



*To Dwell  
among Cedars*

THE COVENANT HOUSE 1

CONNILYN COSSETTE  
CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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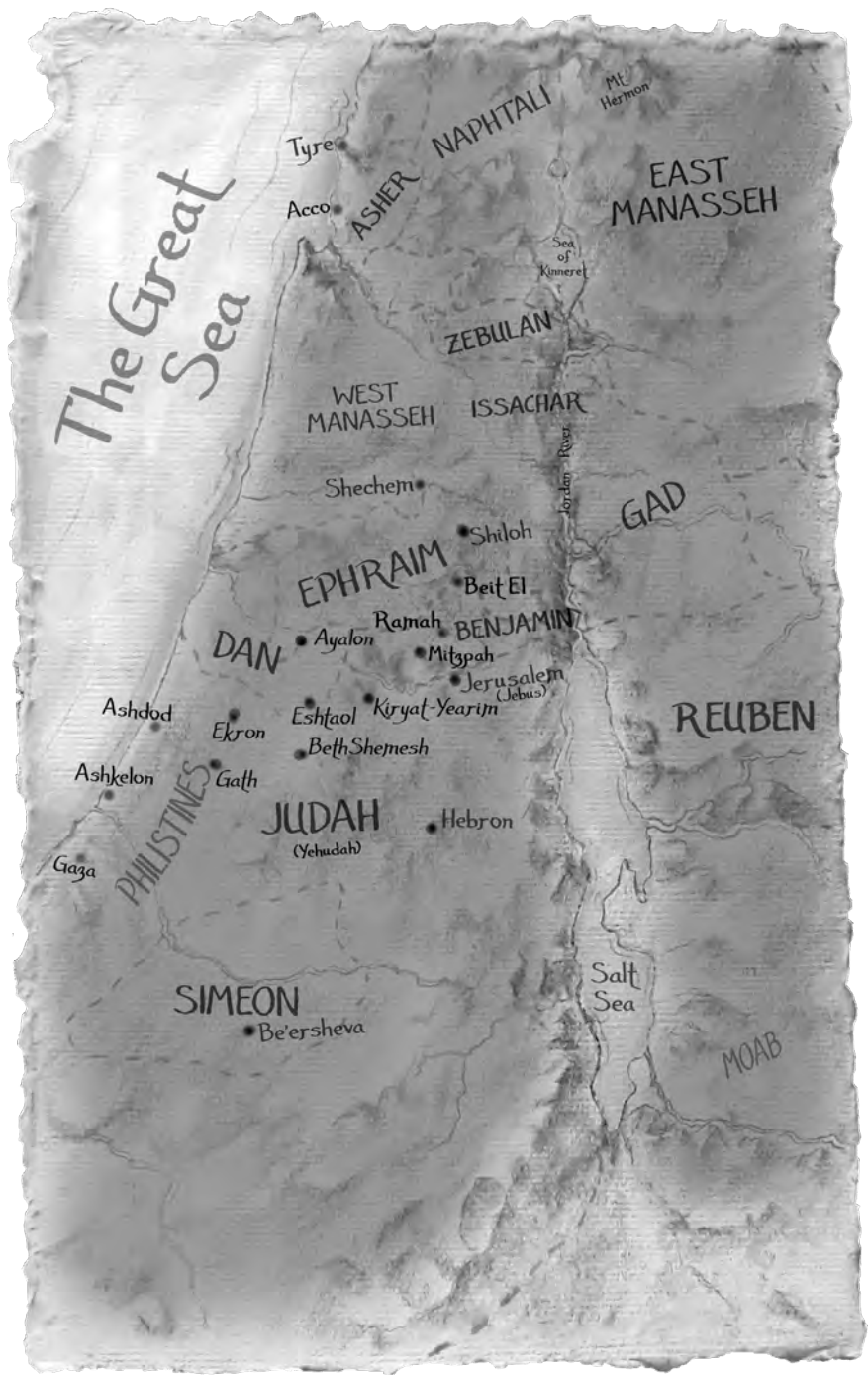
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For my Grandma Ruth,

whose love for Israel and unwavering support for its people inspired my explorations of the roots of my faith, and whose insistence on standing four-year-old me on a piano bench to sing beloved hymns for her annual holiday gatherings was the foundation of my love of music. “If they won’t listen to you sing, Conni,” she used to say, “then go tell your story to the rocks. Jesus will hear you.” Her memory is a blessing to me and all who knew her, and I cannot wait to worship beside her in the world to come.





