain. Rachael held her, Hanani massaged deeply. Outside, a lonely voice took up the keening. Miriam washed the dead child. It was a girl, tiny, dark-haired, perfect. She wiped it clean and wrapped it in the swaddling clothes as though it were alive. She held it to her and closed her eyes against the keening. She felt the tiny bones beneath her fingers. She felt her fingers grow warm. She felt her hands grow strong. She stroked the baby’s breast, stroking life.

It cried.

Rachael and Hanani turned and looked at her. Adah’s keening weakened; then, with a final cry that echoed her daughter, she arched high in Rachael’s strong grasp. The afterbirth slid from her into the clay pot below the stool. She sank back, silent, staring at the wailing child in Miriam’s arms.

Miriam came forward and offered it to her. She took it with trembling hands and held it to her breast. The baby found her nipple and began to suck.

“It’s a girl,” Miriam said quietly.

“Ah.” Adah’s reply was almost another wail. But she watched the nursing child, and her face settled. “At least it is alive.”

Hanani looked once at Miriam, then went to the door. She spoke briefly. The keening outside stopped. There was one joyous cry. Then the father and grandmother passed by her into the house to hover over the mother and child. Rachael helped Adah off the stool and onto a mat near the smoking fire.

Hanani began to clean up. Miriam and Rachael helped, their part over. The father came over and soberly offered Hanani her fee, which she took with a nod. Few enough in Nazareth had silver to pay. Usually they went home with cucumbers or a basket of barley. And they were often paid less for daughters, even though their work was the same.

The man turned back to his wife, watching from a few feet away as she crooned to the nursing baby. He kept his hands behind his back, as though he might be tempted to caress her. For thirty days she would be unclean.

Hanani spoke briefly to the grandmother, then, with her daughters, took up the stool and the pot and the herbs and left. The streets were beginning to brighten with early dawn. The air was chill. Miriam took a deep breath and held it. Her hands shook, fingers still warm.

They came to Rachael’s husband’s house, and she left them. Then Hanani and Miriam walked alone through the narrow street, past the well, across the empty square, and into the alley that held their own home.

Hanani spoke once. “What did you do with the child?” she said.

“I cleaned and wrapped it, Mother,” Miriam replied. “Then I held it.”

Hanani stopped and stared closely at her in the growing dawn. “Make me no miracles,” she said firmly. “We’ve religion enough in our house.”

“I merely held it.”

“Let it be just that.” And she walked on.

* * *

Later that morning, after too little sleep and a hurried meal, Miriam took a basket of food into the hills for her father and brother. It was a long walk, for their tiny plot was one among the least of Nazareth. Shimeon, her father, had been one of many sons. But there was enough barley and wheat and a few vegetables. And a bit of pasture for their small herd. When the goats were with kid, the men stayed in the hills with them.

The land was alive with spring. Flowers spotted the hillsides. Birds called among the olives near town. The plowed fields showed a young beard of pale green. The rainy season had yet to pass, and the rugged land was wet and fresh. Miriam swung the basket gently as she walked, humming. But when she came to their small pasture, she saw no sign of her father and brother.

She called. Only the birds replied. Birds and the barking of a jackal. The winding hills gave no view. The men could be down any gully or ravine.

She climbed the pasture, calling again. As she neared the top, she saw a vulture turning its slow watch in the sky, and heard again the bark of the jackal. She followed the sound, and the vulture soared with her. She began to worry. Then she heard the high bleating of a kid. She dropped the basket and began to run.

They were trapped in a steep fold in the land, a nanny and kid hobbled by rank growth and the kid's spindly legs. Three growing jackals circled behind as Miriam came near. The nanny spun desperately, trying to keep between them and her kid. But one hind leg hung uselessly, torn at the hock. Her tongue hung along her jaw. Only the kid had strength left to cry.

Miriam picked up a large stone and threw it at the jackals, yelling. They growled and slunk farther back. The second stone hit with a dull thump, and one ran. The others followed. The nanny watched them, flanks heaving, then sank to her side in the dirt.

Miriam knelt beside her. The kid pushed under her arm and nuzzled at its mother's side. The nanny tried to lift her head. Miriam touched the hot flank. Ran her hand down the injured leg. She felt the strange, familiar warmth start in her fingers.

And pulled back, remembering her mother's words.

"Mary," a voice said behind her, "do you still doubt?"

She turned. A man stood there, or the semblance of a man, young and lean, with dark hair that curled into a golden beard.

"No, Gabriel," she said.

"They why did you draw back?"

"There was a stillbirth last night—"

"I know."

"And my mother told me—"

"I know."

She looked down at her hands, resting in her lap. They seemed strange to her, the warmth a foreign thing, not of herself. "I do not want to disobey my mother," she said.

"Ah." Gabriel knelt beside her, as a man would. As her brother Shmuel would when talking of the weather to another shepherd. But the sun shone on his hair and beard, making a haze around his face.

"Would you disobey your father?" he asked.

She kept her eyes down, fearing tears.

"Look up, Mary," he said.

She raised her eyes, though she found it hard to look into his.

"Now look what lies before you. How do you hesitate?"

She knew she had no answer. She reached out and touched the goat. She felt her hands grow strong. She rubbed the injured leg, and felt the skin heal beneath her palm. The nanny bleated once and stood, nearly knocking her over. The kid rushed under its legs and began to nurse. Miriam had a sudden vision of the mother and child of the night before. She sighed. Despite her mother's words, it felt right.

"It is a wondrous thing, Mary." Gabriel smiled and stood. He offered his hand, and she took it, rising to stand beside him. He towered over her.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" she asked. "I'm not Greek."

