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WHEN Tamar saw Judah leading a donkey burdened with sacks and a fine rug, she took her hoe and ran to the farthest border of her father's land. Sick with dread, she worked with her back to the house, hoping he would pass by and seek some other girl for his son. When her nurse called her, Tamar pretended not to hear and hacked harder at the earth with her hoe. Tears blinded her.

"Tamar!" Acsah puffed as she reached her. "Didn't you see Judah? You must return to the house with me now. Your mother is about to send your brothers after you, and they'll not take kindly to your delay." Acsah grimaced. "Don't look at me like that, child. This isn't of my doing. Would you prefer a marriage with one of those Ishmaelite traders on his way to Egypt?"

"You've heard about Judah's son just as I have."

"I've heard." She held out her hand, and Tamar reluctantly relinquished the hoe. "Perhaps it will not be as bad as you think."

But Tamar saw in her nurse's eyes that Acsah had her own grave doubts.

Tamar's mother met them and grabbed Tamar by the arm. "If I had time, I would beat you for running off!" She pulled Tamar inside the house and into the women's quarters.

No sooner was Tamar through the doorway than her sisters laid hands upon her and tugged at her clothing. Tamar gasped in pain as one yanked the cover carelessly from her head, pulling her hair as well. "Stop it!" She raised her hands to ward them off, but her mother stepped in.

"Stand still, Tamar! Since it took Acsah so long to fetch you, we must hurry."

The girls were all talking at once, excited, eager.

"Mother, let me go just as I am!"

"Straight from the fields? You will not! You will be presented in the finest we have. Judah has brought gifts with him. And don't you dare shame us with tears, Tamar."

Swallowing convulsively, Tamar fought for self-control. She had no choice but to submit to her mother and sisters' ministrations. They were using the best garments and perfume for her appearance before Judah, the Hebrew. The man had three sons. If she pleased him, it would be the firstborn, Er, who would become her husband. Last harvest, when Judah and his sons had brought their flocks to graze in the harvested fields, her father had commanded her to work nearby. She knew what he hoped to accomplish. Now, it seemed he had.

“Mother, please. I need another year or two before I’m ready to enter a household of my own.”

“Your father decides when you’re old enough.” Her mother wouldn’t look her in the eyes. “It’s not your right to question his judgment.” Tamar’s sisters chattered like magpies, making her want to scream. Her mother clapped her hands. “Enough! Help me get Tamar ready!”

Clenching her jaw, Tamar closed her eyes and decided she must resign herself to her fate. She had known that one day she would marry. She had also known her father would choose her husband. Her one solace was the ten-month betrothal period. At least she would have time to prepare her mind and heart for the life looming before her.

Acsah touched her shoulder. “Try to relax.” She untied Tamar’s hair and began to brush it with long, firm strokes. “Think soothing thoughts, dear one.”

She felt like an animal her father was preparing for sale. Ah, wasn’t she? Anger and despair filled her. Why did life have to be so cruel and unfair?

“Petra, bring the scented oil and rub her skin with it. She mustn’t smell like a field slave!”

“Better if she smelled of sheep and goats,” Acsah said. “The Hebrew would like that.”

The girls laughed in spite of their mother’s reprimand. “You’re not making things better, Acsah. Now, hush!”

Tamar grasped her mother’s skirt. “Please, Mother. Couldn’t you speak to Father for my sake? This boy is . . . is evil!” Tears came in a rush before she could stop them. “Please, I don’t want to marry Er.”

Her mother’s mouth jerked, but she did not weaken. She

pried Tamar's hand from the folds of her skirt and held it tightly between her own. "You know I can't alter your father's plans, Tamar. What good would come of my saying anything against this match now other than to bring shame upon us all? Judah is *here*."

Tamar drew in a ragged sob, fear flooding her veins.

Her mother gripped her chin and forced her head up. "I've prepared you for this day. You're of no use to us if you don't marry Er. See this for what it is: good fortune for your father's house. You will build a bridge between Zimran and Judah. We will have the assurance of peace."

"There are more of us than there are of them, Mother."

"Numbers don't always matter. You're no longer a child, Tamar. You have more courage than this."

"More courage than Father?"

Her mother's eyes darkened with anger. She released Tamar abruptly. "You will do as you're told or bear the full consequences of your disobedience."

