



Old Nahor shuffled out of his room and squinted up at the sky that appeared as a bright, blue patch above the walled courtyard. “It’s a good day for a wedding,” he muttered. Then slowly with many yawns and a few hiccups, he made his way to the water jar, lifted the lid, and peered down. He could see nothing and so impulsively pulled back his sleeve and thrust his arm into the jar.

“Grandfather, what are you doing?”

Nahor groaned as he pulled his arm out of the jar and turned to face his laughing granddaughter. “There’s no water. They’ve used it all.”

“Of course, we’ve been cleaning and cooking. Have you forgotten? Laban is bringing his new bride home today.”

“Who could forget?” Nahor muttered as he pulled down his sleeve. “So her family’s rich. Truth is he’s getting nothing but an ugly, bucktoothed she goat of a woman.”

“Grandfather,” she said with a giggle, looking around guiltily. “If Laban heard you . . .” She lifted the heavy jar of water from her head and leaned it carefully against the wall. “I’ll help you over to the bench and then get whatever you want.”

She took his arm gently. He held back, grimaced, and looked at her. “My son named you wrong. You’re not a noose around his neck. I never understood.” His old voice cracked with emotion as he shook his head in bewilderment. Reluctantly he let her lead him over to the shaded area beneath the grape arbor.

She helped him ease onto the bench where he usually spent the day. “Father says he called me Rebekah, or noose,” she said, “because I was pretty enough to catch a rich husband.”

“Of course, of course, he’s always thinking of ways to get rich.”

“That’s just how he thinks,” she said. She noticed that in the effort he

had lost one of his slippers. Snatching it up, she quickly knelt and helped him work his foot into it.

“Now sit here,” she said, “and I’ll bring you some fresh water.”

When she came back with a dipper overflowing with the clear, cool water, he was still muttering to himself about the name his son, Bethuel, had given his beautiful granddaughter.

“Grandfather, don’t worry. I’m his favorite and that’s all that really matters.”

“Favorite? Then why are dark secrets and bargains made with the clay gods under the stairs?” His eyes grew wild and he wiped his brow with a trembling hand.

For a moment Rebekah was afraid he was about to have another of his fainting fits. “Dark secrets and bargains?” she repeated as she tucked a throw of soft woven material around his shoulders.

He leaned toward her, cupping his hand around his mouth as he whispered, “They’ve greased the old goat-man’s bald head and made big promises if he finds a rich husband for you.”

Rebekah squatted beside him. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “They’ve refused all the young men who’ve asked for me.”

“Of course, of course, they’re greedy. They want riches, gold, favors. And the old clay goat-man is to get it for them.”

Rebekah stood up. She knew Nahor had strange dreams and delusions at times. “Maybe you dreamed it,” she said.

“Go look, see for yourself.” He pointed in the direction of the stairs and then leaned back against the stone wall, exhausted, and closed his eyes. He would doze and forget, but Rebekah was disturbed. She knew her father, Bethuel, and her brother, Laban, put great store by the gods of clay and stone made by old Terah, her great-grandfather, before he left Ur. The god with the greatest powers was the one they called the old goat-man. He was a moon god and could control any situation for a price.

She started toward the pigeon houses fastened to the far wall but stopped when she came to the stairs that led to the roof. She stared at the crude, bolted door that opened to the space below the stairs. Behind this door were shelves on which sat the family gods. Except for the small fertility gods the women were allowed to have, all the gods were kept here. This was a forbidden area for the women. They were not allowed to even look on the gods. Bethuel and Laban carried out the secret rituals at night when everyone else was asleep.

“Go look and see,” her grandfather had said. The idea would never have occurred to her, but now she felt she had to know. She had to find out.

With trembling hands she slid the heavy bolt to one side and pulled the great wooden door out toward her. For a moment she was blinded by clouds of incense with their sickeningly sweet smell. She recognized the odor. It was Bethuel’s most valuable incense; he had given five sheep for one little jar of it. She waved the smoke away and to her horror saw that her grandfather had been right . . . the old goat-god’s bald head was glistening with freshly applied sacred oil.

