

Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.

--from the epigraph of Poe's "Ligeia."

Peniel Dawn

by Trent Masiki

Jacob sat alone, aimlessly plucking the strings of his lyre. The smell of roasting lamb drifted in through the partially open flaps of his tent, and his stomach let out a low, rolling growl. He was not looking forward to his return home.

Twenty years ago, he had left his land in disgrace. And in those twenty years of exile and fear, he had made no effort to contact anyone, and as far as he knew no one had tried to contact him. Jacob was certain that his father was dead by now, but he hoped that at least his mother was still among the living. He had been closer to her than he had been to his father, who had lavished his paternal pride and affections on Jacob's twin brother, Esau, the first born. Jacob had been the object of his mother's devotion. In his youth, she doted on him, never letting him forget that he was a special child, a child who was destined to do something wonderful. A strange little bird, she once told him, had whispered it in her ear.

Jacob loved his mother, loved her perhaps more than was good for either of them, he sometimes thought. He was nearly forty when he left home, but he was unseasoned in the ways of the world, having spent most of his life under his mother's wing. But now, after long years in exile, it was a struggle for him to even recall her face. He remembered his father's clearly, though. He remembered the last glance he had stolen of his father before fleeing into the wilderness. In that glance, he saw a thing curdled with age, a sack of flesh lying bedridden, feeble, sightless, and deceived.

Jacob's brother's face, like his father's, was ever fresh in his mind's eye. He would never be able to purge it from his memory. It's funny how the images of the people you wrong stay with you, he thought. They never die—no amount of time can corrode them.

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Jacob's family and the rest of his household were busy securing their valuables and fastening their supplies to the pack animals. But the commotion barely registered with Jacob as he sat sequestered in his musings. He could not change things now, especially now that his family and all of his household had become, like him, outcasts. He would have to cross the river and return to his father's land. There was nowhere else left for him to run.

Jacob tightened the strings of his lyre. Crossing the river Jabbok would not be easy.

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The silver charms around Rachel's neck and wrists jingled as she passed through the flaps of the tent. Her hands were full of red and blue amulets with white crescent moons in their centers. Jacob looked up at her. He noticed the gray creeping through her dark hair. She passed by him without a word or a glance, leaving the scent of her sandalwood perfume hanging softly in the air.

Jacob put his lyre aside and followed Rachel through the reed screen that separated the tent in halves. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I just came to get a few little womanly things."

"You should be making sure the servants have everything in order. They'll never do anything unless they're watched."

"Don't worry. Reuben and Dan are watching them. The packing is going fine," said Rachel as she moved to the corner of the tent where her clothing and other belongings waited to be lashed to one of the asses. She opened and closed several ornate jewelry boxes and removed necklaces of rock crystal and amber. Then she replaced them with the red and blue amulets. Some of the small boxes contained her collection of perfumes and herbs. She opened one of the smaller boxes and took out a curiously shaped root. Its human-like figure caught Jacob's eye. The mandrake was the one herb he recognized on sight. And each time he saw it, it reminded him of the little stone gods that Rachel's father prayed to.

Jacob had never taken much interest in Rachel's penchant for herbs. From the time he had first laid eyes on her, she had been grinding the stems and leaves of plants into powders, boiling them into elixirs, and shaping them into hot poultices. He left her to her strange pursuit. He never questioned her about it, never troubled himself much with learning the various names and uses of the odd plants she brought back from her forages into the wild. Though he expressed little interest in Rachel's passion, he was always the first to indulge in the pleasures of her herbal concoctions, her soothing ointments, aromatic oils, and invigorating teas.

Rachel looped the amber and crystal necklaces over her wrist. In the other hand, she carried the mandrake, toying with it, turning it over and over as she approached Jacob with her plea.

"Come with us tonight, Jacob. It really won't make a difference to your brother whether you come with us or after us. Once he sees how many servants, sons, and herds of cattle you have, he'll forget about what happened. He'll welcome you back. I know he will."

