

# Angels at the Gate

by  
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*But Lot's wife looked back as she was following behind him, and she turned into a pillar of salt.*

—Book of Genesis 19:26

## Part I

### Canaan, 1748 BCE

*In those days, and for some time after, giant Nephilites lived on the earth, for whenever the sons of God had intercourse with women, they gave birth to children who became the heroes and famous warriors of ancient times.*

—Book of Genesis 6:4

## Chapter One

If the path of obedience is the path of wisdom, it is one not well worn by my feet. I am Adira, daughter of the caravan, daughter of the wind, and daughter of the famed merchant, Zakiti. That I am his daughter, not his son, is a secret between my father and myself. This is a fine arrangement, as I prefer the freedoms of being a boy.

At the head of our caravan, my father and I walk together beside our pack donkeys, the late day sun casting stubby shadows before us. Our sandaled feet raise a cloud of dust along the dry path that winds through Canaan's white-and-taupe hills, studded with shrubs and spring flowers. We are taking a gift of sheep to our tribe's elder, along with a portion of our recent purchase of olive oil and wine. I am less than enthusiastic. Father sees this in my face. He reads me well—often, too well.

"You are not happy to see Abram and Sarai?" he says, giving my donkey a pat. "Why not, Adir?" He always uses the masculine form of my name, even when we are alone. He is afraid if he does not, he will forget one day when he is angry or tired.

I shrug. "I am happy to visit with my cousin, Ishmael, but Abram is old and likes to talk."

"He is a wise and learned man," my father says, resting a hand on my shoulder. "You should listen to him."

I should do many things I do not. But a visit to old Abram is not without benefits. His wife, Sarai, produces very fine weavings; one of bright russet covers my head. Also, and more importantly, his second wife, Hagar, makes excellent honey cakes.

I glance at the three strangers, the northmen who joined our caravan less than a moon ago when we traveled through the north hills of Canaan. They, too, are on their way to see Abram, whose herds graze in the valley of Hebron. These northmen tower over everyone. The oldest

man is very thin and wears an odd, peaked hat. The two younger men do not wear hats. One, who walks with a tall staff, has hair and a full beard of a bright copper and eyes as green as the fronds of a date palm, and the other, the more handsome, is golden-haired and clean shaven with eyes the blue of the Galilee deep. At their appearance, rumors darted like hungry fish through the caravan: They are giants; they are Egyptians; they are El's angels. Their donkeys carry an object covered in thick black fur among their possessions. I am curious to speak with them, whoever they are, as I have a skill with languages and a yearning to learn about other peoples, especially mysterious ones, but they have kept to themselves.

The sun knifes through my fine headdress. Inside my robe, the pup wriggles, adjusting his position before settling back for a nap. I stole him from the litter, afraid he would not survive Chiram's pot, having overheard our cook complain about wasting food on the pups when they are weaned. I take a peek when Father is not looking, amused at his tiny gold-brown paws and black nose nestled against my chest. His little eyes have not opened, and he smells of milk. It is fortunate for me my breasts have only begun to swell, though I am fifteen summers. Otherwise, there would be no room for pups or baby geese or any of the creatures I hide there.

Father has told me often enough not to carry animals in my robes. I think he is trying to ease me into the idea that I am no longer a child but, as I have mentioned, I do not excel at obedience. Fortunately, the heat of my body has lulled the pup to sleep. My job with the caravan is to help manage the animals, and I am good at it because I pay attention, a skill I learned at my father's side in negotiations. Father says understanding comes when the right question has been asked.

"What is the right question?" he asked me the first time I went with him to a trade.

I said what came to my mind, certain I was correct. "How much will they pay?"

"No."

The next time I gave greater attention to the process, trying to discover the right question. This time, when he asked me, I said, "The right question is this: What is the price that makes both buyer and seller happy?"

"No. Pay closer attention."

"I did!" I protested.