Defeated, Tamar said no more. All she had done was to bring humiliation upon herself. She wanted to scream at her sisters to stop their silly prattling. How could they rejoice over her misfortune? What did it matter if Er was handsome? Hadn't they heard of his cruelty? Didn't they know of his arrogance? Er was said to cause trouble wherever he went!

"More kohl, Acsah. It will make her look older."

Tamar could not calm the wild beating of her heart. The palms of her hands grew damp. If all went as her father hoped, her future would be settled today.

This is a good thing, Tamar told herself, *a good thing*. Her throat was hot and tight with tears.

“Stand, Tamar,” her mother said. “Let me have a look at you.”

Tamar obeyed. Her mother sighed heavily and tugged at the folds of the red dress, redraping the front. “We must conceal her lack of curves, Acsah, or Zimran will be hard pressed to convince Judah she is old enough to conceive.”

“I can show him the cloth, my lady.”

“Good. Have it ready in case it’s requested.”

Tamar felt the heat flood her face. Was nothing private? Did everyone have to discuss the most personal events in her life? Her first show of blood had proclaimed her womanhood and her usefulness as a bargaining tool for her father. She was a commodity to be sold, a tool to forge an alliance between two clans, a sacrifice for an assured peace. She had hoped to be overlooked for another year or two. Fourteen seemed too young to draw a man’s interest.

This is a good thing, Tamar told herself again. Even while other thoughts crowded in, tightening her stomach with fear, she repeated the words over and over, trying to convince herself. *This is a good thing*.

Perhaps if she hadn’t heard the stories . . .

For as long as Tamar could remember, her father had been afraid of Judah and his people. She’d heard the stories about the power of the God of the Hebrews, a god who had turned Sodom and Gomorrah to rubble beneath a storm of fire and brimstone, leaving a wasteland of white sands and a growing salten sea behind. No Canaanite god had ever shown such power!

And there were the stories of what the Hebrews had done to the town of Shechem, stories of mayhem . . .

“Why must it be this way, Mother? Have I no choice in what’s to become of me?”

“No more choice than any other girl. I know how you’re feeling. I was no older than you when I came into your father’s house. It is the way of things, Tamar. Haven’t I prepared you for this day from the time you were a little girl? I have told you what you were born to do. Struggling against your fate is like wrestling the wind.” She gripped Tamar’s shoulders. “Be a good daughter and obey without quibbling. Be a good wife and bear many sons. Do these things, and you’ll bring honor upon yourself. And if you’re fortunate, your husband will come to love you. If not, your future will still be secure in the hands of sons. When you’re old, they’ll take care of you just as your brothers will take care of me. The only satisfaction a woman has in this life is knowing she has built up the household of her husband.”

“But this is Judah’s son, Mother. Judah’s son Er.”

Her mother’s eyes flickered, but she remained firm. “Find a way to fulfill your duty and bear sons. You must be strong, Tamar. These people are fierce and unpredictable. And they are proud.”

Tamar turned her face away. “I don’t want to marry Er. I can’t marry him—”

Her mother grasped her hair and yanked her head back. “Would you destroy our family by humiliating such a man as this Hebrew? Do you think your father would let you live if you went into that room and begged to be spared marriage to Er? Do you think Judah would take such an insult lightly? I tell you this. I would join your father in stoning you if you dare risk the lives of my sons. Do you

hear me? Your father decides whom and when you marry. Not you!" She let go of her roughly and stepped away, trembling. "Do not act like a fool!"

Tamar closed her eyes. The silence in the room was heavy. She felt her sisters and nurse staring at her. "I'm sorry." Her lip quivered. "I'm sorry. I'll do what I must."

"As we all must." Sighing, her mother took her hand and rubbed it with scented oil. "Be wise as a serpent, Tamar. Judah has shown wisdom in considering you. You are strong, stronger than these others. You have quick wits and strength you don't even realize yet. This Hebrew has taken an interest in you. For all our sakes, you must please him. Be a good wife to his son. Build a bridge between our people. Keep the peace between us."

The weight of responsibility being given her made her bow her head. "I will try."

"You will do more than try. You will succeed." Her mother leaned down and kissed her cheek briskly. "Now sit quietly and collect yourself while I send word to your father that you're ready."

