

Threshing floor Scene  
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At last, I hesitated at the edge of the grain piles not far from where Boaz lay. I could still leave and tell Naomi that I had failed. That was the prudent thing to do, the one which wouldn't risk my reputation and perhaps my life. But now that I stood here, so close to the man who had filled my heart with his desire even fuller than he had our storeroom with grain, I seemed rooted to the ground.

He was so temptingly close, breathing regularly in his sleep. I looked down at him, wondering if Lot's daughters had stood so, looking at their father before they lay with him for the same reason I was here. Was I repeating the stories of my ancestors, mimicking both Lot's daughters and the temptresses at Beth-Peor?

Nothing moved around me. The floor was deserted except for those who slept beside the fruits of harvest. A nightbird called, and an owl swooped by, likely headed for its nest since it was late to be hunting. The wind felt chill, the day's heat rapidly fading. I didn't want to commit myself until I knew how to give Boaz a choice. Then again, maybe this was another crossing of the Jordan, where I would have to trust Yah, and go forward without knowing the next step.

"Yahweh, as you led me then, lead me now. I will do as Naomi asks." I stepped forward loosening my sash and letting it fall with my cloak. I lifted the cloak Boaz used for a blanket. He had removed his robe, using it as a sheet over the chaff he rested on. The moon gave enough light to reveal the length of his body, lean and strong in spite of the silver that glinted in his hair. Very lightly, I touched his chest, then trailed my fingers briefly downward. He stirred and turned his head toward me.

I lay down beside him, wishing with all my heart that I could stay by him forever, but I must be satisfied with tonight. I started to pull my robe closed, then stopped, covering myself with Boaz's cloak instead.

He lay still, warm and relaxed, and I dared to pillow my head on his arm, settling myself close to him, taking advantage of his sleep. He was mine, at least until he woke. I closed my eyes. And if Yahweh willed, maybe when he woke, I could redeem Naomi's life with a son.

To have Boaz's son? I could imagine his pride and joy, and I ached to fulfill that need in him, make him complete once more just as I needed to be completed and filled. For I was as empty as Naomi, needing the love of a man, just as the land needed the hand of man to bring a harvest. I pressed closer to him, wishing he could have claimed levirate marriage, instead of just land redemption.

My eyes popped open. Any male in the clan could be goel for our land. In the absence of the direct-line males to perform the levirate, why couldn't Boaz claim that *as a further duty of the goel* giving him the right to redeem Naomi and me with a son? He was of the same blood to provide seed. As important as it was to preserve a family before Yahweh, surely that would be acceptable to the town, even with a Moabitess, since without it Elimelech's line would perish.

Excitement filled me. I wanted to shake Boaz awake and tell him that Yah had given me the answer, but instead I put my arm across his chest and concentrated on the beat of his heart under my hand. He was my life.

Not long after, Boaz stirred restlessly, tossing his head as though with a nightmare. Boldly, I reached up and stroked his hair. He stilled, and some of the lines eased from his face. His hair was rough from inattention, but surprisingly soft under my fingers. There were some

short strands near his face, cut by something, and they curled. The moon rose higher. Pressed against Boaz for warmth, I drifted to sleep.

Boaz stirred again. He hated this dream. Why was it coming now? Must he be tortured with it all his days? But he was caught up in the endless walking toward the desert on the other side of Jordan, in the quest for a sleeping place, and the fear of his shadow which moved and grew on its own.

The wind came, blowing his hair, tugging at his cloak. He fumbled for it, struggling to keep it on. The scent of perfume reached his nostrils, and a hand brushed his hair, distracting him from the dream. He turned toward the scent, grateful for the interruption and slipped out of the nightmare for a time.

Inevitably, the power of it pulled him back into the rushing sound of the whirlwind. Lilith stood beside him with her enticing smile and cruel eyes, bending down to steal his life. He could feel her hair on his bare chest and the heat from her body. Somehow this time, he must resist her! That laughter drifted on the wind, and he knew once again he would yield to her deadly kiss, just as her hand on his chest burned through his skin and the scent she wore befuddled his brain—

He twisted his head. This was wrong. Lilith never wore a scent. But surely he lay on sand. Where was his robe? No wind blew his hair, but Lilith's hand rested on him. Terror hit his mind. She felt real! He forced his eyes open, staring at the stars above him, the moon shining full in his face. Had his nightmare become horribly real? Had that fatal kiss burned on his lips so that he could not move from the heaviness at his side?