"So you will get used to it," he said. "Your people will call you many things, but 'Mary' most of all. Holy Mary. God's Handmaiden. Queen of the Jews."

She laughed and shook her head.

"Queen? Midwife, maybe."

"That, too," he said. "They will all be your children. Do you doubt?"

She looked at the goat, stroked its smooth head. It pushed against her, butting gently.

"When?" she asked. "I will be a woman soon. I will have a husband and children. My own children. And we will have fields and goats and a home in Nazareth. How will the people call me 'Queen' then?"

"There will be a sign."

"There was a sign last night. My mother and sister ignored it. Another here today, with no one to see."

"Miracles need no witness, Mary."

"I will be Queen of the Goats."

"Mary." He touched her head with his wide hand. She stilled.

"These were signs for you, to strengthen your own heart," he said. "For your people there will be another sign. When you have come to your womanhood. And that will be soon enough."

"Yes, Master," she said quietly.

The touch lifted.

"Miriam." Shmuel's cry broke the air. She looked up, and Gabriel was gone. Instead, her brother came stumbling down the steep side of the gully, kicking dirt and stones before him.

"You found them," he said. His voice was surly, almost accusation.

"Yes," she said. "I heard jackals and came."

"They're all right?" He inspected the nanny and kid closely.

"Yes."

"Troublemaker, this one." He cuffed the nanny lightly on the head. "She wanders. As though God Himself had watch over her." He turned suddenly, frowning.

"Who was it you were talking to?" he asked.

“What?” Miriam looked down. Shmuel was thirteen now. He had been bar mitzvahed last month and, with sudden manhood, had taken to treating her like a child. She was but twelve, and not yet a woman. She had learned to look down, as she would to her father.

“I heard you talking,” he said. “Who was it?”

And she remembered Gabriel’s promise. She raised her head, queenly.

“The Angel Gabriel,” she told him. “He speaks to me.”

Shmuel cuffed her cheek, as he had the goat. “Troublemaker. Watch whom you speak to out here. Have you got my dinner?”

Miriam hesitated, and the moment passed. Without thinking, she dropped her eyes.

“I left it in the field,” she said. “When I heard the jackals.”

“Pray they haven’t found it,” he said. “I’m hungry.” He grabbed a horn and pulled the goat toward the mouth of the gully. After a few steps, she went on her own, the kid prancing after. Shmuel followed them out. Miriam had to run to catch up.

“Where’s Father?” she asked.

“In town,” Shmuel replied. “With the rabbi. Our father is a holy man.” He said it nodding, a callow statement that he approved their father’s infatuation with the Law.

“Yes,” Miriam said simply. She knew her mother’s mind on the subject. Shimeon spent many of his days arguing among the group that sat with the rabbi in the square.

They found the basket where she had let it fall, and Shmuel took his share. Then Miriam went back to Nazareth to find her father.

She heard him first, pronouncing some truth in his high voice. Then she saw him, standing beside the rabbi, finger raised, narrow jaw thrust out. Several men interrupted him, and his speech became an argument. She hesitated in the shadow of the narrow street, afraid to break in. Then the rabbi raised his hands, and the men quieted.

“To kill a scorpion,” he said, “you must first catch it. That is hunting. Hunting on the Sabbath is forbidden.”

“You could cover it with a pot,” one man grumbled.

“That is catching it,” Shimeon stated, before the rabbi could open his mouth. “Catching is hunting, and hunting is forbidden.”

The argument surged.

Miriam listened with growing impatience. Next they would invite the scorpion to dinner. For a moment she wished she were Gabriel and could walk into the group to tell them what God really intended. And suddenly she stepped into the sunlight and walked toward them.

Gabriel, no, she thought. But her feet carried her forward. Her fingers burned.

The rabbi noticed her first. “Shimeon,” he said loudly. The talkers ceased. “Here is your daughter, is it not?”

Shimeon turned, mouth caught open. He blinked at Miriam. “Why, yes,” he said. “My daughter.”

“She has brought your dinner, I would guess.” The rabbi gestured to her. “Come. Young Miriam, is it?”

She stepped forward. “Yes, Rabbi.” Her tongue felt thick. She took a deep breath. And found herself speaking.

“Rabbi,” she said, “it’s true that hunting is forbidden, but a scorpion is not game. Would you sleep with an adder or lie down with lions because they entered your house on the Sabbath? That would be suicide, and suicide is forbidden on any day.”

She stopped. The men around her stared, but she didn’t see them. Her own words amazed her. She would have thought someone else spoke them, but for the dryness in her throat. Then she noticed her father. His mouth worked. His heavy brow rose and fell in a mix of anger and embarrassment. She felt blood rush to her face. She wanted to run away.

But the rabbi laughed. “So you’d have us sweep the beast out the door,” he said.

She flushed again. And her father finally found his voice.

“But,” he stammered, “but that would be housework.”

“When it comes to housework,” the rabbi said dryly, “our wives and daughters usually know how best to read the Law. Give your father his dinner, child. He needs to regain his strength.”

The eloquence had left her. Miriam thrust the basket into Shimeon’s hands, mumbled something polite to the rabbi, and hurried away. Sudden laughter followed her from the square.

No more signs, she said to the shadows in the alley. *No more signs, Gabriel*. But beneath her confusion, she felt anger. Her words had been right. And she wanted them to listen to her.

There were no more signs. The dry season came; the grain ripened in the fields. They slaughtered the kid she had saved, and ate the meat on Rosh Hashanah. Shimeon spent more and more of his time in the square. Her mother birthed the neighbor’s children and kept the house.

And Miriam outgrew her old robe and donned one passed down from her sister. Her voice took on a softer note. And one night near spring, as she lay awake in their dark room, listening to her father snore and wondering at the new tenderness in her breasts, she felt dampness between her legs and knew she had become a woman.