Father stroked his beard, considering me. "So what did the man from Harran wish to purchase?"

"Salt," I said at once.

"Any salt?"

"No, only the finest. He was very adamant."

"Why?"

I had no answer.

"Find the answer to this question, and you will know the answer to my question."

It took two summers of studying. My father would question what I saw at each trade, what I heard or smelled or felt, and then he would return to the subject of the man from Harran, the man who wanted the finest salt. For two summers, I thought about this man before I went to sleep each night. I went over everything I could remember from the encounter, time after time. Though I would tire of worrying over the problem and try to forget it, the puzzle always returned to plague me.

Finally, I woke abruptly in the middle of the night and knew the answer. That day I studied the negotiations with different eyes, and when my father made me recite all I had observed, he asked, as he always did, "And what is the right question?"

Excited, and fearful I was wrong, I said, “The man from Harran said he wanted the finest salt, but that was not what he truly wanted.”

I had trapped my father’s attention. “And that was?”

My heart drummed. “What he truly wanted was to be seen as a man who knew more than others and who watched out for the interests of his people.”

The slightest of nods. “He wished to be seen as a leader. And how did you decide this?”

“When he spoke, he angled his body to be sure his words carried to the crowd around him. He studied and tasted the salt with large movements, so they could see.”

Now my father gave me the rarest of gifts, a smile of approval. “And so, in negotiations, what is the right question?”

“Not how much we will give or they will pay,” I said carefully, “but what they want.”

“Yes,” my father said.

I felt as if I had climbed the highest mountain in the world and brought my father the prize he desired most. “And you, Father, gave him that by praising his eye for salt in a loud voice!” I laughed. “And he announced he would buy all the salt we had.”

Now I understood why my father made me attend to every nuance. People speak in many ways other than their words—the catch of emotion in their voice, a twitch of cheek, or a brush of hand across the mouth, even the way they position their bodies. Animals also “speak” in these ways if you watch and listen and have a good nose. I will say that for my knotted beak—it can smell.

One of our goats is about to birth her kid, and Father decides to stop for the day. When dusk falls and everyone is busy making camp, I sneak my pup back into the litter to let him suckle. Chiram has already chosen the evening’s fare and has no need to cook puppies tonight. His burly son, Danel, is helping him, so I am relieved of that duty for now.

Nami eyes me reproachfully, knowing one of her pups has been missing. She is new to the caravan and new to motherhood, but I am not sorry I took him. There is no way to be certain when Chiram will decide to be rid of the litter. They crawl blindly over one another to get to her teats. I wish I could save them all, but I am not even sure how I will save the one. Chiram knows every handful of grain, every pomegranate in his stores, and I am sure if he considers these fat pups as a future meal, he knows how many there are.

When my borrowed pup wriggles himself between his siblings, I stroke Nami’s head and tell her what an excellent mother she is. She thumps her plumed tail and licks my hand. She is indeed a beautiful creature, a black hunting dog, prized by the desert people. Standing, she comes to my thigh. Just looking at her is a pleasure—the graceful curve of her, like a cresting wave from her slender hips to her deep chest. My first glimpse of her standing on a hill took my breath. Wind caught the long, silky flow of her ears and the white feathering on the back of her forelegs. She stood like a carving, like a dog of the Egyptian kings, barely deigning to notice the world.

Because of her size, some of the caravan boys feared her when Chiram first brought her into the camp, but I saw a sense of humor in the expressive golden-brown tufts over her eyes and the smiling line to her mouth. We became friends at once, and she followed me around the camp until she had her pups. Then she spent her time as we traveled anxiously pacing beside the donkey that bore them, lifting her slender nose every few moments to check the sack where Chiram had stuffed them.

Chiram ignores her. She belongs to him, but she does not seem to know it. Only two of the many animals of the caravan are truly mine—my aging donkey, Philot, and a brown horse

with black legs. We purchased the horse in a small city north of Harran. Father did so for a trade, but I begged to keep him. He relented, though Chiram grumbled greatly about how useless it was and how it ate food meant for the goats or donkeys. I am not supposed to run the horse, but I love the feel of the wind in my face and the slide of powerful muscles beneath me.

