

## CHAPTER ONE

### November 1178

On a muggy morning, the sun's rays baked yesterday's rain into the cracked earth, a reminder of summer's arrival with its threat of the cattle disease. Silence stalked the plateau in place of the tannin song, a condition that endured for more than two years.

His students' apathy bore down on him. In the past, their interest survived until the new year. This was only the second month.

Trader Benjamin drew in a long breath. And pushed the nostalgia of tannin melodies aside with his exhale. *Focus*. He examined the four boys in his class. The oldest, Jonadab, sat on a stool behind the others. His father wanted him to rule the city. He might have to since they had no Anah and no tanninim.

How sad to have lost God's visible sign of his blessing them. The assurance that the tanninim watched over the Longevity, daily combing the valley for evidence of danger, their presence alone bestowing long life, was gone.

Cattle lowing from the middle veld brought him back to his lesson on the coastal trade language. Even diplomats needed to be fluent in it. If Jonadab never ruled, he could represent them abroad. Like Bashat did before the coastal war. Sighs quavered his breath. Bashat had been his father's best student.

His wife's closest friend entered the courtyard. The boys practiced haggling over gold prices. Good. They hadn't noticed his inattention. He crossed the beaten pathway to speak to Elizabeth.

Her face had lost its wanes over the months after the Anah forced her bridegroom to accompany the tanninim. Perhaps the child with her was the balm that healed her.

"Greetings, Elizabeth. And who do we have here?"

The girl hid behind Elizabeth's legs, trembling. "I'm Shona. We are well met, Mr. Benjamin, sir."

Her voice showed strength despite her timidity. She might have been as old as eight. Surely no older.

He smiled, and she smiled back, her onyx eyes brightening his thoughts. "Are you thinking of coming to school? I'd love to teach you the trade language."

Shona gazed up at Elizabeth, fists relaxing her hold upon the young woman's brown skirt.

Sweet child. Her tenderness might teach Jonadab how to have the servant's

heart he lacked.

She dipped her head. “Yes.”

Benjamin leaned back to take her measure. The child wore a skirt to her ankles—unusual in the summer’s heat—with a faded blue tunic. A turban masked her hair—also, strange for the season. She wasn’t sweating, however. She must be cold natured, like his wife. Satisfied, he spoke to Elizabeth’s thoughts but guarded them from the child. *Who is she?*

Elizabeth’s eyes dimmed. Good thing he had not spoken aloud. But Elizabeth did. “Shona is my ward, left behind by an old friend who couldn’t care for her. Her mother charged me to bring her up as my own. I’ve taught her to read and write both Hebrew and some Greek and her numbers. But she learns so quickly, so she might be ready to learn another language.”

But to what end? The only girls whose fathers didn’t marry them off at some point were those the Spirit chose to be Keeper. And without the tannim, He had not chosen anyone to record their history. Except Siloam the healer, but she lacked the supernatural connection to them all that the previous Keepers possessed.

“Shona, allow me to introduce you to your new class.” He decided not to take her by the hand when a thought from fourteen-year-old Jonadab reached him. A *stupid little girl*. Benjamin didn’t rebuke the young man. That kind of prejudice had to be fought with experience. Maybe Shona could provide that. But she was so young.

She must have picked up on Jonadab’s disdain. Rather than shrinking from him, she moved a stool behind the other three boys and plunked it next to his. “What did you say your name is?”

Jonadab straightened to his full height, nothing impressive, but much taller than the child. Benjamin would have to keep a close watch on him. The youth could be devious and cruel to the boys in his class. How would he treat her?

“Jonadab. My father named me after the Rechabite’s son whose descendants proved faithful to God through generations in the desert.”

The girl put her hands on her hips and raised her chin. “Oh, I thought you meant Amnon’s friend whose advice led to the destruction of King David’s family.”

Jonadab wilted under the child’s gaze. Had she said something else to him? If so, her subtlety evaded Benjamin’s practiced listening skills. She planted herself on her stool beside the boy, a smile touching her lips.

Although Benjamin couldn’t see her thoughts, he guessed them to be, “Challenge accepted.” And he grinned.

Still, for the girl’s sake, he reiterated one simple rule to the class the next day. No student could pass thoughts with other students during the entirety of class. Each had sworn an oath not to, not that he believed they would obey. He stared at Jonadab as he spoke, but the youth examined a trail of ants marching across the

courtyard toward the earthy smell of manure and cattle.

The news perked up Shona's chin. Had Jonadab already said something inappropriate to her? Without hesitation and as if he heard his teacher's thoughts, the youth met his gaze. However, Shona would surely alert him if Jonadab caused trouble. Maybe she would even confront the perpetrator herself and not expect the teacher to handle every unspoken word.