"Rachel, you know nothing about Esau," Jacob said, nervously twisting the end of his beard. "He's my brother. I lived with him. I know him."

"But there's no sense in what you're doing. You're trying to avoid something that probably won't happen in the first place. I can't even imagine the two of you in a fight. Two men as old as you two at each other's throats. It's foolish. Please, let the boys take down this tent. Things can't be as bad as you think. Come with us."

Jacob recalled how Esau, his face streaming with tears, had screamed for blood and vengeance at being denied his divine and paternal blessing, a blessing that was rightfully his as the first born. It was not possible for time to bridle such passion in Esau, Jacob thought. It only took the slightest provocation to set him running wild and amok. He had always been that way.

"No, I won't. I can't come. It's best that you and the rest of the family meet him first. I have to stay. There's something waiting for me here in this place. It's beginning to feel like Beth-el, and I can't cross the river until I know why."

Rachel threw her hands in the air. The necklaces slid and clacked down her arm. "Oh please, don't start that thing about Beth-el again," she said. "I don't want to hear anymore of your damn angel stories and dreams about ladders. I'm tired of it. I've listened to it for twenty years. Twenty years, Jacob. Why can't you just come into the real world for once?"

Jacob refused to let Rachel's frustration incite him. He was the older of the two. Rachel hadn't been much more than a girl when he met her, and she was little more than that when he took her as his second wife after first wedding Leah, her older sister. Because he was older, Jacob felt that he should show more restraint, that he should make his point with more dignity. He sighed and gathered his thoughts. He had hoped to salvage the conversation by mustering control and patience, but his words tumbled haphazardly from his lips. "My visions are real," he stammered in spite of his effort to remain composed.

Rachel groaned and folded her arms across her heavy breasts.

"If you don't believe me, then humor me. Can you do that? Can you humor me?"

"Jacob, I've been humoring you for years."

Jacob turned. "I don't want to hear this," he said, slapping the reed screen out of his way and going back into the front half of the tent.

Rachel rushed after him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. But can't you please give this up and come with us?" she asked.

"It's not possible. My father's god directs me. I have to wait on His word," said Jacob in a low timbre that even to himself seemed contrived to fill his words with more conviction and solemnity than they carried.

"That's not a god directing you. That's guilt and fear. If you hadn't cheated my father out of his best cattle, things would have been fine and we would not be running now."

Jacob's last bit of composure fell. "Woman, I don't understand you. Why can't you believe me? This god is not like the gods of your father. He is not in winds, earthquakes, or fires. He's a word, a breath, a voice." Jacob's eyes brightened. "Don't forget. He removed your barrenness. That was a miracle. That was real. And so is He."

"My 'barrenness' had nothing to do with any god," Rachel laughed. "I was never barren. The problem wasn't with me." Rachel tossed the mandrake at Jacob's feet. "There was never anything wrong with me."

Jacob kicked the root aside. "Get out," he scowled, pointing his trembling finger toward the flaps of the tent. "Get out of here, now." He tried to make his voice boom with authority, but it wavered and faltered instead.

Rachel stood her ground. "I still have things to gather."

Jacob stormed by her. Standing in the tent entrance, he called to his eldest son, the son Leah had borne him. "Reuben! Reuben! Come here. Come help Rachel with her things. She's ready to leave."

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It was late when Jacob returned from seeing his family and the last of his possessions across the river. The day had been long and tiresome, and he was ready for bed. Staff in hand, Jacob stood motionless at the outskirts of his camp. The strong light of a fire flooded his face, a fire he had not left burning.

A man walked out of Jacob's tent. He was carrying a small leather bag of Jacob's best pomegranate wine and a dish of sweet dates, one of Jacob's favorite delicacies. The man sat down next to the fire. His back was turned to Jacob, and he contentedly ate the roast lamb and the barley bread he had already pilfered from the tent.