Tamar tried to think calmly. Judah was one of the sons of Jacob who had annihilated the town of Shechem over the rape of their sister. Perhaps, had the son of Hamor known more about these men, he would have left the girl alone. When he realized his mistake, he made every attempt to placate Jacob's sons. They wanted blood. The prince and his father had agreed to have every man in Shechem mutilated by the Hebrew rite of circumcision. They were desperate to bring about a marriage alliance and assurance of peace between the two tribes! They had done all the

Hebrews required, and still, three days after the Shechemites were circumcised, while they were all sick with fevers, Judah and his brothers took vengeance. They hadn't been content with the blood of the offender; they'd cut down every man by the sword. Not one survived, and the city was plundered.

Hebrews were a stench in Canaanite nostrils. Their presence invoked fear and distrust. Even though Judah had left his father's tent and come to live among Tamar's people, her father had never slept easily with Judah so close. Even Judah's longtime friendship with Hirah the Adullamite didn't reassure her father. Nor did it matter that Judah had taken a Canaanite wife, who had given him three sons and trained them up in Canaanite ways. Judah was Hebrew. Judah was a foreigner. Judah was a thorn in Zimran's side.

Over the years, her father had made contracts with Judah to bring flocks to his harvested fields. The arrangement had proven beneficial to everyone and had brought about a tentative alliance. All through those years, Tamar had known her father sought a better and more lasting way to keep peace between himself and the Hebrews. A marriage between the two households might ensure that if she succeeded in blessing Judah's household with sons.

Oh, Tamar understood her father's determination to bring about her marriage to Er. She even understood his need for it. She understood her role in all of it. But understanding didn't make it any easier. After all, she was the one being offered like a sacrificial lamb. She had no choice as to whether she married or not. She had no choice as to the man she would marry. Her only choice was in how she faced her fate.

Tamar was ready when her mother returned. Her feelings were hidden as she bowed down to her. When Tamar raised her head, her mother placed both hands upon her and murmured a blessing. Then she tipped Tamar's chin. "Life is difficult, Tamar. I know that better than you do. Every girl dreams of love when she's young, but this is life, not idle dreams. Had you been born first, we would have sent you to the temple of Timnah instead of your sister."

"I would not have been happy there." In fact, she would have preferred death by her own hand to the life her sister led.

"So this is the only life left to you, Tamar. Embrace it."

Resolved to do so, Tamar rose. She tried to still the tremors as she followed her mother from the women's chamber. Judah might still decide she was too young. He might say she was too skinny, too ugly. She might yet be spared from marrying Er. But it would change nothing in the end. The truth was hard to face. She had to marry, for a woman without a husband and sons might as well be dead.

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Judah watched Zimran's daughter closely as she entered the room. She was tall and thin and very young. She was also poised and graceful. He liked the way she moved as she served the meal with her mother. He'd noticed her youthful elegance during his last visit after the harvest. Zimran had put the girl to work in the field next to the pasturage so Judah and his sons could see her. He had been fully aware of Zimran's motives in displaying her this way. Now, on closer inspection, the girl looked too young to be a bride. She couldn't be more than Shelah's age, and Judah said so.

Zimran laughed. "Of course, she is young, but so much the better. A young girl is more moldable than an older one. Is that not so? Your son will be her *baal*. He will be her teacher."

"What of children?"

Zimran laughed again; the sound grated Judah's nerves. "I assure you, Judah my friend, Tamar is old enough to bear sons and has been old enough since last harvest, when Er noticed her. We have proof of it."

The girl's eyes flickered in her father's direction. She was blushing and clearly embarrassed. Judah felt oddly touched by her modesty and studied her openly. "Come closer, girl," he said, beckoning. He wanted to look into her eyes. Perhaps he would glean better understanding of why he'd thought of her at all when the subject of marriage had come to mind.

"Don't be shy, Tamar." Zimran's mouth flattened. "Let Judah see how pretty you are." When she raised her head, Zimran nodded. "That's it. Smile and show Judah what fine teeth you have."