She showed herself a diligent student that first week, closing the gap between what the youngest boy, Andoya, had learned the previous year and what he was learning at present. She insisted on studying Jonadab's vocabulary words in addition to her own, which especially frustrated Jonadab when she corrected him.

"Mind your own business, little girl." Jonadab lowered his chin to stare down at his rival.

"Maybe one day I will. But, to do so, I need to know everything about trading. Don't you want to be a great businessman?"

Benjamin heard Jonadab's unspoken reply. *I'd rather be Anah or a warrior.*

That explained the youth's contempt for the class.

"Mr. Benjamin, sir, will I need to know how to read the language, too?"

Had Shona not heard Jonadab?

The youth laughed. "What the tannin for? Are you going to pass love notes in your pottery?"

She cocked her head to the side as if measuring the youth's ability to comprehend. "Have you not heard of trading contracts? They're written in Kiswahili. I'll have to read them and know whether to sign them. Imagine if I can sell hundreds of dresses to the merchants on the coast."

"We already do that."

"*You* don't."

"I meant Great Zimbabwe does, stupid little girl."

Bile touched Benjamin's tongue. *You will address a woman with respect, Jonadab. Do you hear me?*

The boy's snort answered the question. Benjamin walked to his hut. If only the council would let him restart formal weapons training. Then both he and the youth could work out their differences while filling the protector roles the tanninim's departure opened.

When he returned, he held a rod. He never made eye contact with the youth, but he leaned the promised punishment against the wall surrounding the courtyard.

At the muttering, he retook his place before the pupils and started a new lesson. Perhaps Jonadab had learned this one.

### **December 1178**

After a month, most of Benjamin's language students welcomed Shona to class. Especially Andoya who, at ten years old, had been the youngest in the class. On

the days when a sweet, nutty smell wafted over the walls, the boys knew Shona brought enough bread for everyone. But Jonadab met her glad “I cooked it myself” with a sneer.

“That’s what girls do. Do you want a prize?”

Before Benjamin could intervene, Shona advanced on the youth. Odd because she always ignored Jonadab when his comments insulted her sex. “It’s better than being tracked by a wild beast. Or is that what boys do?”

Jonadab sat up straighter. “Be careful who you call a beast. He might rend you in pieces.” Then he clutched his sides, laughing.

“The jackal in this city howls but has no bite.”

The boy’s laughter drew up short, his voice lowering. “Perhaps you’ve attracted a *svikwambo*’s attention and need to offer a sacrifice to satisfy it.”

“You need to attend *Amidah* services rather than believe tales meant to scare babies.”

“I’m not the child.”

“Then stop—”

“Stop what?” He loomed over her even as his tone dropped. “Are you accusing me? Blame yourself for walking the streets at night.”

“I don’t walk the streets.”

“I know, *pfambi*. You’re *working*.”

“What does that mean?”

“Back down, Jonadab.” Benjamin nudged at the youth’s walled thoughts but couldn’t get in. “How do you even know that word? Sit so we can start class.” He would have also demanded Jonadab apologize. But that would increase the strife.

The youth spun on his heel and plopped down on his stool. But Shona frowned. She circled Jonadab and extended her hand. “Let’s pretend this didn’t happen and start the day over. Greetings, Jonadab. I trust we are well met?”

*Say it, Jonadab.*

The youth didn’t look up. “We are well met.”

“May you live as long as Melchaiyim.”

Jonadab snorted but finished the greeting. “And you, even to the end of the age.”

How puzzling the youth’s dissatisfaction with Shona’s peace overture and overall contentment. What would Jonadab do next to deride the child? And when?

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The day arrived in January. The girl passed Benjamin’s daga but didn’t see him. After swallowing the last of his *zviyo* porridge, he strode to the courtyard behind the house. Sour hints from the *zviyo* millet twisted his lips but not as much as the scene before him.

Jonadab pretended interest in an insect on the wall hedging the area. After Shona tossed her shawl across her stool, tipping over a jar on Jonadab’s seat, he waved her over. She took cautious steps to his side and jumped back when he

threw the creature at her face. His grin faded as she snatched the thick yellow-winged creature from the air.

“Oh, it’s a *nyenze*. The *nyeza* song wakes me every morning. Are you afraid of them? I know they terrify Andoya. But Elizabeth says we can eat them. Do you want me to cook this one for you?”

Smacking her wrist such that she dropped the locust, Jonadab gritted his teeth. “Afraid of something smaller than I am?” The *nyenze* crunched under his sandal, and he glared at the child. “Never.”