# Part One

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Judges 21:25

Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. They encamped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines encamped at Aphek. The Philistines drew up in line against Israel, and when the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men on the field of battle. And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.” So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

As soon as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth

resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, “What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” And when they learned that the ark of the LORD had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, “A god has come into the camp.” And they said, “Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.”

So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

1 Samuel 4:1–11

# One

## *Arisa*

1070 BC

ASHDOD, PHILISTIA

“Lukio!” I screamed, as a wave crashed over us and yanked my brother’s small hand from mine. He disappeared under the surface, and I lunged into the foamy surf, gasping with relief when I caught hold of his tunic, then gagged as brine hit the back of my throat. My fingers stiff from fear, I pulled upward until he emerged, sputtering seawater. Tightening my grip, I curled my toes into the shifting sand as I fought the insistent pull of the sea and dragged us both to the beach, fighting my exhaustion and the weight of a seven-year-old who stood a head taller than others his age. When we were finally free of the current and the earth was once again firm beneath us, we flopped our sodden bodies on the sand, chests heaving and eyes on the pure blue canopy above.

“I told you not to go out so far,” I panted, squinting against the glaring sun.

“But I saw the biggest shell, Risi,” he said, his voice small and



contrite. “It was rolling out with the waves. I couldn’t let it get away.”

“And you should drown yourself for a shell? You have plenty, Lukio, a whole collection.”

“But—”

“No. You must listen to me and not wander off,” I said, hoping I sounded enough like our aunt Jacame that he would take me seriously. “You might have been dragged out to sea had I not seen you go under.” Angry tears burned the backs of my eyes.

Lukio was silent. His wide eyes—one green, one brown—watched me as I railed at him and the shock of what had nearly happened caught up to me.

“We only have each other,” I whispered, digging my fingers into the gritty sand. “What would I do without you?”

With a sob he flung himself over me, his arms winding around my neck. “I’m sorry, Risi! I only wanted to get the shell for you. It was a purple one like you like—” The rest of his explanation was lost as his tearful apology muffled against my wet tunic.

I sat up, pulling him into my lap and gripping his sea-soaked body tight against me. I kissed his head, salt on my lips as I took a deep breath and reassured myself he was safe. The sea hadn’t taken him. We were together, and we were both safe.

A shadow moved over us, and I looked up to find Jacame frowning at us. “If the two of you are quite finished playing in the water, there are baskets to carry home.”

“We weren’t playing—” Lukio began.

“Of course,” I interrupted, not wanting my aunt to know I’d been closing my eyes and humming through the song I’d learned from Azuvah instead of watching my brother. I’d been trying to practice the strange melody and the words in the foreign tongue our Hebrew slave spoke to us whenever my aunt and uncle were not around.

Pushing Lukio from my lap, I stood and brushed sand off both of us, then turned a bright smile on my aunt. “How can we help?”

“There are three baskets of goods, and that old woman only

has two hands,” said Jacame, as if such a thing were an affront to her. “You children can each take one.”

My mother’s sister was not unkind to us, but there was little warmth in the woman. The deep lines between her eyes attested to a lifetime of furrowed brows and she had none of the graceful beauty my mother had been famous for. Still, she had been more than generous to take us into her home five years ago when my father dumped us, along with Azuvah, at her threshold before he boarded a ship for the last time, heading back to the distant northern shores his ancestors hailed from.

Not wanting to chance being separated from Lukio for anything, I dutifully gripped his hand in mine and followed my aunt back up to the market near the port, vowing to never again take my eyes off my brother. He was my responsibility and had been since our mother died giving him life. I loved no one in this world more than Lukio.

Azuvah, the slave who had been with my family for as long as I could remember, stood waiting for us, three large baskets at her feet. Although her expression remained neutral, her deep brown eyes flitted to my brother and me, relief in their murky depths that made me wonder whether she’d seen Lukio go under the water. The old Hebrew woman saved her smiles and stories and songs only for Lukio and me in private; to Jacame she displayed only blank-faced submission, as was expected of her. Like me, I suspected she would do anything to please my aunt, not wanting to jeopardize her position in the household.

Once the three market baskets had been distributed—mine full of fish, Azuvah’s a variety of shellfish, and Lukio’s a large bundle of the finest papyrus and an assortment of imported spices—Jacame led us to the river, heedless of the weight we carried for her.