“Rebekah, what are you doing!” Her mother’s voice vibrated with shock and horror. She had come to the edge of the roof and was leaning over the parapet.

Rebekah jumped back, letting the door slam shut.

“It’s true. What Grandfather said is true,” she stammered.

“What are you talking about?” her mother asked as she came hurrying down the narrow, uneven stairs.

With one swift movement Rebekah pushed the bolt into place and stood with her back to the door. “They’ve made a bargain with the old goat-man. He’s to find a rich husband for me.”

“And what’s so bad about that?” Her mother stood with her hands on her hips, a puzzled expression on her face.

“All they care about is their own gain and high position. I want something better than that.”

“What’s better than a rich husband? Laban understands these things. He’s even marrying an ugly wife for the gain it will bring him.”

“It’s his choice. She may not be beautiful but he can have other wives. I can have only one husband.”

Her mother brushed past her, muttering, “Your father has burned his prize incense, poured out his most expensive oil. He wants the very best for you and for the family.”

Rebekah said no more, but that night she sought out her beloved nurse, Deborah, in the vine-covered shelter on the roof. She told her everything and was comforted when the older woman held her in her arms. “It may not be so bad,” she said. “For your family it isn’t just the old goat-man god under the stairs but all the gods, even the Elohim of your uncle Abraham.”

“They always seem to be at odds with each other,” Rebekah said. “Who can we trust? Who is the strongest?”

Deborah drew back and looked at her for a long moment before answering. "All the gods are greedy," she said. "They want gifts and make hard bargains. Your father and your brother are trusting the old goat-man. We'll see what comes of it."

Rebekah adjusted her headpiece and brushed back the coins that fell from it down each side of her face. They made a pleasant tinkling sound as she laughed. She bent over and hugged her nurse. "Then I'll ask the Elohim of my uncle Abraham to find me a husband, and we will see who wins."

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Rebekah had never seen her uncle Abraham or her aunt Sarah. They had left the family long before she was born. She had heard very little of them, and what she had heard was usually carried on in whispers. Even this talk stopped when any of the children appeared. She had finally learned that Abraham and Sarah had no children. (News had reached them of a son born to them in their old age, but that was taken to be a rumor, as it was clearly impossible.) This seemed very strange since her grandfather, Nahor, the brother of Abraham, had eight sons by his wife Milcah and five by his concubine Reumah. Most of these sons were gone on trading trips or out herding their father's sheep.

Rebekah and her brother, Laban, were the children of Bethuel, the youngest son of Nahor and Milcah. They still lived in the home of their grandparents, a large, sprawling house with several courtyards, large kitchens, and adequate space for quite a few animals when it was necessary to bring them inside.

On this particular day Laban was spending the afternoon with the men of his family at the public baths. His bride, Barida, had taken over the same facility with her maidens that very morning. The village of Haran had only one such nicety, which had to be shared. Three days of the week women and children took over the steamy, dark rooms with their warm stone floors and tepid pools, but the other days belonged to the men. If there was a wedding, as was the case on this day, the bride and the women of her family and friends had the morning and the groom with his male family members and friends the afternoon. The people of Haran considered themselves fortunate that the river Balikah flowed nearby and they had plenty of water for bathing and irrigation.

That night Laban and the men of his family would go to escort Barida to his home. The agreement had already been signed and Laban was excited.

Though he had been warned by his mother and his sister of Barida's snaggle-toothed ugliness, he was pleased beyond reason to be marrying into the family of Nazzim.

Nazzim always had the best of everything. His house was of the same mud brick as the rest of the villagers, but it had many rooms and the courtyard was large and shaded. He owned the local caravansary and shop where travelers and men from the village could sit and talk while drinking his fine barley beer or eating roast lamb that turned endlessly on a spit over the fire.

Nazzim was old now. Though his face was creased like a crumpled sheet and his thin lips sucked in over toothless jaws, his eyes were hard as agates and missed nothing. There was now no hint that in his younger days he had been a lusty, handsome man. Numerous stories were told of his questionable exploits right in their village and in the countryside beyond.

