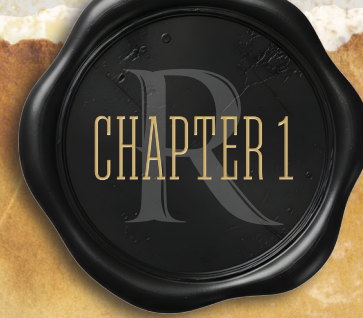




THE NOTICE

Fourteen-year-old Rahab woke to her mother coughing.

Not a polite cough. Not the kind you could blame on smoke from the hearth and ignore. This cough clawed its way out of her mother's chest like it was pulling something loose inside her.

Their home, which doubled as an inn, was built into Jericho's wall. Dirt and stone

underfoot, mudbrick above. It was a cramped front space where travelers could sit and eat, a sleeping corner cut off by a curtain, and a tiny storage nook. At the very back, a narrow staircase climbed to the flat roof. At night, if

they had to relieve themselves, they used a clay pot, and in the morning, Rahab would carry it out to the waste pit near the wall.

Calling it an “inn” made it sound grander than it really was. Their home doubled as a guesthouse when strangers passed through. In exchange for the mat behind the curtain, a traveler need only to weigh out a small bit of silver or trade some grain or oil. On those nights, Rahab and her family moved to the entry and slept shoulder to shoulder. Most nights, the guest mats stayed empty.

Behind the curtain, Rahab’s mother coughed again. Rahab sat



up fast, already making a list of what she had to do today. Water. Fire. Food. Medicine. The list rarely changed. But medicine was new, and by the sound of her mother's cough, it needed to move to the top.

Rahab's father should've been the one to hear that cough and decide what to do next. But the space where he belonged had been empty for weeks. He was "working" for the king. The kind of work that didn't come with coin or choice. Rahab pushed the thought away.

"Ayla," she whispered. "It's time to get up." Her ten-year-old little sister groaned, then sat up, rubbing her eyes.

Rahab moved to the cooking corner, where the small hearth sat blackened from hundreds

of meals. She pushed aside the cold ash and tucked dry reeds under a few charcoal scraps from the night before. Then she struck flint to tinder. A small flame caught, then grew.



Ayla began sweeping the dirt floor with palm fronds while Rahab retrieved the grain

jar. For a long moment, she just stared into it. Almost empty. It was a hollow thought. The jar was always “almost empty,” but lately, filling it had become much harder. With a sigh, she poured the last bits of grain into a pot and stirred in water, willing it to be enough.

“Yarikh,” Rahab whispered, “let my mother keep breathing today.” Yarikh was the moon god and the patron of the city of Jericho. The Canaanites prayed to any number of gods, depending on the need. They had gods for storms and crops, sickness and birth. They had gods for war and luck. To Rahab, they always felt cold and distant.

Rahab did not know if Yarikh was real, but her mother had taught her the words to say,

and when you were desperate, you said them, hoping that someone might answer.

Today, silence answered. Always silence.

Rahab turned back to the pot and stirred, trying to keep her dark thoughts away. Her mother lay on the mat, skin hot, lips cracked. Yusef, Rahab’s five-year-old brother, was sleeping on another mat in the corner. “Mama,” Rahab said softly as she approached.



Her mother opened her eyes. Glassy, but focused on Rahab. As she forced herself to sit up, a cough hit her, folding her nearly in half.

Rahab braced her gently. "I'm going to the healer today."

Her mother's fingers found Rahab's wrist, weak but fierce. "Coin," she rasped. "We don't have enough to waste on—" She cut off as another fit of coughing seized her.

"Mother, we have no choice. You aren't getting better," Rahab said. "Trust me, I'll find what we need."

Her mother's gaze sharpened, sudden and clear. She held Rahab's eyes for a long moment, then gave a small nod. "I'll be alright," she croaked. "I just need a little more

sleep." Then she sank back onto the mat and closed her eyes.

Suddenly, a shadow fell across the entry. Boots stopped outside the door. A man's voice, calm and cold, called out, "House of Hanan, open the door by order of the king!"

Rahab froze.

Then the pounding started.