Lukio had been thrilled when our aunt insisted we accompany her to the port north of the city, not only because it gave him a chance to enjoy the sea, but because it was necessary to ride on one of the shallow-bottomed boats that ferried goods up and down the river. Once he was safely tucked into the hull between Azuvah

and me, his eyes sparkled with excitement for the return trip as he watched the men push the vessel away from the shore and begin to row against the current. He was enthralled by every stroke and every guttural command the leader of the team spat at the rowers. But as for me, no matter how lovely the boat's bird-headed prows might be or how swiftly it cut through the water, I could not help but remember that a ship had been the very means by which our father abandoned us.

The sun had not even reached its high point by the time the enormous walls of Ashdod rose up before us, the most prestigious of the Five Cities sprawling like an overindulged queen at the conflux of the river and the most important trade road between Egypt and Damascus. Colorful banners danced on the ramparts in the distance, welcoming us home.

The moment the boat touched land, Jacame hissed at us to disembark with all haste. Messengers had spread word that the army would arrive back in Ashdod today, two months after heading off to war against the Hebrews. With her three sons among its ranks, she was determined to provide them with a lavish homecoming feast this evening, which is why she'd insisted on meticulously tending to every detail. I knew little about this latest struggle against Azuvah's people but had heard my uncle Harrom describe them as a plague over the hills and valleys to the east. This was only one of many battles we'd fought with the Hebrews since our people had arrived on the shores of this fertile land, but it was the first major one since their champion had brought a temple down on the heads of a large number of our commanders and leaders a few years ago.

Stumbling as she stepped out of the boat, two of the fish Azuvah carried tumbled out of her basket and plunked into the muddy water with a small splash.

"Look what you've done, you clumsy old woman!" snapped Jacame. "I selected each one of those fish myself! Now we will have two less to serve this evening. The feast will be ruined! I should make you walk back to the fish market and purchase more."

Her harsh rebuke was sliced in two by a chorus of horn blasts coming from the direction of the trade road, and I hoped it was enough to make her forget her threat of forcing Azuvah to walk back to the port, a journey that would take many hours.

My aunt's face went pale as a hand flew to her heart. "Have they returned already?"

Another joyful blast of the horns answered her question; the army had indeed returned. All around us people began moving toward the sounds of rhythmic drumbeats and shouts that announced a triumphant arrival.

The third blast of the rams' horn rang with such a distinctive warble of victory that it seemed to vibrate my bones. We must have won a great battle against the Hebrews.

Jacame demanded we hurry, anxious to catch sight of her sons among the long parade of soldiers that would soon be entering the city gates, their long spears held aloft and round shields tucked against broad chests in an impressive show of Philistine military might. She pushed through the crowd, caring nothing for the fact that Azuvah, Lukio, and I still hefted overflowing baskets.

We allowed the current of bodies to carry us along, keeping pace with the soldiers as they headed toward the center of town, where Dagon stood watch over Ashdod within his imposing and ornate temple, bestowing prosperity and fertility on the people who'd adopted the once foreign god as their own. Today, our victorious soldiers would deliver the spoils of the battle to his feet, and the leaders would offer libations and sacrifices in thanks for his favor.

"Stay close. I don't want you to get lost in the crowd," I said to my wide-eyed brother as the curious crowd around us began to thicken and came to a halt before the temple.

Lukio pressed in close to me, and I encouraged him to place his basket at his feet like I had and keep a tight hold on my hand. I was unable to see much of anything with the shifting, roiling crowd in my way, but he was enclosed by a wall of bodies and likely frightened by the chaos.

Through the gaps between shoulders, I caught a glimpse of the

commanders of the procession, their bronze-scaled armor flashing in the sunlight and their feathered headdresses regal and bright against the blue sky. At the very front of the parade was the *seren* himself. The young king of Ashdod perched atop an enormous stallion, his own polished armor bearing the marks of the recent battle, and both his thick-muscled arms were wrapped in linen, evidence of his bravery on the battlefield. One of the tallest and most handsome men I'd ever seen, the *seren* was known to be ruthless in his dealings with enemies and fearless on the battlefield. Even among the other four kings of Philistia, he stood apart. Regal and well-deserving of his scepter, there was no better man to rule the region. A warm swell of pride in my people and my king rushed through my whole body.

“What is that?” I asked Jacame when I caught the barest glimpse of something sparkling in the bed of an ox-drawn wagon. “I can't see.”

“It's some sort of box,” said my aunt. “Made of gold and with winged creatures atop the lid. It must be a trophy of the battle, depictions of the gods of the Hebrews, I would guess.”

*God*, my mind silently corrected. Azuvah was very firm that her people only worshiped one god. An all-powerful one. I'd heard stories of Yahweh from her lips since I was tiny, always whispered in secret or sung about in her Hebrew lullabies. It was implicitly understood that the stories of Yahweh and his deeds were to be kept between Azuvah, Lukio, and me, and since I did not want them to end, I had never breathed a word about them to anyone else.