It was said that if he saw a woman he wanted, he would go to any lengths and pay any price to get her for his harem. Things had changed now, and it was whispered that he had outlived all of his favorites and had even sent some of the younger women back to their families in disgrace. "They were totally useless," he complained. "None of them were entertaining and any dish they prepared was uneatable."

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As Laban sat getting the last fine shaping of his beard by one of the slaves, he heard a commotion in the outer room. The men with Laban fell silent as they listened. Voices could be heard, muffled and indistinct, rising and falling as though in some urgency. Then there was silence but for the soft padding of bare feet on wet stones.

A young man appeared in the doorway. He stopped and peered around the room until his eyes grew accustomed to the dark. When he spotted Laban, he came quickly and knelt before him. "My lord," he said. "My master, Nazzim, waits outside. He wishes to see you alone."

Laban was immediately alarmed, though he struggled to look unconcerned. He had visions of the old man calling the whole arrangement off, even taking his daughter back to give her to a more likely prospect. "Show him in," he said nervously. He waved for the members of his family to leave him alone.

The young man disappeared and again came the sound of voices in the outer room and then a shuffling, slow, dragging sound accented by the solid

thumping made by a staff. Laban's anxiety became acute as he realized how important this meeting must be for Nazzim. The old man had trouble walking and rarely left his own courtyard. What could possibly be so important that he would come to the public bath to seek out the bridegroom of his daughter?

By the time the old man stood in the dim half-light of the doorway, Laban was dabbing the sweat from his brow. He rose and came to kiss the old man's hand as was the custom, then led him to one of the benches that surrounded the wall. "I'm most honored," he stammered as he puzzled over the strange affair.

Nazzim thumped his staff on the hard stone floor and shouted an unintelligible order that brought two young men carrying cushions and a tray with brass goblets filled with his famous date wine. He jabbed the staff at the bench, indicating where he wanted the cushions and the armrests. Then with great difficulty he sat and again ordered the cushions to be adjusted and the armrests to be put in place. When he was comfortable and the young men had helped him pull his feet up so he could sit cross-legged on the bench, he signaled for Laban to come sit beside him.

Laban hurried to accommodate him while the two young men held the tray of drinks for both of them. With this completed, Nazzim motioned for them to wait just outside the door; then he turned to Laban. "This is a good day for our families," the old man said, looking with sharp, piercing eyes at Laban.

"You greatly honor me," Laban said as he tried to find some clue as to Nazzim's purpose in coming.

"May this day be blessed by all the gods," Nazzim continued.

"May I bring happiness to your family," Laban said as he became more relaxed.

"May my daughter be fruitful in your house."

Nazzim obviously had not come to call off the wedding. Laban became more confident that he had come to ask some favor that could not wait. The sense of relief was so great that he was inclined to grant any favor the old man might ask.

The two sat in silence sipping the date wine and testing the atmosphere for any hostility. Finally with guarded words, Laban spoke, "What can I do to show my gratitude for the privilege of marrying your daughter?"

Nazzim stroked his beard and smiled. Laban had obviously said the right thing.

“Since you have broached the subject . . .” He hesitated and looked at Laban as though needing encouragement.

“What subject, my lord?” Laban asked, leaning forward with eager anticipation.

“Why, the subject of marriage,” old Nazzim said as he chuckled and then coughed with the exertion.

“Marriage?” Laban said, puzzled. Did the old man have wedding counsel for him at this late hour?

“Yes, marriage. I have decided to marry again.”

Laban choked and coughed in surprise. Then collecting himself, he asked, “May I ask who is to receive this great honor?”

Again Nazzim laughed. “Of course, that’s why I’ve come to you. I am an old man but rich. I can give great favor to those I choose.” As he said this he leaned over and tapped Laban on the arm. He didn’t smile but instead grimaced and nodded with a knowing look.

Laban was more puzzled than ever. He couldn’t imagine what he might have to do with Nazzim’s getting married. If the old scoundrel wanted help, he would give it gladly. He quickly sifted through the possible meanings and could think of nothing. “You are very generous,” he said at last. “I’ll do anything I can to help you find the happiness you seek.”