Judah didn't care about her smile or her teeth, though both were good. He cared about her fertility. Of course, there was no way of knowing whether she could produce sons for his clan until she was wed to his son. Life held no guarantees. However, the girl came from good breeding stock. Her mother had produced six sons and five daughters. She must also be strong, for he had watched her in the fields hoeing the hard ground and carrying rocks to the wall. A weak girl would have been kept inside the house, making pottery or weaving.

“Tamar.” Her father gestured. “Kneel before Judah. Let him have a closer look.”

She obeyed without hesitation. Her eyes were dark but not hard, her skin ruddy and glowing with health. Such a girl might stir his son’s hardened heart and make him repent of his wild ways. Judah wondered if she had the courage needed to gain Er’s respect. Her father was a coward. Was she? Er had brought nothing but grief since he’d been old enough to walk, and he was likely to bring this girl trouble as well. She would have to be strong and resilient.

Judah knew the blame for Er’s waywardness could be laid at his feet. He should never have given his wife a free hand in rearing his sons. He’d thought complete freedom would allow them to grow up happy and strong. Oh, they were happy as long as they got their way and were strong enough to abuse others if they didn’t. They were proud and arrogant for lack of discipline. They would have turned out better had the rod been used more often!

Would this girl soften Er? Or would he harden and break her?

When she looked into his eyes, he saw innocence and intelligence. He felt a disquieting despair. Er was his first-born, the first show of the strength of his loins. He’d felt such pride and joy when the boy was born, such hope. *Ah*, he’d thought, *here is flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone!* How he’d laughed when the young sprout had stood in red-faced fury, refusing to obey his mother. He’d been amused by his son’s passionate rebellion, foolishly proud of it. *This boy will be a strong man*, he’d said to himself. No woman would tell Er how to live.

Judah had never expected his son to defy *him* as well.

Onan, his second son, was becoming as difficult as Er. He'd grown up threatened by his older brother's white-hot jealousy and had learned to protect himself by cunning and deception. Judah didn't know which son was worse. Both were treacherous. Neither could be trusted.

The third son, Shelah, was following the ways of his brothers. Confronted with a wrong, Judah's sons lied or blamed others. When pressed hard enough to get the truth, they appealed to their mother, who defended them no matter how offensive their crimes. Her pride wouldn't allow her to see their faults. They were her sons, after all, and they were Canaanite through and through.

Something had to be done, or Er would bring Judah's head down to the ground in shame. Judah almost regretted having sons, for they wreaked havoc in his household and his life! There were moments when his rage was so intense, it was all he could do not to pick up a spear and hurl it at one of them.

Judah often thought about his father, Jacob, and the trouble *he'd* endured at the hands of *his* sons. Judah had caused his father as much trouble as the rest of them. Er and Onan reminded Judah of his brothers Simeon and Levi. Thinking of his brothers brought back the black memories of the grievous sin he himself had committed—the sin that haunted him, the sin that had driven him from his father's household because he couldn't bear to see the grief he'd caused or be in the company of the brothers who had shared in what he'd done.

His father, Jacob, didn't even know the full truth of what had happened at Dothan.

Judah tried to console himself. He'd kept Simeon and Levi from murdering their brother Joseph, hadn't he? But he also remembered that he was the one who'd led them into selling the boy to the Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt. He'd made a profit from the lad's misery—profits shared by his brothers as well. Only God knew if Joseph had survived the long, hard journey to Egypt. It was more than possible he'd died in the desert. If not, he was now a slave for some Egyptian.

Sometimes in the darkest hour of night, Judah would lie awake upon his pallet, filled with an agony of remorse, thinking about Joseph. How many years would it be before he could put the past behind him and forget what he'd done? How many years before he could close his eyes and not see Joseph's hands shackled, his neck noosed, as he was led forcefully away by the Ishmaelite traders? The boy's screams for help still echoed in Judah's mind.

He had the rest of his life to regret his sins, years to live with them. Sometimes Judah swore he could feel the hand of God squeezing the life from him for plotting the destruction of his own brother.

Zimran cleared his throat. Judah reminded himself where he was and why he'd come to the home of this Canaanite. He mustn't let his mind wander, mustn't allow the past to intrude on what he had to do about the future. His son needed a wife—a young, comely, strong wife who might distract him from his wicked schemes and devices. Judah's mouth tightened as he studied the Canaanite girl kneeling before him. Was he making another mistake? He'd married a Canaanite and lived to regret it. Now he was bringing

another one into his household. Yet this Canaanite girl appealed to him. Why?