She rose quietly, cleaned herself, and found the cloths her mother had given her months before. And as she lay back to sleep, she felt familiar warmth spread up her fingers and through her hands and into her whole body. She remembered Gabriel’s words in the narrow ravine, felt the power revealed in his voice.

The sign would come, as he said. She shivered, imagining fire and flood and the voice of the Lord echoing over the alleys of Nazareth. She imagined facing the men in the square, with Gabriel beside her. She imagined them listening, all laughter lost in the strength flowing from her

hands. She felt exhilaration, and not a little fear. She lay awake with these thoughts till dawn lit the narrow doorway.

But Gabriel did not come that day, nor the next. And her mother, wise in these things, took a single look at her that morning and laughed.

“Well, Shimeon,” she said. “You must find a husband for our daughter.”

Shimeon looked up from his breakfast and blinked at Hanani in confusion.

“What?” he said. “A husband? Our Miriam?” He looked at her, squinting in the dim light.

Miriam blushed and looked down. She felt her breasts pushing against the coarse cloth of her robe, felt the soft cloths pressing between her thighs. Felt most of all the eyes of her family pressing against her. At that moment her visions of power left her.

Hanani came over and took her daughter’s hand in her large hands. She kissed Miriam’s forehead.

“Our daughter is a woman now, Shimeon. It’s time she had a husband.”

Shimeon rubbed his hand along his narrow jaw.

“Well,” he said. “A husband. The Lord be praised. I’ll talk to the rabbi. I’m sure he can suggest a proper young man.”

“Yes,” Hanani said, laughing, “talk to your rabbi. And I will talk to the mothers in this town. We will find a good man for you, Daughter.”

“At least she’s pretty,” said Brother Shmuel. “We won’t need so large a dowry.”

“Shmuel!” Hanani spun around and glared at him. “Miriam will have a proper dowry. No daughter of mine will go begging for a man.”

“Now, Hanani,” Shimeon said, raising his open hand like the rabbi, “I’m sure he meant it as a compliment. Yes, Son? Come now, the planting.” He rose and gestured Shmuel to the door.

“Respect your sister,” he said. “When you go seeking a wife of your own, you’ll understand.”

The two men left. Hanani turned back to Miriam and took her shoulders.

“I have silver from my work, Daughter, and your father will happily part with some goats and grain. Pay no attention to Shmuel’s teasing.”

But Miriam had no thoughts for Shmuel’s words, or for her father’s goats. *Husband* echoed in her ears. A husband, a family – a life away from the small house she had known since birth. A new home. She tried to imagine the man her father would find. And saw instead Gabriel’s fine face, haloed with gold. Suddenly there were two paths before her, and she wished to follow both. She felt tears start in her eyes.

Hanani saw them and misunderstood. She drew Miriam close, pressed her daughter’s face into her warm breast.

“Ah, my daughter,” she said softly, “husbands aren’t so awful. Your father is a good man and will find you another good man. In time you will even love him.”

Miriam shook her head and cried into the folds of her mother's robes.

* * *

Her period passed, and still Gabriel did not come to her. Nor did her father find a husband.

"These things take time," he muttered when Hanani pressed him.

Miriam found herself waiting with mixed hope and dread each evening when he came home. At night she had dreams of men – men loving her, men bowing as she walked among them – the dreams flashed from one scene to the other, following the confusion of her desire.

Finally she went off by herself one day, to question the two faces of Miriam that lived inside her.

Nazareth seemed empty. It was near Passover, and all who could afford to leave were on the road to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast there. The groups of people she passed spoke Aramaic and Greek. Those few who spoke Hebrew were poor or lame or could not leave their work in the fields. She had gone herself with her family on other years. More often they stayed in Nazareth.

She went out of the village, past the caves where the artisans had their workshops, to the orchards on the hillsides overlooking the town. She walked into the bright green shade of the pomegranates. Early blossoms dotted the ends of the branches with scarlet. A light breeze shifted the leaves, making the ground sparkle. She stopped by a trio of narrow trunks and rested her hand on the rough bark. She felt the warm strength pulse in her palm, living strength that was part hers and part tree.

"Gabriel," she called softly. There was no answer. A single bee hummed above her among the branches.

"Gabriel," she called again. "I am a woman now." The breeze blew along her cheek. She called a third time. "Gabriel, I am afraid." And he was there beside her.

She turned to him, and was surprised. He seemed smaller, his eyes only slightly above her own.

Have I grown so much? she thought.

"You have," he said. "In spirit, you have grown."

"I don't feel it," she said. But she realized that she did feel it, the strength that grew in her daily.

"You see?" he said. "You are a woman now, and more."

She considered that, running her hand along the wiry trunk.

"What happens now?" she asked finally.

"For one thing, your father will soon find you a husband." He smiled at her, almost a grin.

"But—" A husband! She felt even more confused. "But what of the sign? I thought—"

"That you could not be both wife and queen?" The smile changed. He was a father, schooling a slow child. "Abraham had a wife. David had a queen. You must have a husband."

“And children?” It seemed too much to ask.

Gabriel’s smile changed again. Miriam shrank back.

“That most of all,” he said.

He took her hand and led her deeper into the orchard, passing from shadow to shadow like a vision. The shifting light caught in his beard and held her eyes.

“The sign, Mary, will be a child,” he told her. “Your child. The child you will bear this winter.”

She glanced up at his face, startled.

“But I am not even betrothed,” she said. “This winter is too soon.”

“This will not be your husband’s son,” Gabriel said, “although he will raise him as a son. This will be the Lord’s son. And your son.”