Nazzim sucked in his breath and worked his lips back and forth over his toothless gums; a cunning look came on his face. Laban had seen this look before when he was about to make a clever bargain. “Then it is settled.”

Laban squirmed uneasily. “Everything is settled but to find who the lucky woman is.”

“Of course, of course, I can’t expect you to presume so much. How could you possibly guess? Quite simply, it’s your sister.”

“My sister!” Laban could not keep the surprise from his voice.

“Yes, I believe her name is Rebekah. Strange name. They say she is a beauty and yet is not lazy.” Nazzim’s small eyes settled on Laban as if waiting for some expression of his pleasure.

Laban squirmed uncomfortably. He smiled a forced, stiff smile and stared at Nazzim. The man was as old as Haran and more feeble. He smelled of musty grain, garlic, and rotting flesh. Rebekah would never go along with such an arrangement if she could help it. It would be very difficult to persuade her. However, he could see many advantages.

It was almost as though the old goat-god beneath the stairs had answered their prayers in record time. Someone rich, they had asked, and who in all the area was as rich as Nazzim? If Rebekah married the old man, he began to think, what wealth they would control. With his marriage to the daughter and her marriage to the old father, they would soon be in charge of everything the old man owned.

There had always been a problem when marriage to Rebekah was discussed with other young men and their families. They all expected, even insisted, that any young woman they would consider must first participate in the secret fertility rites at the temple of the goddess. Above all else they wanted a bride who would produce children, and such rites were deemed an absolute necessity. The family of Terah had always managed to cleverly evade these demands by marrying their women within the family. However, with Rebekah there were no young men available within the family.

Now Laban looked closely at Nazzim. He had sons and daughters by his many wives and there was a slight chance he would not feel so strongly about the fertility rites. If he really wanted Rebekah, it was possible he would not insist on the offensive rituals.

Laban felt he must somehow manage this. What did it matter that he was old and repulsive? He was so feeble he was not likely to last a year. "I am honored, greatly honored," Laban stammered as he smiled.

"There is one thing you must do for me first," Nazzim said. "The fertility rites in the temple are not necessary, but it is important that I see her before we draw up the final agreement."

Laban was elated. The old man must have heard from his daughter about the problem of the fertility rites, and he was willing to marry Rebekah without that requirement. He smiled and then quickly frowned. To grant the old man's request to see Rebekah would be very difficult to manage. "Rebekah is sometimes out with my father's sheep and you could . . ." he began hesitantly.

"No, no, no, I am too old to go running about after a pretty shepherdess. It must be something less troubling, something easier."

"You could just happen to be riding by the well at the time the women go out to fill their jars."

Here Nazzim was even more emphatic. He shook his head and muttered a few well-chosen curses. "My son, until now you have been extremely clever. I have been impressed with your understanding of difficult situations."

“If you must see her . . .” Laban dared not show his impatience, but he was getting more and more frustrated.

“To be wise, my son, you must learn to study the facts. The facts will always lead to the solution.”

“The facts?”

“Exactly. If you had said, ‘Nazzim has hurried here today. There must be some urgency about his request.’ Then if you followed with what day it is and what is going to happen this evening . . . you would find an easy solution.”

Laban looked at Nazzim and listened closely to what he said, but even then he did not at first understand. “This day is my wedding day,” Laban began. “I will come with the men of my family to get Barida and take her to my house.” When he said this it began to dawn on him just what Nazzim had in mind.

“Yes, yes,” Nazzim broke in impatiently. “It is not usually done . . . but a man of my distinction can make his own rules. If I decide that I, along with the men of my house, wish to escort my daughter to her new home, who would dare criticize?”

“And I am to manage to have my sister where you can see her.”

Nazzim beamed. “You are indeed as clever as I had at first thought. Be assured, you will be richly rewarded whether I decide to marry her or not.” With that he assumed it was as good as agreed upon. He handed Laban his walking stick to hold for him while he clapped loudly three times for the young men who were waiting for him. They helped him to his feet, gathered up the mats and cushions, and within minutes Laban heard the soft, shuffling sound, the tapping of the walking stick, and Nazzim’s heavy breathing.