Judah tipped the girl's chin. He knew she must be afraid, but she hid it well. That would be a useful skill where Er was concerned. She looked so young and guileless. Would his son destroy her innocence and corrupt her as he was so eager to do to others?

Hardening himself, Judah withdrew his hand and leaned back. He had no intention of allowing Er to make the same mistakes he had. Lust had driven him to marry the boy's mother. Beauty was a snare that captured a man, while unrestrained passion burned away reason. A woman's character mattered greatly in a marriage. Judah would have done better to follow custom and allow his father to choose a wife for him. Instead, he'd been stubborn and hasty and now suffered for his folly.

It wasn't enough that a woman stirred a man's passion. She also had to be strong, yet willing to bend. A stubborn woman was a curse upon a man. He'd been laughable in his youthful confidence, so certain he could bend a woman to his ways. Instead, he'd bent to Bathshua's. He'd fooled himself into thinking there was no harm in giving his wife freedom to worship as she wished. Now, he found himself reaping a whirlwind with his idol-worshiping sons!

Tamar was of calmer disposition than Bathshua. Tamar had courage. She appeared intelligent. He knew she was strong, for he'd watched how hard she worked. His wife, Bathshua, would be happy about that. No doubt she would dump her chores upon the girl as soon as possible. The quality that mattered most was her fertility, and only time

would tell about that. The qualities he could see were more than enough. Yet there was something more about this girl that Judah couldn't define—something rare and wonderful that made him determined to have her in his family. It was as though a quiet voice was telling him to choose her.

“She pleases me.”

Zimran exhaled. “You are a wise man!” He nodded to his daughter. Thus dismissed, Tamar rose. The Canaanite was clearly eager to begin negotiations. Judah watched the girl leave the room with her mother. Zimran clapped his hands; two servants hurried in, one with a tray of pomegranates and grapes, another with roasted lamb. “Eat, my brother, and then we will talk.”

Judah would not be so easily manipulated. Before touching the food, he made an offer for the girl. Eyes glowing, Zimran plunged in and began haggling over the bride-price.

Judah decided to be generous. Marriage, though far from bringing happiness to him, had brought some stability and direction. Perhaps Er would be similarly diverted from riotous living. Besides, Judah wanted to spend as little time with Zimran as possible. The man's ingratiating manner irritated him.

Tamar. Her name meant “date palm.” It was a name given to one who would become beautiful and graceful. A date palm survives the desert and bears sweet, nourishing fruit, and the girl came from a fertile family. A date palm sways in the desert winds without breaking or being uprooted, and this girl would have to face Er's quick, irascible temper. A date palm could survive a hostile environment, and Judah knew Bathshua would see this young girl as her

rival. Judah knew his wife would pit herself against this young bride because Bathshua was vain and jealous of her son's affections.

Tamar.

Judah hoped the girl held all the promise her name implied.

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Tamar waited while her fate was settled. When her mother stood in the doorway, she knew the matter of her future was decided. "Come, Tamar. Judah has gifts for you."

She rose, numb inside. It was a time for rejoicing, not tears. Her father need not fear any longer.

"Ah, Daughter." Her father smiled broadly. Obviously, he'd fetched a high bride-price for her, for he had never before embraced her with so much affection. He even kissed her cheek! She lifted her chin and looked into his eyes, wanting him to know what he'd done to her in giving her to such a man as Er. Perhaps he would feel some shame for using her to protect himself.

He didn't. "Greet your father-in-law."

Resigned to her fate, Tamar prostrated herself before Judah. The Hebrew put his hand upon her head and blessed her and bid her rise. As she did so, he took gold earrings and bracelets from a pouch at his waist and placed them upon her. Her father's eyes glowed, but her heart sank.

"Be ready to leave in the morning," Judah told her.

Shocked, she spoke without thinking. "In the morning?" She looked at her father. "What of the betrothal—?"

Her father's expression warned her to silence. "Judah and I celebrate tonight, my daughter. Acsah will pack your

things and go with you tomorrow. Everything is settled. Your husband is eager for you."

Was her father so afraid that he didn't require the customary ten-month betrothal period to prepare for the wedding? She would not even have a week to adjust to her impending marriage!

