

Each day a group of women met at the synagogue to sort donations and prepare baskets for the daily distribution. Late in the afternoon, with everything ready, the *diakonoi* arrived to take those goods and distribute them to needy recipients.

Shortly after Stefanos' visit, Channah volunteered to help.

It warmed Rivkah's heart to see her daughter offering her time to assist others. Channah's generosity, however, turned out to be far less benevolent than Rivkah imagined. One day she glanced out the window and noticed Channah and Stefanos walking toward the house together.

She quickly unraveled her daughter's motives for volunteering at the synagogue. How could she have overlooked the fact that being at the synagogue each day when the deacons came in provided Channah with a respectable way to interact with Stefanos?

In an instant it all became clear.

They began speaking to each other when he came by to pick up his baskets. Nothing serious, just shoptalk. Eventually her devious daughter happened to mention that Stefanos' path to the Hellenist's neighborhood took him past her street. A few days later, she had him walking her home.

"He suggested it," Channah insisted, when Rivkah questioned her about it.

"He did, did he?"

"Oh, yes. Stefanos said it is not safe for a maiden to walk the streets unchaperoned."

"And this would be the reason he walks with you each afternoon?"

Channah lifted her shoulders and gave her a wide-eyed look of surprise.

"What other reason could there be?"

What other reason indeed. Did she think her mother had never been young?



A week later Rivkah found her usually happy daughter moping in a corner. "Such a long face. Your Uncle Caleb sheared his sheep and sent us a large package of wool. If you have nothing to keep your fingers occupied, perhaps you could spin some of it. Your little brother is outgrowing his cloak and I must weave him another."

Channah sighed and pulled a large handful from the bundle of fleece. Taking a carding comb in each hand, she released her frustration on the helpless tuft of wool. Once she had the leaves and grass combed out of it, she rolled the wool off the comb and sat it aside.

She was starting on another wad when Rivkah caught her eye and smiled.

Channah frowned back at her and attacked the wool with as much vigor as she had expended on the first batch. This went on for a short while until she whined, "I am tired of carding wool, there must be something else I can do."

“Put the wool aside for now. I have some rose hips and berry leaves steeping in a pot. I will pour us each a cup. How does that sound?”

Channah supposed it might be all right.

“Do you have cramps in your abdomen? Should I get you a little of your father’s decoction of willow bark?”

Channah stared into her cup. “I feel fine. You know very well it is not time for my womanly cycle.”

“Your mouth says you feel fine, but your actions say another thing entirely. You have not been yourself for several days now.”

Channah rocked her cup, watching little waves rise and fall. “If you must know, Stefanos is not making the daily distribution to the Hellenists.”

“You need not fret about the poor. Demetrios is taking care of them until Stefanos and Phillip return from their mission.”

“Demetrios is an old man, why would I be interested in what he does?”

Everything dropped into place.

“I thought you volunteered to help at the synagogue so you could assist the needy.”

“Well, I did. It’s just that...”

Rivkah found herself laughing even though she tried not to. “It’s a much more enjoyable task when you are preparing baskets for Stefanos instead of Demetrios. If it has become too much of a burden, perhaps they can find someone else to take your place.”

A terrified look swept over Channah’s face. “Oh no, I will continue to do it. I want to.”

“Because Stefanos returns right after *Shabbat*.”

Channah couldn’t stifle her grin.



To Channah’s great delight, Stefanos and Phillip returned on time. They brought glowing reports of many souls won over to The Way of Rabban Yeshua. More importantly, at her insistent pleading, Shemu’el again invited him to visit on the third day of the week.

During the meal Stefanos complained of a young man named Sha’oul who, like him, had once been a student at the School of Hillel. Sha’oul trailed him each day as he made his distributions.

Channah brought a basket of bread to the table. “Why is he so troublesome?”

“He distorts my words and tries to turn the people against me. Whenever I preach to them of Yeshua, he heckles me.”

“How can he tolerate such a person?” Channah asked when she returned to the kitchen. She swung her fist in a swift, upward arc, striking an imaginary opponent. “Stefanos need not put up with this. He is big and surely strong enough to make this awful person leave him alone.”

“I believe Yeshua said we should love our enemies.”

Channah gave an angry snort.



Stefanos proved to be bright, engaging and always ready with an interesting tale of life in Alexandria. Over the next months his visits became a regular, and enjoyable, event in their household.

One week, Shemu'el was called away on a medical emergency and the boys were busy with other activities when Stefanos arrived. Rivkah, Channah and Stefanos had a quiet dinner together. After they ate, she left the two young people in the front room while she worked on her loom.