Then all was quiet.

When the men of his family returned, Laban ignored their questions about Nazzim’s visit. He needed time to ponder the strange turn of events. He wanted no discussions on the subject. He was determined to see that no one gave his sister even a hint of his plans until all the arrangements were made and it was too late for them to be changed.

When he reached home he saw that everything was in order for the celebration. “Go to the roof and sit,” the women advised. “We don’t want you in our way until you are to bring the bride.” He had time only to warn them of Nazzim’s coming, and then he got out of their way.

Laban headed for the stairs and then turned around and came back. He

opened the big door under the stairs and sprinkled more of the precious incense in the dish in front of the old goat-god.

“See Laban,” one of Rebekah’s maids whispered. “He wants things to go well with his bride tonight.”

Laban heard her and laughed to himself. “Not for myself, old goat-man, but may my sister find favor in the eyes of Nazzim.”



When evening came the men of Nahor's family made final preparations for the short ride through the city of Haran to the house of Nazzim. The dancers and drummers arrived, torches were lit, and last touches were given to the trappings of the donkeys that were to carry Laban and his entourage. Laban was obviously nervous. He shouted orders, made hasty decisions and then canceled them, paced back and forth until old Nahor cautioned that he would wear out the tiles of the court.

When at last the moon rose over the courtyard, Laban announced that it was time to leave. He glanced quickly in the direction of the small room under the stairs and noted with satisfaction that a thin trail of sweet incense was oozing out around the door. The old goat-man should be well pleased with his work.

As he rode out the gate he stopped to anoint the clay plaque dedicated to the moon god, Sin. Sin was the god of the people here in Haran, and Laban believed in acknowledging all the gods. He was determined to leave nothing to chance. He was sure that with these gods favoring him he would at last have the good luck and riches he so desperately wanted.

As he rode along the dark, cobbled streets lit only by moonlight and their own flaring torches, people appeared in the lighted windows above him. Some even leaned over their parapets to shout raucous advice and good wishes, which could hardly be heard over the drumming and singing of the wedding party.

However, as he neared Nazzim's house one old woman leaned far out of her upper window and shouted, "There goes the handsome Laban to marry Nazzim's ugly daughter."

Laban looked up quickly to see who dared to shout such a thing, but the woman had disappeared and the shutters had been quickly pulled together with a bang. He glanced around to see if anyone else had heard what the woman said and then determined that they were more interested in the dancing, jigging step they fashioned to the steady beat of the drums.

It was the words, however, that continued to beat in Laban's head. He wanted to be envied not pitied. If the old women shouted such rubbish, then it was certain that the people of Haran were whispering the same thing behind his back. If they felt that he was so mismatched, what would they think when they heard that Rebekah, who had turned away many suitors, was going to marry old Nazzim? He could feel the blood rising hotly and knew his face was red with frustration.

At last they turned from the narrow lane out into a wide cobbled area. Facing them was an impressive doorway opening to the courtyard of Nazzim's house. Palm branches festooned the opening and torches flickered and flamed. The sweet odor of incense filled the air. From inside the courtyard the cry went up, "The bridegroom comes, the bridegroom comes." Immediately torches appeared along the wall and the cry sounded from every corner of the inner court, across the roof, and down into the servants' quarters. Cymbals crashed and women gave the yodeling joy cry that signaled a wedding procession.

Framed in the gate were dancers and jugglers. Behind them could be seen the bridal party with the bride covered from head to toe in a glittering garment fashioned of imported material decorated with pearls and rare medallions. On her head she wore a queenly crown of cleverly fashioned flowers and gold leaves, and from it hung a bridal veil so thick her features were completely hidden. Laban did not see all of this at first glance, but as they led his tawny donkey in to stand beside her white mule, he noticed every detail.