My tasks are easier without worrying about the pup squirming under my robe or crying out in hunger. I see to the goat, but she is not ready after all, and her kid will come another day or most likely in the middle of a night. Once the animals are settled, I turn the spit for the roasting meat, changing positions to avoid the shifting smoke. The moon is a pale shadow in the darkening sky. I unwind my headscarf and pull it around my shoulders.

My father emerges from the tents to put a hand on my shoulder. From the firmness of his grip, I know I am in trouble. "Our tent after the meal."

I nod. "Yes, Father." I can tell by his parting squeeze my attempt at respectful acquiescence has not relieved him of whatever parental burden he carries. I *am* in trouble.

This is not a new condition.

"Adir, you are burning the meat!" Chiram's shout from where he stands outside his tent snatches my attention back to what I am doing—or supposed to be doing. I turn the spit, then my mind wanders again, this time to the puzzle of the tall strangers. Who are they? Where are their lands?

As if I have conjured him, a cloud of smoke parts, revealing the clean-shaven stranger, the one with the gold hair, now more bronze in the firelight. The smoke fills my nostrils. I cough but do not speak, remembering the rumor that El has sent the tall men. What does a god's messenger want with me?

"You are Adir, Zakiti's son?" he asks.

It was the first time he had ventured from the company of the other two. I nod, unable to pull my gaze from the broad forehead and jaw and the hair that gleams in the firelight. How does he know my name? Then I realize he has just heard Chiram shout it, and relief floods me. It is not necessarily a good thing to come to a god's attention. I think of Abram, praying day and night and making sacrifices on his high place. Not a very interesting life, in my opinion.

My glance drifts to the skein of fire. I want to have an interesting life—to see the world and its mysteries, to relish its surprises.

Boldly, I look back up at the northman, all the way up. "What are you called?"

A smile makes his face radiant, and a pulse throbs in my throat.

"I am Raph."

"Raph," I repeat to make sure I have the accent right. "And your companion?"

"Mika."

"Where are your lands?" I ask.

His smile turns wistful. "A simple question, but easy answer no." It is clear his mother tongue is not our language.

He gestures toward the fire, a graceful movement that makes me aware of my awkwardness, despite my father's assurances it is only a matter of my age and height. "Should you . . . circle?" he asks.

Grateful for the warning, I twist the pole that impales the carcass, just in time to save the skin from blackening and avoid another curse from Chiram. Raph moves to the opposite side of the fire to assist. With both of us on either end, the pole turns easily.

"Thank you."

“Nothing to speak.” He changes from kneeling to a more comfortable squat. The smoke starts to follow him but switches directions abruptly. I keep my eye on it, watching to see if it provides evidence of El’s favor on this man, or if he gets smoke in his face like any other.

“Where are your people from?” I ask.

“Ah, this wiser question, Adir,” he says, and I am reminded of the lesson of the salt negotiation and my father’s teaching: Understanding comes when the right question has been asked.

Struggling for the words, Raph says, “Now live they many places, but most in north mountains.”

His phrasing stirs my curiosity. “You imply they come from elsewhere?”

Again, his smile stirs more than my curiosity, and I wonder at my body’s acute reaction on so little information.

“Yes,” he says. “They do.”

At that moment, Chiram strides over to check the meat, and at his aggressive approach, Raph rises in one swift move to his feet. *Warrior*, I realize. That grace belongs to men whose muscles are tuned to obey in the most efficient manner, like the gallop of a horse or the quick turn of a herding dog. I still see no sign of weapons, but I have no doubt he could use them.