“A son.” She felt a sudden pride. To have the luck of a first son. But it passed quickly. “I don’t understand,” she said. “How will I bear the Lord’s son?”

Gabriel laughed softly. “As you would bear any child,” he said.

“But how . . .” She blushed.

“How will you beget this child?” Gabriel turned her toward him. He was serious now. “That will be different, I’m afraid. But it will be done. And it will be today.”

She stared up at his handsome face, suddenly afraid. Afraid of him, afraid of the future he offered. Most afraid most of the act he seemed to propose. In all her dreams, in the years since he had first appeared to her, Gabriel had never been her lover.

“Why me?” Before, she had merely accepted. Now she must ask.

“You must be a virgin,” he said, “or the sign will be ignored.”

“No one will believe I am a virgin when I am pregnant.”

“There will be other signs. And I will tell them. They will believe me.”

“But why me?” She strained at the idea, tried to make him understand her fear. This was personal. This was her soul. No one else’s. But Gabriel only shrugged. “You are here; you are a virgin. The people need a messiah. And the Lord wills it.”

All her doubts came to a head. It was not enough that the Lord willed it. “What kind of messiah can I be?” she said. “The people need a leader—like Abraham, or David.”

“No,” he said. He shook his head, and light danced in his hair. “The people have had their statesman and their general. Now they need a healer. Most of all, a mother.” He squeezed her hand. His dark eyes held her. “You are the one,” he told her. “Believe it.”

Then he took both her hands and held them tightly. He closed his eyes and was transformed: taller, older, his face lined with frowning grace. He opened his eyes again, regarded her with distant concern. And seemed to approve. The lines eased. Almost, he smiled. Then he bent and kissed her forehead.

Miriam gasped at the touch. A wave of feeling lifted her, spreading from the touch of his lips throughout her body, then centering to pulse below her belly. She sagged against his hands. Another surge, and she went to her knees, sighing. Dimly, she felt the wind touch her cheeks, her neck, her clenched hands.

Then she was alone, kneeling in a pool of shadow beneath the flower-spotted canopy of an ancient, drooping pomegranate. She rested, feeling her breath settle as the pulsing in her loins eased to a smooth glow. She lifted her hands to her belly and closed her eyes, feeling . . . what? Nothing she could name. Something that she recognized as life.

Then a voice brought her eyes open in surprise.

“Are you all right?”

A young man knelt beside her. He stared searchingly at her face, heavy brows drawn with worry.

Miriam felt blood rush to her cheeks. She looked away, covered her mouth with her hand. For a moment she felt caught. Had he seen?

“You cried out,” he said. “Did you faint?”

She looked back. His face showed nothing more than honest concern.

“Yes,” she said. “I mean, no. I fell, I think.”

“Are you hurt?” He had a sweet voice. She wondered if he was a cantor. But she noticed his plain, worn robe. Perhaps this was his orchard.

“No,” she told him. “I am well, thank you.”

He stood and offered his hand.

“Let me help you.”

She hesitated for a moment, for they were strangers. But she looked again at his honest face and took his hand. He lifted her easily.

He was tall. *As tall as Gabriel*, she thought. But his hair and beard were dark and coarse, like her father’s. And dusted with bits of wood that caught the scattered light.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, letting go his hand. She looked down again. “I must go home now.”

“Do you live in Nazareth?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied, knowing as he asked that he wanted her to stay longer. And she added, “I am Miriam, daughter of Shimeon and Hanani.” Then she turned and hurried down the lane of trees. He did not follow, but she felt him watching until she turned toward the sunlit road and the trees came between them.

Some days after the feast of Passover, Shimeon hurried into their house in the evening. He was smiling broadly and holding his head much higher than usual. He said nothing as he took his place on the rug before the dinner bowl, but he watched Hanani and Miriam with quick, happy

eyes. Hanani brought the towels and washed his feet, and as she started to rise, he put his hand on her shoulder and bade her stay.

“I have news,” he proclaimed. Hanani sat quietly, letting him have his moment. He smiled hugely at Miriam and then winked at Shmuel.

“I have found our Miriam a husband.”

“Husband!” Hanani cried, and it was both an echo and praise for Shimeon.

He laughed out loud. “See, see,” he said. “These things take time, but the Lord’s will is always done. Eh, Daughter, what do you say?”

Miriam’s ears rang. She opened her mouth, but no words came. Instead, tears filled her eyes. Her heart soared. Shimeon laughed again.

“Speechless for once. My, my. Come here now.”

She went to him and knelt, and he embraced her. Then Hanani and even Shmuel took her in their arms, smiling.

“Well, who is he?” Hanani finally asked, drying her eyes on the towel. “Who is this young man?”

“His name is Joseph,” Shimeon said. “His father is Jacob, of Bethlehem in Judea.”

“A Judean?” Hanani asked.

“From Nazareth now,” Shimeon assured her. “They came here when the boy was a lad.”

“But what does he do?” Hanani asked. Her smile had faded.

“Well, he is a carpenter,” Shimeon said, nervously smiling at the corners of the room. “He has a shop near the orchards.”

“A carpenter?” Hanani cried. “You have married our daughter to a carpenter? A Judean carpenter?”

“So he is an artisan,” Shimeon said. “He is from Nazareth now. He is a good man.”

“Is this one of your rabbi’s choices?”

“No!” Shimeon said, almost yelling. His pride had quickly turned to anger. “He came to me himself, asking after our daughter.” He waved his hand in front of Hanani. “He is a good man,” he repeated. “I have chosen him. It is done.”

He sat in stony silence, while the rest of them watched, amazed at his outburst. Finally he looked back at Hanani and shrugged.