The torches glinted on the elaborate crown and flickered over the costly gown and elegant trappings of her mule. Only her hands were visible, and they were well shaped and smooth. It was obvious they had been spared from the hard work of most women. He noticed with satisfaction that they were jeweled and decorated with a careful tracery of vines and flowers done in black kohl. If there was anything ugly about his bride, it was carefully hidden under the heavy veil, and for the advantage he was gaining, he could manage to live with that.

She sat with her head held high and had not looked in his direction. Most brides feigned shyness. It was the custom. A shy bride had to be approached like a skittish mule. Every man in Haran knew how to deal with such a situation, but if she were so unafraid and bold as to not be crying and downcast, it bode no good. Laban felt a bit unnerved by the prospect of encountering not only an ugly woman but one who dared look a man in the face as though she were his equal.

With a shrug he dismissed the bad omens and looked beyond her to see Nazzim sitting on a gray mule dressed in his most festive attire. Nazzim had obviously been watching him and now slightly raised his hand in recognition and greeting. A surge of well-being reassured Laban that all would be well. Even the marriage of Nazzim to his sister would be for the best. It was an opportunity that could not be missed and certainly Rebekah would understand.

With a nod of his head and a slight tap of his riding prod to the mule's flank, Laban led the procession out the gate and down the dark lanes that led to his own home, the house of Nahor.

The pleasant odor of meat turning on spits filled the air. Barley cakes were ready to serve hot off the rounded ovens, while big woven trays of fat figs, dried raisins, and nuts of every variety sat waiting to be served.

The women had prepared a raised seat with carpets and cushions for the bride and groom, and beside the bride's seat, a place of special honor for her father, Nazzim.

When the bridal party arrived, Laban's father, Bethuel, met them at the gate and led the bride and her father to the places prepared for them. Laban followed and was surprised to see that when his bride was helped down from her mule, she was as tall as her brothers. She still held her head in the proud, arrogant way he had first noticed. She paused for a moment, lifted the top veil slightly, and took a quick look at her surroundings. This was not something most brides would have dared to do. Once more Laban felt a twinge of concern lest she be more than he could easily manage.

There was some stir when the bridal pair came to be seated. Nazzim insisted on sitting between his daughter and Laban. "How else can you point out your sister?" he whispered.

Laban looked around the courtyard. At first Rebekah seemed to be missing. Then he spotted her squatting beside his grandfather. She had brought him some choice pieces of roast meat on a rounded loaf of bread and was helping him as he ate. "See," Laban said, nodding in the direction of his grandfather's favorite seat next to the wall, "she has gotten some food for the old man."

Nazzim leaned forward and squinted. "Is she always that helpful?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose so," Laban answered.

Nazzim clutched his arm and spoke in a low, urgent tone, "Get her to come here. I must have a closer look."

Laban was irritated at the old man's insistence, but he didn't dare show his true feelings. Instead he called for one of the servants and ordered him to go bring his sister to serve the bride.

They watched the man go elbowing through the crowd and then talk and gesture toward the dais. Rebekah smiled and nodded, then hurried off. Laban watched her go and almost felt a twinge of pity for her that he hadn't felt before. *She has no idea that with her nice ways and pleasant smile she is sealing her fate. He will pay any price to get her and there will be no way for her to escape.*

When she came back with a tray of the most succulent roast and fattest figs, she first offered his bride the food. Laban noticed it was rejected. Rebekah was not at all upset. Instead she turned to Nazzim and said with her most enticing smile, "I'm sure you must be almost faint with hunger."

"Hunger, yes, yes." He took a bone with some meat on it and began to chew at it, while all the time he was looking at her and mumbling unintelligible grunts of approval. Laban could see the confusion on her face. He glanced quickly at Nazzim and saw that his greedy eyes were traveling over her in much the same way as he would examine a sheep he was going to buy.

Laban had seen enough. He wanted to go through with the deal, and he realized if he watched a second more, he would be calling it off. He dismissed her with a nod and watched her go back to where the women were serving the trays of dried fruit.

Nazzim finished the meat and threw the bone on the floor, then wiped his mouth and fingers on his sleeve. "As fine a young woman as I've seen," he said, turning to Laban. "You can ask your price and I'll pay it."