Chiram is a large man; a layer of fat covers his muscles, but I have seen him lift with ease a downed ibex onto his shoulders. Still, even the meaty cook comes only to Raph’s chest. Chiram’s hand tightens on the knife he holds. What has riled him? Raph moves only slightly, but his body now edges to Chiram’s. Whether Chiram notices this, I cannot tell, but he seems to lose a bit of his bluster and turns to carve off a slice of meat. “Ready,” he proclaims, and my mouth immediately begins to salivate. I am hungry. I am always hungry.

Raph takes his share and a portion I assume is for his companions and disappears into the night. I eat slowly, not relishing my father’s summons.

*Then the men [angels] got up from their meal and looked out toward Sodom.*

—Book of Genesis 18:10-16

## Chapter Two

When I can avoid it no longer, I go to our tent, a knot in my chest. My father will be right to punish me, as I have disobeyed him, but more than his punishment, I dread facing his disappointment.

I pull aside the hanging and duck through the opening. Our tent is not lavish, but it is home. My section is small, only my blankets and bag of clothing, everything always rolled and ready to pack in the morning. We rarely stay in a camp more than a night.

My father waits beside the small fire that warms the interior, the remains of his own meal beside him in a clay bowl. Trying not to be awkward, I kneel before him on the hard ground, my bottom resting on my heels. I wish to be still, but my fingers, which have their own will, twist the braid of the rug. It is finely made with reds and blues in patterns my trader's eye identifies as a piece from the east Father has acquired.

"Adira," he says, and I catch my breath. My true name! This is indeed serious.

"Father, I am sorry," I whisper.

He frowns. "For what?"

Confused, I meet his eyes and then look away. Why does he make me say it? Is he angry at something else I have done? My mind races through the past few days, and I can bring nothing else to mind, at least nothing he could possibly know of. He can't know about the aloe juice I added to Chiram's wine. Chiram thinks I do not listen when he talks about his herbs, but I do. I bite my lip to keep from grinning at the thought of him, straining to keep his thick bowed legs together, running at regular intervals to the camp's edge for two days. It served him well for speaking of cooking puppies. I decide I will start confession at the lesser infraction. "I am sorry for my disobedience in taking the pup."

"Ah yes, that," Father says, as though distracted from another chain of thought. "You must return the dog to Chiram."

"But Father," I say, though I do not still have the pup in my possession, "he is going to *cook* him!"

He snorts. "Adir, the bitch is his and thus her litter is his. To steal from another in the caravan is a stoning offense."

"But—"

His right hand slices the air, which means he will hear no more on the matter. No amount of begging on my part will change his mind once he has made that gesture. I have seen him use it many times in negotiations when he has made his last offer.

"We are a tribe of laws," he says, oblivious to the terrible cramping of my chest.

I stare into the fire and try not to see those tiny, warm balls of fur nuzzling into their mother's belly.

"There is else I wish to speak of," he says.

"What?" I ask, trying to dam the tears that have welled in my eyes.

He shifts and holds his closed fist toward me, palm up. Despite myself, I am curious. "What is it?"

He opens his fingers. On his palm lies a small cylinder seal made of a black silvery gemstone. I pluck it from his hand, admiring the small carving of a woman in long, tiered robes.

"Lama," he says. "A goddess of protection and intercession. I gave it to your mother long ago in Ur. Now it is yours, your personal seal."

A slender piece of rawhide threads through the hollow center. I hold it in my hand for a moment, trying to feel some connection to my mother, and then tie it around my neck.

"When your mother died, I did not want to give you up. You were my only connection to her. But you have not stayed a child, and I fear I have kept you for myself too long."

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying it is time you claimed your birthright as a woman."

"But you always said you did not want the caravan to know I was a girl. I have never told anyone. Why would they suspect now?"



He gives me a sharp glance. “They will suspect soon. How are you to hide your woman’s bleeding?”

I flinch. I have tried to keep that from him, apparently without success. “It only just began last moon.”