"You may go, Tamar. Make ready to leave in the morning."

When she entered the women's chamber, she found her mother and sisters already packing for her. Unable to contain her feelings any longer, Tamar burst into tears. Inconsolable, she wept all night, even after her sisters whined and pleaded for her to stop. "You will have your day," she told them angrily. "Someday you will understand!"

Acsah held and rocked her, and Tamar clung to her childhood for one last night.

When the sun rose, she washed her face and donned her bridal veils.

Her mother came to her. "Be content, beloved one. Judah paid dearly for you." Her voice was tear-choked and faintly bitter. "That Hebrew came with a donkey laden with gifts. He returns home with only his seal ring and staff."

"And me," Tamar said softly.

Her mother's eyes filled with tears. "Take good care of her, Acsah."

"I will, my lady."

Her mother took Tamar in her arms and kissed her. "May your husband love you and give you many sons," she whispered against her hair. Tamar clung to her tightly, pressing herself close, soaking in the warmth and softness of her mother one last time. "It's time," her mother said softly, and

Tamar drew back. Her mother touched her cheek before turning away.

Tamar went out into the morning sunlight. Acsah walked with her as she headed toward her father and Judah, who were standing some distance away. She had cried herself out last night. She would shed no more childish tears, though it was hard not to do so with Acsah weeping softly behind her.

"Perhaps all we've heard isn't true," Acsah said. "Perhaps Er is not as bad as some say he is."

"What does it matter now?"

"You must try to make him love you, Tamar. A man in love is clay in a woman's hands. May the gods have mercy on us!"

"Have mercy upon me and be quiet!"

When she reached the two men, her father kissed her. "Be fruitful and multiply the household of Judah." He was eager for their departure.

Judah walked ahead, Tamar and Acsah following. He was a tall man with long strides, and Tamar had to walk quickly to keep up with him. Acsah muttered complaints under her breath, but Tamar paid her no attention. Instead, she set her mind on what lay ahead. She would work hard. She would be a good wife. She would do everything within her power to bring honor to her husband. She knew how to plant a garden, tend a herd, cook, weave, and make pottery. She could read and write enough to keep proper lists and records of household goods. She knew how to conserve food and water when times were bad and how to be generous when times were good. She knew how to make soap,

baskets, cloth, and tools, as well as how to organize servants. But children would be the greatest blessing she could give her husband—children to build the household.

It was Judah's second son, Onan, who came out to meet them. "Er is gone," he said to his father while staring at her.

Judah slammed the end of his staff into the ground. "Gone where?"

Onan shrugged. "Off with his friends. He was angry when he heard where you'd gone. I stayed out of his way. You know how he gets."

"*Bathshua!*" Judah strode toward his stone house.

A buxom woman with heavily painted eyes appeared in the doorway. "What are you yelling about this time?"

"Did you tell Er I was bringing his bride home today?"

"I told him." She leaned indolently in the doorway.

"Then where is he?"

She lifted her chin. "I'm his mother, Judah, not his keeper. Er will be along when he's ready and not before. You know how he is."

Judah's face darkened. "Yes, I know how he is." He gripped his staff so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"That's why he needs a wife!"

"That may be, Judah, but you said the girl was pretty." She gave Tamar a cursory glance. "Do you really think this skinny girl will turn Er's head?"

"Tamar is more than she seems. Show her to Er's chamber." Judah walked off, leaving Tamar and Acsah standing before the house.

Mouth tight, Bathshua looked Tamar over from head to foot. She shook her head in disgust. "I wonder what Judah

was thinking when he chose you?" Turning her back, she went into the house and left Tamar and Acsah to fend for themselves.

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Er returned late in the afternoon, accompanied by several Canaanite friends. They were drunk and laughing loudly. Tamar remained out of sight, knowing what men were like in this condition. Her father and brothers had often imbibed freely and argued violently because of it. She knew the wisdom of staying out of the way until the effects of the wine wore off.

Knowing she would be summoned, Tamar had Acsah array her in wedding finery. While waiting, Tamar willed herself to set aside every terrible thing she'd ever heard about Er. Perhaps those who had spoken against him had hidden motives. She would give him the respect due a husband and adapt herself to his demands. If the god of his father smiled upon her, she would give Er sons, and quickly. If she were so blessed, she would bring them up to be strong and honest. She would teach them to be dependable and loyal. And if Er so wished, she would learn about the God of Judah and bring up her sons to worship him rather than bow down to the gods of her father. Still, her heart trembled and her fears increased with each passing hour.