Gasping and shaking in every limb, Boaz turned his head very slowly. *A woman lay beside him, cloak and sash beyond her on the ground.*

"Yahweh, save me!" he screamed in his mind, shoving himself away from the figure, and ramming his back into something behind him that shifted and settled, trickling around him.

Barley. He was trying to force himself backward into a pile of barley. The threshing floor. Not sand. He could still feel the heat of her hand on his chest, and he rubbed at the spot frantically. He froze as the woman stirred.

She opened her eyes and sat up as he stared at her. She was beautiful, the moonlight reflecting off her skin, and he almost reached his hand out to touch it.

"Who are you?" he whispered harshly, rigidly controlling himself, fearing he'd hear Lilith's cruel laughter in reply. If he did, he was still in his dream and his mind refused to think of what that would mean.

"I am Ruth, your handmaid."<sup>1</sup>

Boaz drew in a huge breath, easing the ache in his chest. "Ruth?"

"Yes, adon."

The stars of his dream whirled and vanished and he smelled the freshness of the west wind. Around him heaps of barley and wheat loomed on the Bethlehem threshing floor, and the sounds of others sleeping reached his ears. He relaxed with a soft groan, and put his head in his hands, trying to calm the racing of his blood. *Ruth?*

Jerking his head up, he stared at her. "What are you doing here? Why are you in my

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<sup>1</sup>Ruth's word, "handmaid" claims for her membership in the clan and eligibility for marriage.

bed?” What had he done, he asked himself frantically. Had he done anything? How much had he drunk before coming to bed anyway? Surely not enough to forget a woman as desirable as she was with that perfume and perfect—. The night air cleared his head more. The threshing floor was empty and dark. Nothing stirred close by. He was certain he had come to bed alone.

He faced Ruth again and swallowed. Her perfume drifted past his nose and he swallowed again. She rivaled Lilith there in the moonlight, sitting so still and silent. Desire rose like a wave, and he barely stopped himself from reaching for her. Only the fear that she might not be real stopped him.

“Adon?”

Lilith would never have called him that. “Fool,” he thought. Gingerly, Boaz shook the kernels of barley from his arms and moved back to his robe on the pile of chaff. This was Ruth, not Lilith. Her eyes were grave and watchful, not cruel. “What are you doing here?” he asked, keeping his voice very soft.

“I have come to ask you to be a goel.”

“To redeem Elimelech’s land?”

“I’m not asking you to be goel for the land, but for me. Cover me and redeem me from Tobeh’s household.”

Boaz closed his eyes, a wave of heat washing over him, and he started to tremble. *Redeem* her? Boaz forced himself to think. She had called him goel, and redemption applied to land, not people. She must be confused. That was it. She was from Moab, after all, and had mixed up land redemption and levirate marriage. She hadn’t really meant for him to cover her, just make sure Tobeh paid enough for the land to keep them out of his household. Besides, there was no one to provide levirate marriage. Naomi would know that.

“You can be goel for us, can’t you?”

Her voice was soft and enticing and brought sweat to his forehead. He dared not look at her and nodded his head in reply. Then realizing she might not be able to see the action in the darkness, he added, “Yes.”

“Then be goel to me. Redeem me like the land. Fulfill your blessing the first day I gleaned and give me a son.”

His eyes flew open, and he stared at her. The moon cast a glow around her, but left her face in shadows, with only a glimmer from her eyes to tease his thoughts. He tore his eyes away and looked at the cloak and sash on the ground. She hadn’t mixed up anything.

Boaz sat back, her request racing through his mind. Redeem her from Tobeh’s household as land was redeemed? Bought with a son, a seed for Mahlon? *By a goel*? It had never been done. The idea was outside everything he knew . . .