"You must give me time," Laban said as he thought of the difficulties he would face.

"Don't take too long. I'm an impatient man where pretty women are concerned," Nazzim said.

The remark momentarily sickened Laban, but he quickly squelched the feeling and smiled. "Before the new moon I'll bring you the good news."

With that Nazzim motioned for his men, gave Laban a long, meaningful look, and then followed them out to where his mule was waiting. He had not said a word to his daughter and she had not spoken to him. She appeared silent and unmoving like a graven image. Laban moved over to sit beside her and the crowd of well-wishers shouted and clapped.

Laban would have liked to prolong the time in the courtyard, but he felt

so awkward sitting beside this silent, proud woman that he was ready to bring the whole thing to a swift conclusion. To be alone with her was to face the whole bargain squarely, and then he would know just what he had to deal with.

He stood and nodded to the relatives and friends. He noted that they whispered in amazement that he was so obviously anxious to be alone with his bride. At this signal, Rebekah and her mother with the serving girls from Nazzim's house came to lead the bride into the bridal chamber.

Laban glanced at his bride and noted that as she stood she was still holding her head high with the same arrogant air about her. "She is not one to submit to anyone for any reason," he conjectured.

The men led Laban to the side room where he waited for a signal from his mother that the bride was ready for him. As the time passed he became more and more nervous, and the men laughed at him and gave him bits of advice. "First, you must get the veil off so you can look at her face," one of them joked.

"Remember if it isn't to your liking you can send her back to her father before any damage is done," one of the others whispered.

Laban didn't answer. No matter what she looked like, he was going to keep her. Nazzim was rich beyond belief, and with Rebekah married to him they would have control of all the wealth of Haran.

To his surprise it was Rebekah who came to get him. When he stepped outside the door, she whispered, "Your bride insists that she will not take off her veil until daylight. Even though we have made the bed and helped her in, she will not take off the veil."

Laban shrugged. "That may be just as well. Who knows what secrets are hidden by that veil."

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As it turned out Laban was pleasantly surprised. His veiled bride was bold and passionate, with none of the giggling shyness brides were rumored to hide behind. This woman was confident and shamelessly aggressive. Laban even found himself imagining that she was ravishingly beautiful. Since there was no oil lamp and the moon did not shine into the high window of the room, he saw nothing until morning.

When the day dawned Laban woke first and took several moments to figure out where he was and what had happened. He turned and saw his bride,

still hidden by the veil, and it all came back to him. Carefully he touched the gold coins that held the veil in place. Immediately Barida was awake. She sat up slowly and then tossing her head she spoke in a slow, deliberate manner, "If you find I am not to your liking, will you send me back?"

"No," Laban answered after a slight hesitation, "I have no intention of sending you back. What made you think I might send you back?"

"I've been told that I am not beautiful. Most men want a woman to be beautiful."

"Who told you that?"

"My father will not have a woman unless she is beautiful."

Laban was quiet for a few minutes while he thought about what he should do and what he should say. He remembered that his first impression of this woman was of someone who was willful and arrogant. He must not give her the satisfaction of knowing that she pleased him in any way. Let her worry a bit about her status. Finally he said, "With me beauty isn't everything. There are other things that matter even more." He didn't tell her what they were.

"Now," he said, "it's time to see the bride." She lifted her head slowly and turned toward him but made no move to unfasten the coins that held the veil. Awkwardly he fumbled with the fasteners and slowly the veil dropped. He had expected her to look away but instead she faced him still with the proud lift to her jaw. She was indeed very plain. She had small eyes pinched into a permanent squint, a large nose like her father's, and her mouth was small and pouting. "For my purposes you will do very well," he said at last.