"Jacob," the man called. "Come and join me."

Jacob kept still and tightened his grip on his staff. Then the stranger stood up and faced him. His patterned tunic fell just over his ankles, and its long sleeves nearly swallowed his hands. He looked about twenty years younger than Jacob. His hair was dark and his beard a few days old. His eyes were a dour flame green. "Come closer," he said. "You're too cautious, like a coward."

"Who are you?" Jacob asked as he approached the man.

"Are you pretending not to know?" The man's voice was calm. He did not seem the least bit concerned about being discovered in Jacob's tent. His cool poise was unsettling. But Jacob resolved not to let his fear show. He looked the man up and down. He did not appear to be very strong, and he figured he could best him if he had to.

"Did my brother send you?" Jacob asked. "Did my brother send you here?"

"Look at you. Are you so afraid of him that you cannot say his name? Relax. Come. Sit by the fire." The stranger casually waved his hand over the roast lamb. "Here, have something to eat."

That this stranger could call him a coward and then brazenly offer him his own food incensed Jacob. He grabbed the sleeve of the man's tunic and flung him to the ground. The force of the throw brought Jacob tumbling down onto the stranger. Jacob was amazed at himself. He was not the type of person who got into physical confrontations, and he was certainly not the type who would pass the first blow. He had always run from violence, but now here he was caught in this struggle, wrestling and scrambling in the loose earth, trying to pin another man down.

In the fray, Jacob's tunic ripped at the shoulder, and the stranger forced the bared flesh against the sharp point of a stone. Blood flowed freely, but Jacob ignored the wound and continued to fight. Where he found the strength to do so at his age was beyond him, but he hoped whatever it was that sustained him would continue to do so. He had always prevailed over others with his cunning. But it was much too late for that now. No amount of cunning could remove the hands at his throat.

Eventually, Jacob managed to get the better of the stranger by thrusting his knee against his ribs and locking him in an inescapable hold. Jacob knew the hold well. His brother had made him the victim of it often enough in their youth.

The man attempted to twist himself free of Jacob's lock. "Release me," he whispered through puffed and bloodied lips.

The command was so calm and directed that Jacob almost obeyed it despite himself. But he resisted the impulse to release the man and gripped him even tighter.

Then the stranger stopped struggling and resigned himself to the tenacious embrace. The less the man strove to free himself, the more Jacob's anger subsided. He fought his growing desire to let the man go. He could not afford to give up the hold he had on the stranger, especially now that his own passion to kill was waning.

"If I let you go, it will be the death of one of us," said Jacob.

"That's very possible," the man replied. And then he did the strangest thing. He placed his hand in the hollow of Jacob's thigh. The move was neither sudden nor violent, but Jacob tensed nonetheless. He stared into the man's eyes. Their heated green became a dull brown, a brown much like the waters of the river Jabbok.

The man's face began to change, too. It smoothed out into a much younger, much softer version of itself. It was then that Jacob knew the stranger for what he really was.

The man removed his hand from Jacob's thigh.

Jacob stood up. "Why do you continue to follow me?" he asked. "I've done everything you told me. I made the altar at Beth-el. I'm returning home. What more do you want?"

"Faith, Jacob."

Commands. More commands. Every time one of His messengers came, they came with commands, shifting their forms and features. Nothing about them was constant, nothing.

And faith? How could his faith be in question? For twenty years, he had striven to convince his wife, Rachel, that his vision at Beth-el was real, that the removal of her barrenness was divine and not the result of her mandrake roots and other herbs.

"I have faith," muttered Jacob, sick of the encounter.

"Really? And is it because of your faith that you are able to send your family into the hands of a man that you mortally fear while you wait to see what happens?"

Jacob touched his wounded shoulder. "My brother wants my life, not my family's. I'll have faith when I know that he's over things, that he's no longer a threat."