Rivkah wove for a time before she noticed there were no voices coming from the front of the house. Leaving her loom, she went to the doorway. She walked barefoot and neither of them heard her footsteps.

The room lay in purple shadows. Though the sun had slipped below the horizon, Channah hadn't bothered to light the lamps.

The two of them stood beside the window, silhouetted by the dying sun. Stefanos had his arms around her. Resting a hand on his shoulder, she nestled her head against his chest. Rivkah watched him lift Channah's chin and tenderly kiss her.

They were beautiful together. A picture of the love the Greeks and Romans sought to immortalize with their indecent statues. Seeing them like this brought back memories of being in Shemu'el's arms when she was a young girl and the stirrings it caused.

Her daughter kept insisting she was a woman, with a woman's needs and a woman's desires. If Rivkah ever doubted those words, she no longer did.

She begged God to give the two of them all the happiness this world had to offer. She wished with all her heart she could leave them be...slip away and do nothing. It would have been easy, but she knew she must not.

She was the mother now and understood the yearnings of youth. Whether she wanted it or not, her task was to extinguish the flame before they were scorched. And do it in such a way to, hopefully, leave some embers smoldering.

They leaped apart when Rivkah cleared her throat.

"Imma, you startled me." Channah gave her an anxious look. "Why are you sneaking around the house on your tiptoes?" She turned her hands one over the other, looking everywhere but at her mother.

"Oh, look at how dark it has suddenly become." She raced into the kitchen for a taper. Rushing back into the room, Channah quickly lit every lamp.

Red-cheeked, Stefanos pulled himself up to his full height. "Sister Rivkah," he stammered, "I did not hear you come in."

Swallowing a chuckle, Rivkah made her voice as stern as possible. "When no one watches, do the young men of Alexandria take liberties with maidens to whom they are not betrothed?"

He sighed deeply and ran his eyes along the floor. "It was not as it appeared." His voice was barely more than a whisper. "I would never do the things you suggest."

"I saw what I saw."

Channah stepped in front of him. "It was not his fault. He could not help himself. I beguiled him with my feminine wiles and—"

Stefanos took her by the shoulders and eased her aside.

“I beg you, do not blame your daughter. The fault was mine, not Channah’s. Over the last several months we have become friends, good friends. We were looking out the window enjoying the sunset and, and—” He folded an arm across his chest and scratched the back of his hand as he searched for words to complete his thought.

Stefanos looked at her straight on. “You are correct, Sister Rivkah. I have dishonored your hospitality and behaved inappropriately. Please accept my deepest apologies. I will go to Simon before this night is over and confess my sin of lust.”

Rivkah glanced over at Channah.

She wore a bright smile at his mention of lust.

Her mother’s stern frown erased the grin.

“And, if he requests it,” Stefanos continued, “I will resign from my position as *diakonos*.”

Now what had she done? Rivkah only wanted to bank the coals, not extinguish the flame.

“I do not think this need go so far as confessing to Simon, or anyone else,” she said. “Instead, this evening in the quiet of your room, both of you should examine your conscience. If you feel you have sinned, confess it and ask God’s forgiveness. The Lord knows what was, or was not, in each of your hearts.”

Both of them visibly relaxed.

“One other thing,” Rivkah said. “What has happened in this room must stay in this room. Take care that word of this never reaches her father’s ears. Do you understand what I am saying?”

They each gave a serious nod.

Stefanos apologized again, thanked her for the meal and prepared to leave.

She saw him out and, as he left their doorstep, called his name.

He glanced back over his shoulder.

“Will we see you again next week?”

Sweet relief washed over his face. “Oh yes, Sister Rivkah, you may count on it.”

Channah was grinning when Rivkah came back into the house. She ran over and grabbed her mother’s hand. “Did you hear what he said?” she asked with a proud smile. “He said I incited his lust.”

“You what?”

Channah chuckled. “You need not pretend with me, Imma. We both know what he meant. My friends and I often discuss these matters.” She gave her mother a knowing wink. “I understand all about the ways of men.”

“Do you and your friends also discuss the fate which befalls a young woman who makes it a practice to incite a man’s lust before they are married.”

Channah’s face flushed bright red. “Oh no, never. I just meant—”

“I know what you meant. Now go to your room and pray about it.”

The two of them had lit a powerful spark, unleashing a flame, which if not controlled could consume them both. Even though she was secretly happy for them, Rivkah hoped her words were sufficiently harsh to dampen the flame...at least for a little while.

At that moment, her only concern was that they not blunder into indiscretion.