“He is a good man,” he said, gently this time. He turned to Miriam. “He will come soon with his best man to say the vow. You will be betrothed tonight, my daughter.”

“Tonight?” Hanani cried. “God above, Shimeon, not tonight?”

“Well, of course, tonight,” he said, blinking. “Why not tonight?”

“You crazy man,” she said, scrambling to her feet. “What am I to feed them? We have no meat, no new wine.”

“What is wrong with this?” he said, gesturing to the bowl of porridge before him. “It’s not a feast.”

“It is our daughter’s betrothal, and I will not shame her before her groom.”

“She will not be ashamed,” he said.

But Hanani took the bowl from the floor and carried it back to the hearth. She added more barley and began to slice cucumbers and leeks.

“Shmuel,” she said. “Take a coin from my pouch. Go find some lamb. Quickly. And figs. Buy some figs. Miriam, get fresh water for the wine.” She threw some sticks on the fire, muttering.

Shmuel knew better than to question that tone in her voice. He went quickly, and Miriam followed with her ewer. Shimeon sat bewildered on the rug. She stopped in the doorway and returned to kneel before him.

“Thank you, Father,” she said. “I am honored.”

Then she rushed out and down the alley toward the well.

She hurried back as fast as she could, splashing water on the ground and herself. But when she reached the doorway, she heard strange voices inside. She stopped, suddenly afraid. She was breathless from her run, still sweating, and wet on one side from the water she had spilled. She wiped her face with a wet hand and tried to brush her hair into some order. She stilled her breathing.

Then she heard a voice she knew, a sweet, clear voice, and her breathing rushed anew. She walked into the house. Her mother was still cooking, her back toward the door. Shimeon and Shmuel sat on the rug, facing two men. Who turned as she entered. One was a stranger. But the other held her eyes. And smiled.

He rose quickly and took a step toward her. Then stopped awkwardly, hands loose at his sides. Then his friend rose, and her father and Shmuel. Hanani turned from the hearth.

“Miriam,” Shimeon said, “this is Joseph, your husband.”

“Yes,” she said, then realized that she should say something more. But all she could think of was: “You remembered me.”

“Yes,” he said. “And found you.”

“What?” Shimeon said. “You’ve met before?”

“Just once,” Joseph said. “Walking in the orchard.”

Suddenly Miriam was aware of her father and mother and brother, looking back and forth between her and Joseph.

“Welcome,” she said, to break the silence. Then, lifting the jug of water, “Excuse me, I . . .”

“Of course, of course,” Shimeon said. “Help your mother now.” And he flurried around the two young men, seating them again on the rug and chatting aimlessly about weather, the recent Seder, and finally, his favorite subject, the Law.

Miriam carried the water to the hearth. Her mother handed her a small pitcher half filled with wine. “Be careful,” she said softly. “This is what there is.”

Miriam poured in a generous helping of water and carried the pitcher to her father. He held up his cup, and she poured a small amount.

“Be generous, Daughter,” he chided. “We are celebrating.”

So she poured more, then filled the cups of Joseph and his friend and Shmuel.

Hanani pulled the lamb from the fire and set it on plates before the men. Miriam took the bowl of porridge, thickened now with vegetables and spiced with garlic, and set it on the floor before them. Then she and Hanani stood back.

Joseph rose again, with his friend, who smiled.

“I am Amos, Levi’s son,” the friend told her.

Shimeon laughed self-consciously and stood. “Forgive me,” he said. “In my joy, I have forgotten my manners. Shmuel, get up.”

They stood in a small circle around Joseph and Miriam. Joseph reached into his robe and brought forth a cluster of freshly picked scarlet flowers. They were from a pomegranate. He handed them to her, then held both her hands in his own. They were calloused and large and surrounded hers so that only the flowers showed.

Then he said simply in his clear voice, “She is my wife, and I her husband, from today and forever.”

Shimeon laughed and hugged them both as they stood there. Amos took her hand and bowed to her, while Shmuel and Joseph called each other Brother.

Then the men returned to the rugs and began to eat.

Shimeon quickly called for more wine, and Miriam poured what there was. She looked at her mother, who only frowned and shrugged. The meal continued, and then Joseph raised his cup, smiling into her eyes.

Miriam went to get the pitcher. She poured in what was left from the jug of wine, but it was less than a cupful. She filled the pitcher with water. But she couldn’t bring herself to return to the men. To pour plain water for her husband. She felt angry at her father, for giving no warning. But then she remembered his joy that day, his happy confusion, and forgave him.

And she felt the warmth growing in her hands as she held the pitcher. She felt strength flowing through her fingers. Her palms tingled.

The pitcher was filled with wine.

She smiled then, and tears came to her eyes. She thanked God for this gift – both gifts, husband and wine – and turned back to the room. Her mother watched, amazed, as she filled everyone’s cup. And Shimeon chided her again.

“Well, Daughter, more care. You’ll have us all drunk.” He raised his glass in toast to his new son-in-law.

* * *

And so began the year of their betrothal.

Although Miriam would not move to Joseph’s house until their marriage, a year away, she went as often as she could to see him. Usually her mother went with her, or Rachael. Often she took him food or some small gift of her making, and he would carve her whimsical shapes from scraps of cedar and olive wood. They would eat the midday meal together in the shaded doorway of his shop, or in the orchard nearby. They talked of small things, or of nothing, and she was happy.

But in the third month of their betrothal, she awoke one morning and felt the child move inside her. A flutter, like a moth held against the cheek. The quickening of life. She lay still and thought of the strange fate thrust upon her. A fate she had accepted gladly enough when she realized she would share it with Joseph. If he, too, could accept it.