"Is that what you expect? To get a guarantee on your life before you return? Well, you cannot have a guarantee, Jacob. You cannot set the conditions. You took the blessing, and with it you took the responsibility. In the blessing was the promise. And the promise will be fulfilled."

Jacob wondered if there would ever come a time when he could "set the conditions." Not once in his life had he had the chance to determine his own fate. There had always been someone directing him, someone keeping him locked on his or her chosen course. His mother had goaded him into stealing his brother's birthright; Rachel's father, Laban, had beguiled him into long years of servitude; and a very determined god was holding him to a promise he had never asked to be a part of, a promise made before he was even born.

"No, I don't understand," answered Jacob, after pondering the question. "And I don't want to understand."

The man spread his fingers and raised the back of his hand before Jacob's face. His nails were cracked and dirty, his fingers greasy with the fat of the lamb.

Jacob screamed and began to fall to his knees as the man's hand curled into a fist.

Tears rolled into Jacob's beard and moistened the skin below. There was a sharp pain in the joint of his hip, and the place where the man's hand had laid burned like a scald. He tried to massage the pain out of his hip as he lay in the dirt. Under his breath, he cursed Abraham, his grandfather. He cursed him for making a pact with a living god. Why couldn't he have made a covenant with gods like Laban's, gods that one could easily ignore, abandon, or pack on the backs of asses? Why hadn't the old man listened to the other tribes and ignored the voice in the hills?

The man stood over Jacob like a father over a child.

"Jacob, what's happening is bigger than you. A wondrous and awesome change is coming, and you're a part of it. If you accept it, it will be gentle. If you strive against it, it will be a trial. But it is coming just the same."

The man laid his hand on Jacob's head. "Your new name is Israel. It is in that name that you will have power with God and men." Then he returned to the fire and helped himself generously to the lamb and pomegranate wine as Jacob lay sprawled and sobbing in the dirt.

Jacob used the poles of his tent to pull himself to his feet. He leaned against them and let the pain in his hip subside. Then he joined the man by the fire. The stranger passed the lamb and the bag of wine, which Jacob calmly accepted.

The man came to his feet after he finished eating. He wiped his hands and mouth on his tunic. Then he walked out past the edge of the camp where the light of the fire gave way to the darkness of night.

"Is this the last visit?" Jacob called after him.

"Who can say? Who can know what is in His will?"

"His will is strange."

"Be careful. It's not for you to judge. It's for you to obey."

Daunted, Jacob bowed his head.

The man returned and placed his hand on Jacob's wounded shoulder. His touch washed the pain away. "Do you remember what you are to be called?" he asked.

"Israel," Jacob murmured. "And what about you?" he asked the man. "What are you called?"

"I don't have a name. I have a purpose," he said and then turned and walked off into the night.

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Jacob returned to his campfire and gorged himself on the remainder of the lamb. He ate and drank until his stomach bulged and he grew tired. Then he went into his tent, unrolled his straw mat, and spread it on the floor where he lay down and slept a dead, black sleep.

But he did not know where or who he was when the light of dawn roused him. He rose slowly, recovering his identity and bearings like a reptile shaking off the weight of a long winter's

sleep. For the first time in his life, he knew who he really was, or, rather, what he was. He was pure purpose, a man without a will. He was Israel.

Jacob left the tent and put out the last embers of the campfire. It was time to leave, time to join his family. He took only the things he would need to make the half day's journey it would take to join his household. The tent and his other possessions would remain behind. Everything essential to him was already on the other side of the river. With some difficulty, he made his way through the brush and down to the point of the crossing. It was a long, painful walk despite the help of his staff.

He looked into the direction of his father's land. Then removed his sandals and waded into the cool water. The smooth pebbles of the river's bottom massaged the soles of his feet. It would be so easy to let himself flow with the river, to lie in its current and let it wash him away like a dream in the light of morning. Then the pain in his hip stung him, and he moved on to the other side.