He sighs. “I should have left you with Sarai long ago. She asked for you, but I could not bear to give you up. Each time I thought, one more journey, so I can become used to the idea.”

*Give me to Sarai?* “Why can I not stay with the caravan? There are women here.”

“There is not a man here worthy of you, and you need a chance to have your own family.”

I rise to my feet, breathing hard, betrayed. We travel to Abram and Sarai so he can dispose of me. “I have a family. You are my family. The caravan is my family!”

Once again, the hand slices the air, but I am not silent, not obedient. “No, I will not go. No matter where you send me, I will not stay. I will follow you.”

He does not answer. I expect his rage, but the look on his face is not anger, only a great sadness, and that fills me with more despair than I can hold.

I turn and flee into the night, grateful for the bite of cold air. The need to run, to feel the wind’s push on my face, pulses through my flesh. Since I was young, I have been drawn to rocky inclines and hills. No feeling can match standing in a high place and receiving the wind’s embrace. My father truly named me daughter of the wind.

Oblivious to stones and without my guidance, my feet take me across the camp. No one pays attention or tries to stop me. Boys often run about, dodging fires and chasing each other. I chase no one, but my future pursues me.

When I approach the herds, I slow to a walk. To run here would start a stampede, and that is not my purpose. Only now do I even know my purpose. I have fled without thought, but now I take a camel-hair bridle from the cart and slip through the donkeys, moving slowly out of habit, though the ache to run still pounds in me.

Above, clouds veil the half moon, but I know each creature by the shape and the lighter markings that distinguish them. A soft neigh ahead changes my course, and my hands find the familiar silky skin of the gelding I have named Dune. His breath is sweet on my face, and he lowers his head for the bridle. He is not young, but he still loves to run.

Glad for my height, I swing onto his back and guide him away from the herd. The desire for speed is still strong, but I am no fool to run a horse in rocky terrain at night. A fall and a broken leg would mean Dune in Chiram’s pot. Instead, I drop the reins and lay my head on his mane, wrapping my arms around his neck and letting him take me up and down the hills where he will.

Before my tears finish soaking his mane, Dune snorts, lifts his head, and halts. Sitting upright, I search for campfires, but none are in sight. I check the sky, knowing I headed west originally, but clouds now blanket the stars, and I have no idea how much of the night has passed while I wrapped myself in misery.

A shadow moves in a nearby clump of brush, and Dune’s muscles tense beneath me. Before I can react, he rears and jumps sideways. I am slipping off. I make a desperate grab for mane, but most of my weight is off to his side. With a frightened snort, Dune leaps again, and I hit the ground.

I cannot draw breath or move for long moments. Dune is not in my line of vision, but I imagine by the sound of pounding hooves, he has fled back to the caravan. He is gone, and I am alone. There is not enough light to follow his tracks. If I stumble around in the dark, I risk

becoming more lost. It is best to wait here until morning breaks and Zakiti realizes what has happened and comes for me.

It is the best plan I can think of . . . until I hear something move in the brush and catch the faint, greenish gleam of watching eyes.

*At that time a severe famine struck the land of Canaan, forcing Abram to go down to Egypt, where he lived as a foreigner. As he was approaching the border of Egypt, Abram said to his wife, Sarai, "Look, you are a very beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife. Let's kill him; then we can have her!' So please tell them you are my sister. Then they will spare my life and treat me well because of their interest in you."*

—Book of Genesis 12:10-13

### Chapter Three

I wipe the dirt from my mouth, my gaze locked on the last place I saw the gleam of the wolf's eyes. Every breath jabs sharply into my side. I have fled from a future I do not want and found a present with fangs.

What a fool I am.

With one hand pressed tightly to my side, I roll to my knees and try to stand. Pain stabs me so fiercely, my vision blurs and nausea churns my belly. I let out a cry. Perhaps it will frighten the wolves, or perhaps someone is coming to look for me and will hear.