The urge to see the box for myself pulsed through my limbs. Something about Jacame's description seemed familiar, and I glanced at Azuvah for confirmation that this golden box was indeed a Hebrew treasure.

Azuvah was no young woman—her hair had been gray for as long as I remembered—but in the past four years, it seemed her wrinkles had multiplied and her back stooped further every month. I wondered sometimes if her aging had been compounded

by her additional labor as a kitchen slave, instead of tending only to Lukio and me as she'd done in my father's house. But now every remnant of color fled her skin as a look of absolute horror settled into the lines of her face.

"Mercy," she whispered in her own tongue, her eyes following the wagon with a strange look of longing as it passed almost directly in front of us. "Have mercy on us."

Regardless that the day was warm, with a gentle breeze sweeping around me and brushing across my shoulders, a cold finger of dread slipped up my spine. How could a box frighten her so?

"Make way!" shouted one of the soldiers. "Make way for the shame of our enemies! Make a path to Dagon!"

The crowd scuttled back a few steps as the wagon rattled along, and the shift in movement afforded me a few moments to see the golden box with my own eyes. There were indeed some sort of winged creatures, their feathers curled as if in protection over whatever might lay inside. I wished I could ask Azuvah if she knew about the contents, but I dared not speak of it in front of Jacame.

The crowd jostled again as a loud buzz of voices rose up, mocking, jeering, whistling derisively at the box, like it was the very embodiment of our foes. The closer the soldiers came to the temple porch, the louder the people around us grew. A few pieces of soft fruit were thrown at the box, the pulpy missiles striking its sides with a wet crash. Each time it was hit, the delighted crowd roared, their fervor going nearly wild as the soldiers maneuvered the wagon until the bed was at the steps of the temple of Dagon.

I, however, could not take my eyes off the intriguing object. Even as the soldiers slid it off the end of the wagon, it shimmered in the sunlight, looking like its surfaces were alive and glowing. I had the odd urge to push through the assembly, race to its side, and place myself between it and the rabid crowd.

Four soldiers lifted the chest with poles that were slipped through loops on the sides and hefted it atop their shoulders. Then they took the four steps up to the temple porch and none

too gently dropped the golden box just at the threshold, an offering to the enormous depiction of Dagon within. The chest sat on the porch, looking small and sad between the towering scarlet and blue columns on either side.

The seren ascended the stairs, his two high commanders at his heels, to confer with some of the priests who'd been watching over the procession in delighted anticipation. My uncle Harrom, the High Priest of Ashdod, was included in the discussion, a smug grin on his clean-shaven face, but I could not peel my eyes away from the shining box.

"I want to go home, Risi," yelled Lukio over the melee. No matter that he was tall for his age, my poor brother could see little more than backs and legs and arms all around him.

"Soon," I said, drawing him closer. Even if Jacame desired to leave—and the elated expression on her face told me she had no intention of doing so—the shifting, crowing crowd would never allow us to pass through.

At my other side, Azuvah stood perfectly still, her eyes fixed on the box and her lips moving silently, while her fingers worried at the knotted threads she wore around her wrist.

My uncle finally stepped forward, then lifted his hands, palms outstretched. A breeze off the ocean fluttered the tall crimson feathers on his ceremonial headdress as he waited for the crowd to settle. When the taunts and hisses finally melted into uneasy quiet, the priest slid a slow and steady kohl-lined gaze over the crowd.

"People of Ashdod," said Harrom, a benevolent smile spreading across his face as he gestured toward the seren, who looked over the crowd with regal satisfaction. "Our exalted king and his faithful men have returned with news to gladden our hearts. From the time the gods brought our ancestors across the Great Sea and, in their divine wisdom, led them to these shores, we've been fighting for our place in this fertile land. But as you have guessed, our valiant warriors have finally brought the Hebrews to their knees. The victory was decisive and our enemies' losses extensive. This land is ours!"

The crowd erupted again, the roar of approval for such news nearly deafening. With satisfaction on his face, Harrom allowed the chaos for a while longer before again gesturing for quiet. Once the people settled down again, he lifted his palm toward the golden box, which sat forlorn and askew before the threshold of the temple that threatened to consume it whole.

“Behold, people of Ashdod, Dagon has bested the God of the Hebrews,” he bellowed, victory lifting his voice to impossible volume. “Yahweh. Is. Vanquished.”