That day she went to him alone. She waited quietly outside on the dusty road while he finished dealing with a customer. Then she stepped inside. The room was cool and scented with the pitch of a dozen woods. Shavings rustled under her feet. Joseph looked up from his bench and smiled. He showed her two silver talents, freshly stamped with the face of the emperor.

“Payment in advance,” he said, “and from a tax collector. The Lord does have a sense of humor.”

“Sometimes,” she agreed.

He put the coins in his pouch and turned back to her.

“You’re early,” he said. “And alone?”

She nodded.

“Well,” he said. “The Lord smiles on me twice in one morning.”

He came to her and took her hands, then hugged her gently. She returned the embrace, and held him when he would have stopped. He laughed and brushed her hair with his lips.

“It will be a long year,” he said, not for the first time.

Then she let him go. She stepped back and looked up at his face. She opened her mouth, to tell him what else the Lord had done for them. But his smile stopped her words. She turned away, uncertain now. Gabriel had promised her a husband, but had not named him. Joseph was the man she wanted.

He sensed her mood, watching gravely as she wandered deeper into the shop, touching his bench, his tools, everything but the man himself. Once, he opened his mouth, ready to speak, it seemed. But he shook his head and went to sit by his bench, waiting. His eyes held the same honest concern she had first seen. She began a silent prayer to Gabriel, then stopped, thinking, *This is my husband, and my child. I must tell him myself.*

So finally she turned to him and said, "Joseph, I am going to have a child." And watched his eyes cloud with confusion and disbelief.

"I don't understand," he said. "Have a child? But we're betrothed."

"Yes, we are betrothed, and I am honored to call you Husband. I want very much to be your wife. But I am also with child."

He stared at her, unmoving, hardly seeming to breathe. Only his eyes showed the trouble in his heart.

"Whose is it?" he asked. His voice was strained and low.

Then Miriam hesitated again. How to tell him this? How to say, *I am the Messiah*, without sounding the fool and troubling his belief even further?

"Mine," she said. "Mine and the Lord's. No man had a part in this, Joseph. I am a virgin, believe me. This is a holy child."

"You are still a virgin?"

"Yes."

"And you are my wife. And you are with child." Finally he moved, raising his open hand as if to shrug. But his fists clenched and his face twisted. He stood suddenly and turned aside.

"How can I believe this?" he said. "A virgin with child? The Lord's child? I want a wife, Miriam, not a bastard wrapped in old prophecies. Next you'll claim you bear the Messiah."

She lowered her eyes before his anger.

"No," she said, "he is not the Messiah." She raised her eyes again, suddenly calm. "And he is not a bastard. I will bear him this winter, and my husband will help me to raise him and will love him like a son. I was promised this, and I believe it."

He turned his head toward her, and she saw the anger drain from his eyes. But what it left was cold and hollow. He looked down at his bench, lifted a mallet in his rough hands, unseeing.

"This winter," he said. "We wouldn't be married till next spring." He tapped the mallet lightly on the thick bench. His shoulders sagged. "How can you ask this of me, Miriam? To love this child? To watch you swell and freshen with another man's seed?"

"No man, Joseph. I swear. I will be your wife, completely."

He looked at her again. Then he let the mallet fall and turned away.

"No. I will send Amos to your father. I—"

He covered his mouth with his hand and closed his eyes. Miriam took one step toward him, hand raised to touch him. But he turned his back to her.

“No,” he said. “Leave me. I will send to your father. Let it go at that. Now leave me.”

Her hands were hot; strength pulsed in her fingertips. But she did not know how to touch him. She hugged herself instead and tried desperately to hold the calm around her. She left before it broke and let tears flood through.

She spent the day behind a wall of grief. People spoke to her, and she did not hear. Her mother handed her a broom, and she did not feel. At dinner she spilled wine on her father. She burned her hand on the hearth. Her family watched her strangely, but her silence drew silence from them. She would not be approached.

And that night she dreamed. She lay on a bed of straw, while her belly grew and twitched from the child inside. Her mother stood beside her, and Rachael, and they drew her up on a birthing stool and rubbed her swelling body, chanting. Then her belly clenched three times, and the child came forth into her mother’s hands. Who kissed it and handed it to her.

It had Gabriel’s face. And it reached out a tiny hand and said, “Go to your husband now. Go to Joseph.”

And it lowered its head to her breast and sucked.

She awoke in the early dawn. The rest of her family still slept in the gray light that drifted in through the narrow doorway. She rose without waking them, donned her robes, and left. The alleyway was empty, the air still cool. The sky was clear. She felt calm again.

She went quietly through the streets to Joseph’s house, but he was not there; nor was he in the workshop beside it. She stood a moment in the doorway, watching the shadows shorten beneath the growing sun. Then she knew.

She went to the orchard, into the cool shade of the pomegranates. She found him there, walking slowly among the ancient trees. They hung with unripe fruit now, small and green in clusters at the ends of the branches. A few late blossoms caught the early light like promises yet unfulfilled.

He saw her coming and stopped, watching as she drew near. She went up to him and looked into his eyes. They were filled with dark light.

“There was much you didn’t tell me yesterday,” he said. “About this child. About you.”

“Would you have believed?”

He considered, and shook his head.

“No.” He ran a hand through his hair, looked around at the orchard as though surprised he was there. “An angel came to me last night, Mary. Miriam, I mean. An angel.” He shook his head, this time in wonder. “I still don’t know what to believe.”

“What did he tell you?”

He looked at her strangely.

“Who you are,” he said. “And why this child must be.” He took her hand. “I wanted a wife, and children, that’s all. I wanted you. Yesterday I thought I had lost you. Today I have you again. But so much more.”

“Too much?” she asked. Her heart sang with hope.