When Tamar was finally summoned and saw her husband, she felt a flicker of admiration. Er was tall like his father and held the promise of great physical strength. He had his mother's thick curling mass of black hair, which he had drawn back in Canaanite fashion. The brass band he

wore around his forehead made him look like a young Canaanite prince. Tamar was awed by her husband's handsome appearance but filled quickly with misgivings when she looked into his eyes. They were cold and dark and devoid of mercy. There was pride in the tilt of his head, cruelty in the curve of his lips, and indifference in his manner. He didn't reach out to take her hand.

"So this is the wife you chose for me, Father."

Tamar shivered at his tone.

Judah put his hand firmly on his son's shoulder. "Take good care of what belongs to you, and may the God of Abraham give you many sons by this girl."

Er stood unblinking, his face an inscrutable mask.

All through the evening, Er's friends made crude jests about marriage. They teased Er unmercifully, and though he laughed, Tamar knew he wasn't amused. Her father-in-law, lost in his own thoughts, drank freely while Bathshua lounged nearby, eating the best tidbits of the wedding feast and ignoring her. Tamar was hurt and confused and embarrassed by such rudeness. What had she done to offend her mother-in-law? It was as though the woman was determined not to show her the least consideration.

As the night wore on, her fear gave way to depression. She felt abandoned and lost in the midst of the gathering. She had married the heir of Judah's household, and yet no one spoke to her, not even the young husband who sat beside her. The hours passed slowly. She was bone weary from lack of sleep the previous night and the long walk to her new home. The tensions of the wedding feast further sapped her. She fought to keep her eyes open. She fought

even harder to keep the tears from welling up and spilling over.

Er pinched her. Tamar gasped and jerked away from him. Heat flooded her cheeks as she realized she had unwittingly dozed against his side. His friends were laughing and making jokes about her youth and the impending wedding night. Er laughed with them. "Your nurse has prepared the chamber for us." He took her hand and pulled her up to her feet.

As soon as Acsah closed the door of the bedchamber behind them, Er stepped away from Tamar. Acsah took her place outside the door and began singing and beating her small drum. Tamar's skin prickled. "I'm sorry I fell asleep, my lord."

Er said nothing. She waited, her nerves stretching taut. He was enjoying her tension, plucking her nerve endings with his silence. Folding her hands, she decided to wait him out. He removed his belt sardonically. "I noticed you last year when we brought the sheep to your father's fields. I suppose that's why my father thought you might do as my wife." His gaze moved down over her. "He doesn't know me very well."

She did not fault Er for the hurtful words. She felt he was justified. After all, her heart had not leapt with joy when Judah came and offered a bride-price for her.

"You're afraid of me, aren't you?"

If she said no, it would be a lie. To say yes would be unwise.

His brow rose. "You should be afraid. I'm angry, or can't you tell?"

She could, indeed, and couldn't guess what he would do about it. She remained silent, acquiescent. She'd seen her father in rages often enough to know that it was better to say nothing. Words were like oil on a fiery temper. Her mother had told her long ago that men were unpredictable and given to fits of violence when provoked. She would not provoke Er.

"Cautious little thing, aren't you?" He smiled slowly. "At least you keep your wits about you." He came toward her. "You've heard things about me, I'll bet." He brushed his fingers against her cheek. She tried not to flinch. "Have your brothers carried stories home?"

Her heart beat faster and faster.

"As my father said, you're mine now. My own little mouse to do with as I wish. Remind me to thank him." He tipped her chin. His eyes glittered coldly, reminding her of a jackal in the moonlight. When he leaned down and kissed her mouth, the hair on the back of her neck rose. He drew back, assessing her. "Believe the rumors, every one of them!"

"I will try to please you, my husband." Heat poured into her cheeks at the quaver in her voice.

"Oh, no doubt you will try, my sweet, but you won't succeed." His mouth curved, showing the edge of his teeth. "You can't."

It took only a day of the weeklong wedding celebration for Tamar to understand what he meant.