But that is not possible. Dune has not had time to return to the camp. What are the chances someone will notice he is bridled? That I have disappeared? I should have ridden Philot. My faithful donkey would not have left me. I should have paid attention to where I was going. I should have—

A cloud moves from the moon's face and I see my death less than a stone's throw. I scrabble about with my hand looking for a stick, a stone, anything for a weapon. Even uninjured, I could not outrun a wolf.

There is nothing within my reach.

Warily, the wolf approaches. It is lean and muscular, with short fur a mottled gray. The copper undertones are barely visible in the moonlight. I put a hand on the cool, smooth surface of the seal that hangs around my neck, hoping Lama will protect me, or at least intercede with El on my behalf. But one does well not to rely completely on the gods, as I have heard Chiram say, and I yell at the advancing wolf, the loudest shriek I can manage, which sends another bolt of pain into my side.

He hesitates, head cocked sideways in a canine question. The wolf appears to be a lone male. A human is not his normal prey, but a wounded human is another matter. He is thin without the advantage of hunting with a pack, and hungry. In the cock of his head, I read he is weighing the risk of waiting until I weaken further against the possibility of another predator

finding me and robbing him of his meal. Competitors abound in these hills—lions, leopards, a pack of wolves.

I am indeed a fool. My father is better rid of me.

The wolf lifts his head, sniffing, and then moves forward, his lips pulled back, exposing sharp teeth. His instincts are wolf, not hyena. He will make his own kill.

My breaths are ragged from fear and shallow to keep the pain from stabbing my chest. He hears that and probably my galloping heart. I try to slow my breathing, hoping to appear less vulnerable.

He circles.

On my hands and knees, I scramble to remain facing him, knowing his preferred attack is from the rear, onto the back of my neck to break my spine between his powerful jaws. To keep from crying out in pain, I bite my tongue—and realize another mistake with the coppery taste in my mouth.

Now, the smell of blood stains the air.

Without taking his cool eyes from his prey, the wolf sniffs again and growls, a low, rumbling sound that freezes my heart.

I scrape my fingers against the hard ground, gathering dirt to throw in his eyes, a meager defense.

Moonlight gleams off his teeth. They transfix me. So white, so pure. As he charges forward, I throw my pitiful handful of dirt and raise my hands to shield my face. So quick is his spring, he appears only a blur of motion. But as fast as he is, a slender black shape meets his leap like a thrown lance.

Ferocious snarls, flashes of teeth—

They fight over me, until both abruptly stop, regarding each other with lips peeled back and low, ominous growls. I peer closely at the intruding wolf. Nami! My throat clamps with gratitude and with fear for her.

Locked in a standoff, both canines vie for dominance with their posture. Nami's swollen tits hang low. She has left her pups to follow me. I do the only thing I can to help her. Grimacing, I growl low in my throat. *We are pack*, my bared teeth warn. *I may be wounded, but we are pack*.

The wolf's eyes flick to me and then back to Nami, who stands tall because of her long, slender legs.

Perhaps it is the threat of both of us, or perhaps he defers to Nami as a female he does not wish to fight. I do not know, but slowly he turns his head aside. Nami holds her position, not yielding, the short fur on her shoulders stiff with warning.

With a slow, deliberate movement, so as not to provoke her, the wolf turns his back and stalks away.

Nami waits until she is certain he is gone and then limps to my side, licking my face and taking my chin delicately in her mouth for a moment, something I have seen her do with her pups. She has turned in an instant from fierce predator to adoring dog. I hold onto her and for the second time that night, I cry into an animal's side.

"Nami, thank you."

She gives me another worried lick.

"I promise I will save your puppies. All of them, I swear on El, my god."

Unimpressed with my oath, Nami stretches beside me and tends to her bloody paw.

Exhausted, I ease down and rest my head on my arm, draping the other on her back. She lies by my side, but when she finishes cleaning her wound, she keeps her head raised, alert for the wolf's return or any other danger that might appear.  
We are pack.

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