He lifted her hand and kissed it. “No,” he said. “I pray not.”

She laughed and threw her arms around him, then spun away, flushed with happiness. He laughed, too, lowly at first, but then aloud in his clear, fine voice.

She reached up and touched his cheek. Then, impulsively, reached behind him and pulled a hard, smooth fruit from the tree. She held it out, and it ripened in her hand, now swollen and red-gold in her palm. She gave it to him. He took it slowly and held it, looking back and forth to her and the ripened fruit in wonder.

* * *

They told her family that day, but they told them no more than the fact that she was with child. Her father wrung his hands, speechless. Shmuel frowned with the intensity of youth. Her mother covered her eyes and turned away. Then Joseph offered to take Miriam quietly into his house that day, and her father blustered with relief, insisting there was no hurry, that these things happened, that the forms be followed.

But her mother was more practical. Two weeks later, Joseph prepared a wedding feast, smaller perhaps than he might have, and not the customary six days, but joyful nonetheless. Shimeon presented the full dowry and ate heartily. The rabbi couldn’t bless the marriage until their year was done, but Miriam moved into Joseph’s house and became his wife.

The first days were simple and happy. But people talk, even good people, and such small scandals seem for a time more outrageous than the adulteries of the Romans. It had never occurred to Joseph that his neighbors would consider the child his – or wonder if it was not. The friendliest rumors came with a wink, and a comment on his prowess.

Once, in a dark moment, he told Amos the truth. But Amos made it a joke.

“The mudslingers are just jealous of her earthly charms,” he said, “though she’s certainly pretty enough to be an angel. Take pride in your good taste, and her willingness.”

And Miriam spoke to her mother, but Hanani would not listen.

“Don’t talk to me of miracles,” she said. “I hear enough from your father. He sees the Messiah in every hot-mouthed youth who dares insult the Romans.”

It was well that Joseph’s parents were dead, for that would have been another burden. Instead, she and he lived alone and found comfort in each other. And Miriam found something else, a strength and calm she hadn’t known, flowing from the warmth of her hands. She worked

no miracles, but she rubbed the knots from Joseph's back and smoothed his brow with her kisses, and that was enough.

In his turn, Joseph treated her with respect, talking now not just of little things, but also bigger matters, of business and politics and even Law. He heard her out, deferred to her opinions. There was something of awe in his manner, and she liked it. She had more respect for herself. She realized that she could indeed be the queen that Gabriel described.

But as her belly grew, so did the rumors, until it took all her strength and calm to walk to the well in the morning. Joseph had it easier, for it was accepted by then that the child was his. And adultery was a woman's sin. So other women often greeted her with smug smiles, patted her belly without leave, and made comments on how fast she seemed to blossom.

One day she lost her calm and poured a jug of water over one old crone. Then she laughed so hard she became dizzy. After that, many women avoided her. They wanted shame and contrition from her, not calm and defiance. She longed for the birth, when Gabriel would appear and remove the stain from her and the child.

When the news came of the census, she was relieved. Joseph was ordered to Bethlehem, to the city of his birth. She was in her ninth month, and it was the rainy season, but the decree took them from Nazareth to a place where they were not known and could have the child in peace. Hanani was loud in her condemnation of the emperor, for she wanted to birth the child, and Miriam felt a brief disquiet when they parted, but her happiness grew as they left Nazareth behind.

* * *

They were five days to Jerusalem, through Nain and Shunem and Jezreel, around the foot of Gilboa and south down the valley of the Jordan River. At Jericho they turned west and climbed out of the river valley and into the hills of Judea. The way became rougher, the ground drier and stony and brown. But it was not too cold, and did not rain, and she rode on the borrowed donkey whenever the path was too steep.

The road was crowded with travelers, and they joined a small group of pilgrims, as much for protection as company. As they entered Bethany, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, at the end of the fourth day, a crowd came out of the town to a field below the road. In their center they pushed and dragged a small figure in black, who cowered from their hands and words.

"What is this?" Joseph asked a fellow traveler.

The man shrugged. "Looks like they're punishing someone," he said. He went down into the field to the edge of the crowd, then hurried back. His face was set.

"They're stoning a woman," he said, and even then they heard a shrill cry and saw the first stone strike her on the back. "For adultery."

Joseph and Miriam looked at each other and turned away. And Miriam felt the child stir in her belly, and thought, *I will end this. When I am queen.*

She saw other things she would end. Before the gate of Jerusalem, the road was flanked by crosses holding the rotting bodies of criminals and rebels. Lepers stood beneath them, necks hung with bells, begging. A would-be prophet shouted prayers and curses from the hillside. Squads of Roman soldiers strode through the crowded streets, pushing aside old men and women who could not scurry out of their way. But the stoning affected her the most. It could have been her own fate had Joseph not loved her.

Never again, she thought. Gentle strength pulsed in her hands, waiting to be called.

They pushed their way through Jerusalem and out the other side, and another day brought them to Bethlehem.

The town was crowded. Caravans passed through daily, to and from Hebron, and many stopped to provision there before pressing southward. Joseph had no near relatives he could call on, so they went from inn to inn, seeking room. It was past dark before an innkeeper's wife took pity on them and offered them space in the stable.

The place was clean, surprisingly, and the wife brought them blankets and a lantern and a small meal. They made a bed in the straw and lay down to sleep.

"I'm sorry," Joseph said as he cradled her head in his arm. "You should have better."

"At least we can afford it," she replied.

He laughed softly. "The old prophets will roll in their graves when our child is born," he said. "The Messiah they foretold would bring down fire on the town and raise a bed of gold from the ashes."

"They foretold a messiah for their own times. I am for this time."

She kissed him then and settled to sleep. But she thought over his words, and remembered he had said *our* child.