Not breaking eye contact with her, he marched to his stool and threw himself on it, oblivious to Andoya’s frantic hand motions and gaping mouth. Eyes watering, Jonadab yelped and leaped from his seat.

At last, the youngest boy found his voice. “*Chinyavda!* Chinyavda!”

Shona slammed her palm on the creature, crushing it, body, pincers, and stinger. Rather than mocking Jonadab, she called to Andoya. “Get the healer! Tell her the chinyavda was a yellow one, nearly three inches long. Perhaps she has a medicine to stop the poison.”

The boy fled the courtyard toward Siloam’s hut.

Majaya, another student, this one a year younger than Jonadab, helped Jonadab lie on the dirt floor, but Majaya admired the little girl. “Shona, you could have been stung as well. Why did you squish the chinyavda with your bare hand?”

Her mouth opened wide as if in fear, but she shrugged rather than answer. Was she embarrassed?

Twelve-year-old Batanai knelt beside Jonadab. “I saw your little jar. The chinyavda climbed out of it onto your seat. What would have happened if it stung Shona instead? Is that what you wanted? She’s only a girl. I thought you wanted to protect our people. Some Anah warrior you’d be.” And he stomped away.

Jonadab’s fisted hands confessed his guilt. But Batanai’s words emphasized Jonadab’s reluctance to learn the trade language.

Knowing the chinyavda sting was not fatal and his class had not noticed him, Benjamin backed toward his hut, then rushed over to Jonadab’s side. “What happened here?” He laid his hand on the youth’s forehead. Warm sweat coated his palm, perhaps from Jonadab’s reaction to the venom or to the humiliation.

Through clenched teeth, the youth rasped out his words. “A chinyavda crawled onto my stool, and I sat on it. Andoya went for the healer. She should be here—”

Siloam entered the courtyard, Reuel the blacksmith accompanying her. He lifted Jonadab and carried him as she pelted the youth with questions about whether he’d been stung before and if he felt hot or thirsty. Calm replaced the commotion, and Benjamin examined each stool. No more chinyavdas, but beside Jonadab’s seat lay the small jar with its lid. Foolish boy.

“Are all of you unharmed?”

They nodded.

But Andoya gushed. “That was amazing! I loved how you caught the nyenze he threw at your face. How do you move so quickly?”

The corners of her eyes crinkled. “For fun, I see how many I can pluck from the air. You know, when the wind shakes them out of the acacia trees in the veld. Elizabeth says they can’t hurt me, but she gets angry if I smear their guts on my skirt. So I have to be careful.”

“I wouldn’t tell her about the chinyavda, then. What would she say if you brought the pincers home?”

“I won’t. Unless Mr. Benjamin says I have to.” She looked at him, her head at a slight angle as if asking another question or listening. But no thoughts reached him. The same had not been true of Jonadab. Something about a chase? Well, the youth would have to heal first.

For more than a week, Jonadab missed class. Upon his arrival, Shona greeted him first, concern widening her eyes as she stood in a show of respect. “Welcome back. Your body got rid of the poison fast. My guardian thought you’d be gone a month. Wait until you hear all the new vocabulary we learned. No wonder you said I’d find the trade language difficult. Merchants talk a lot.”

Benjamin intervened before Jonadab voiced his thoughts. *Don’t. You. Dare. She has prayed for your recovery every day.*

Jonadab glared at him before he nodded at Shona and took his seat. He maintained his silence throughout class, only answering Benjamin’s direct questions. Good. Otherwise, temptation would master Benjamin’s creeping desire to put the youth’s swollen arrogance in its place.

After Benjamin dismissed the other students, he detained Jonadab. “Do you need help catching up?”

He stood tall. “Sir, my father rehearsed all the haggling phrases with me. I’m not behind.”

Benjamin held up the jar and its lid. “Is this yours? I found it while you were gone.”

The boy nodded.

“So then, when are you going to apologize to Shona?”

Jonadab scowled but got no further.

Benjamin fisted his hand around the jar and waved it under the youth’s nose. “You brought the chinyavda here in this container. You have as much as admitted it.”

“I’m not the one who released it.”

“An apology would—”

“My father taught me to never apologize to women. And I don’t apologize to girls. If that’s good enough for my mother, then it’s good enough for her. Is there anything else you wanted to ask me, sir?”

“No. You may go.” Benjamin’s heart ached as the youth departed. No wonder

the boy's mother remained silent around her husband. And she arrived early to the market and left late when she had wares to sell. Perhaps Jonadab would fare better as a warrior after all. But no one else showed the intelligence or ambition to lead the tribe. "God help us."