He never mentioned his disappointment to anyone, and he consoled himself in his choice by reminding himself that his sister, Rebekah, would face a far more difficult proposition. Old Nazzim was lusty and ugly and he could not imagine Rebekah having a moment's happiness. *It will all be worthwhile. He will not require the special fertility rites at the temple, and once the marriage takes place we will be well on our way to controlling the old man's fortune.*

* * *

Laban wasted no time before telling Rebekah and his father what he had in mind. It was two days later in the afternoon while the others were taking a noonday nap that he broached the subject. "My sister," he began, "my father and I have prayed and given choice gifts to the old goat-man under the stairs. We all know that he has unusual powers."

Here he stopped and looked at Bethuel, hoping he would go on and tell Rebekah about Nazzim. Bethuel said nothing and finally Rebekah asked, "I know you have burned the costly incense and anointed the old god's head, and I have even been told you did all this so he would find a rich husband for me. Is that true?"

Both Laban and Bethuel were taken aback. Neither knew what to say. Finally Laban nodded. "It's true. We asked for a rich husband."

"And?" Rebekah said.

Again Laban and Bethuel looked at each other. Neither wanted to be the one to break the news to her. Finally Laban spoke. "The old goat-man has answered wonderfully. It is the rich Nazzim himself that has asked for your hand."

"Nazzim?" Rebekah puzzled for a moment over the name. "Certainly not the old man that came with Barida?" she said finally.

"Yes, yes," Bethuel said. "He is old and very ugly but he is rich. He could give you everything."

"That's what we asked the old goat-man for . . . a rich husband," Laban said.

"Rich husbands come with some disadvantages," Bethuel hastened to add.

"He is old. You won't be bothered with him for long," Laban said, seeing the look of disgust on Rebekah's face. He desperately wanted her to agree without any unpleasantness.

"Well," she said finally after recovering from her initial shock, "you can go tell the old goat-man I have other plans." She looked at them with complete confidence as though she knew something they didn't.

"What other plans?" they almost shouted.

"Well, when I heard of your dealings with the old goat-man, I went and talked to my old nurse, Deborah. She reminded me of the God of Abraham, Elohim, and I have asked Him to find me a husband."

Bethuel and Laban were speechless for a moment. They couldn't imagine such foolishness. "The God of Abraham," Laban finally said. "He can't be seen; you can't deal with Him."

"Why not?" she asked with a saucy toss of her head.

"Well, you can't bargain with Him," Bethuel said.

"You can't even threaten Him," Laban said.

“We can take the old goat-man out and beat him if he disappoints us, but Abraham’s God can’t be touched,” Bethuel added.

“Where would Abraham’s God ever find anyone richer than Nazzim and someone who would not require the fertility rites?” Laban felt they were certainly winning and she would have to agree.

Rebekah was standing with her back to the courtyard wall. Behind her spread a huge grapevine with shiny leaves and ripe fruit. Carefully she pulled off a cluster of grapes and looked at them. It gave her a moment to think. “If by the time of the new moon,” she said finally, “Abraham’s God has not brought me a better and richer husband, I promise to marry old Nazzim.”

Bethuel and Laban looked at each other and smiled. They felt they had won and with so little trouble. “Then you agree to marry Nazzim?” Laban said, wanting to pin her down.

“Only if the God of Abraham fails to send me a better and richer husband,” she repeated.

Laban could hardly believe it had been so simple. He smiled again. “The God of Abraham has undoubtedly gone off into the desert with him, and it is the god Sin and the goat-man that rule here. I have no fear that Elohim will hear you or that He will answer and send you a rich husband. This is all just foolishness.” He began to feel a bit sorry for her, seeing how trusting she was and how sure she was that the God of Abraham could help her. “To marry Nazzim may seem hard to you, but you won’t regret it, I promise you. The old man will be dead in a year and then you can marry anyone you please.”

With that Laban and Bethuel went out the gate and left her standing by the grape arbor. “Oh God of my uncle Abraham,” she prayed, “You see how they are thinking. If You don’t hear me and help me, the old goat-man will win and I will have to marry that horrible old man.” There was no answer but she was excited. If the God of Abraham did accomplish this impossible thing, how splendid it would be. She sat down on the bench where Nahor usually sat and enjoyed a few of the dark red grapes.

Would Elohim act in time? Or would she be stuck with the distasteful, ugly old man?