Early the next morning, Miriam went into labor. Joseph would have rushed out to find a midwife, but she bade him wait. She knew the first part of the labor could last many hours. She was able to eat and drink between contractions, and walked out on the street for a while. Joseph fretted around her, and finally set about making a bed for the child from a manger in the stall.

That evening she felt the change in her labor, and asked for a midwife. When the woman arrived, a sturdy matron who reminded Miriam a little of Hanani, she told them of the star.

"Go out and see," the midwife said. "Go on: the walk will only help you. Brighter than the moon, it is, and right over the town. The priests are reading their books tonight, I tell you."

So they went out, and there it was, casting shadows in the twilight streets, burning blue-white above them. Joseph held her by the shoulders, his body stiff with awe.

"Did Gabriel mention this?" he asked.

“No,” she said, “but he promised there would be signs.”

He shivered then, though the night was dry and still. She held his hand and knew the past six months were just now becoming real for him.

It was not a hard labor. She had helped with worse and with better and knew what to expect. The midwife was skilled in her trade and made it easier where she could. Only the starlight shining in through the open door made the birth seem strange.

But as she pushed the child from her, the warmth in her hands spread throughout her body. She gasped, not from pain, but from the surge of spirit. Then she reached down and pulled the child to her chest, cord draped along her belly and into her body. It was a boy, and very much alive. More than a sign, he was her child. She held him to her till the afterbirth slipped from her and the midwife insisted.

So the woman took the child and cut the cord. Then she rubbed his body with salt and oil to harden his muscles, and swaddled him in clothes given by Rachael in Nazareth in what seemed a former life.

Miriam lay back on the straw and watched, and music played in her ears. Joseph came to stand by her, not touching, as the Law demanded, but still close and warm. He frowned once and looked around, as if he heard something, too, and she smiled, knowing that the music sang in the starlight throughout the land.

Then the midwife gave her the child. It sucked briefly and fell asleep at her breast. Joseph paid the woman in silver – Miriam insisted – and they were alone.

He sat by her in the straw, staring at the child with a faint smile. Then he frowned again and cocked his head.

“Do you hear?” he asked her.

She nodded.

“So it begins.” He sighed and touched the child on the cheek.

“Are you sorry?” she asked.

He considered. “No,” he said finally. “I am afraid.” He touched the boy again. “All I wanted was a wife and a child.”

Once again she could not touch him when he needed to feel the strength in her.

“You have them both,” she told him. “We will not leave you.”

He found a smile for her. “I pray for that every day.”

Then they heard a commotion in the yard, men’s voices, and the innkeeper’s wife answering them. Joseph rose and started for the door, but the woman rushed in, flustered.

“Shepherds!” she fumed. “A whole flock of them, asking to see the child. Who are they? Should I let them in?”

Joseph looked at Miriam in dismay. “So soon?” he asked. “The child is barely born.”

Miriam was calm, knowing this would have come sooner or later.

“Let them in,” she said. “They must see to believe.”

The wife looked from one to the other, bewildered.

“Let them come in,” Joseph told her.

She went out, muttering.

And as she left, Gabriel appeared before them. He was robed in silver, and the starlight limned his hair and beard. Joseph stepped back in awe, but Gabriel smiled slightly and seemed less godly. He stepped forward and knelt by Miriam. He touched the child. A frown crossed his face. He looked at Miriam, and she felt suddenly cold.

“Was there much pain?” he asked. She heard the meaning in his voice. These were not the words he had to say.

“No,” she said, wondering what made him hesitate, he who had known her very thoughts.

“That, at least, went well,” he said. He looked back down at the sleeping child and sighed.

“This was not foreseen, Mary.”

“What?”

But then the shepherds came in, and Gabriel was behind her, arms raised, shining.

“Is this he?” one asked. “Is this the child who will be King of the Jews?”

“What?” Miriam asked.

Gabriel spoke from behind her, his words echoing in the small place. “It is.”

She tried to rise, to turn to him, but he held her shoulders.

“This is his mother,” he said, “a virgin, for she and her husband are but betrothed.” The shepherds stared at her, murmuring. “And this is the child who will be the Messiah.”

Miriam tried to cry out, but a hand seemed to hold her mouth. She looked to Joseph, desperately, but he stared past her at Gabriel. And in his face there was joy.

Then the child woke and cried, and the shepherds bowed to her and to Joseph and went out, talking among themselves in low voices. Others greeted them in the stable yard, and they spoke with wonder, moving away down the street.

Miriam crouched in the straw, holding the child, staring at the eldritch light from the star, numb. Gabriel came before her again, looking down.

“They would not have the mother,” he said. “They wanted the son. They would hear only of the son.”

She stared at him, hardly hearing. He offered her a final smile, but she looked away.

“This was not foreseen,” he said again, a hint of wonder in his own voice.

Then Miriam became aware of the child crying in her arms. She gave him her breast, and he sucked. And she felt the strength flowing out of her into him. She trembled. Joseph knelt beside her and touched her shoulder, and she did not care that she was unclean and he broke the Law.

“Wife,” he said. “Miriam.”

His eyes were filled with love. And his voice with relief. For a moment she hated him.

But there was another strength in her: her own. And the calm stayed with her. She looked down at the child and saw in him the life that should have been hers. They wanted the son. So be it. But he would first be *her* son. And she would raise him to rule as she would have ruled. There was love in her heart, and he would have the power of that.

But now there was also pain. She felt tears start in her eyes. She looked up at Gabriel, in his robes and fiery beard, and saw that he had become smaller again. Then the tears came, and he was a blur against the starlight.

“Go now,” she told him. “Go, and let me tend to my family.”

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