His breath stopped. Yahweh’s hesed to the Habiru. That had gone outside the covenant itself, which defined the land, the people, the world! If hesed demanded that Yahweh move beyond the law to provide life for the strangers and wanderers, surely hesed could stretch the duties of the goel to preserve a family in Israel. Besides, didn’t the promised Seed from Abraham preserve *all* the earth, not just the sons of Israel? And if he claimed the right of levirate marriage as a duty of the goel, he could have Ruth with the full support of the town. She’d be in his house for always.

And he wanted her more than anything else. And she had just come and said she was willing to be his. Elation and a wild desire crashed into him, tightening every muscle he had. She could be his, with her regal grace, her strong slender body, and those unbelievable eyes. She

turned her head slightly, and a slice of moonlight crossed her face.

He hardly knew what to say; so many ideas charged through his mind. Slowly, he reached out and tilted her chin up with one finger, turning her face farther into the moonlight. Even that slight contact transmitted her tension and uncertainty, and sent a jolt of joy through him.

“Yahweh has indeed blessed you, Ruth,” he finally said, struggling to keep his voice down, and his desire under control. “You’ve given me more hesed tonight—choosing me over all the younger men—than you gave Naomi when you came with her to Judah.”

A brief smile crossed her face. “You’re better than all the younger men, and I have wanted none other since you called me ‘daughter’ in the field.”

Another shaft of joy ran over him, and Boaz almost gathered her into his arms. But she stayed very still, neither yielding to him nor withdrawing from him.

“Don’t worry, Ruth. I’ll gladly do what you ask,” he reassured her. “Everyone in town recognizes you as an exceptional woman, and I will be envied because you have come to me.” He chuckled a little. “You’ve also shown me how I can help you with the elders’ blessing. We’ll be married as soon as we can, and I’ll redeem you.” He reached out again and lightly touched her cheek with his fingers. She trembled under his touch, then moved back slightly.

Boaz smiled, sure now that this woman wanted him as much as he wanted her. “As for Elimelech’s land, Tobeh will have first right on that. I’ll ask about it in the morning. If he wants it, I’ll be certain he pays a good price. If not, I can redeem that also. But either way, you will be mine.”

Ruth didn’t speak for a minute. “Thank you, adon. This is more than I expected.” She pulled her robes closed about her. The moonlight flashed off something on a cord around her neck.

“What’s that?” Boaz asked, leaning closer and gently pulling the robe back. “It looked like a ring.”

She went rigid, and her hands closed over it instantly. “It’s from my mother,” she barely whispered.

“Who was she? I know little about you, Ruth.” He took the opportunity to push aside her head covering to let the moonlight dance on the smoothness of her hair. Her perfume filled his head again, and he combed his fingers through a long, soft tress that fell over her shoulder. The rest of her might have been a block of stone.

As the silence stretched out, he felt the fear in her and sadness dampened his thoughts. Would she trust him with the truth about herself, or was her request tonight born only of desperate need? The flames of desire were one thing, but the companionship and love born of respect and trust between two people was another. That was the empty ache which he still carried from Mena’s death. He had no companion with whom to share his life.

Ruth still remained silent, her tense body unable to completely hide her shaking. He continued to stroke her hair, allowing his hands to brush her cheek, knowing he could only ask, willing her fear to leave, striving to woo her with his tenderness. His chest hurt from holding his breath and his heart sank more with every moment. Would it be like this between them? Brought together by a desire which would fade, leaving nothing behind? Would there always be the sorrow of loneliness eating at his heart?

Then, slowly, as if it hurt to move, she pulled the ring back over her head, the chain running down her unbound hair, pulling the glistening waves over her shoulder. She held it out

to him, her hand shaking.

He started to take it and her hand tightened convulsively. He covered it lightly. "What's the matter?" he asked.

Ruth swallowed. "I've never taken it off before," she confessed.

When her fingers loosened, he took the ring, his heart suddenly pounding and his own hand unsteady. He angled it to the moonlight, the feel telling him it was carved ivory, and those had to be rubies set in it. But the chain wasn't gold, as he'd thought. It was human hair, the gold highlights tricking his eye in the dim light. He studied the signet ring itself, a bull and sun flanking a man with a dove over him. "Baal's bull and Kemosh as the sun protecting the king," he murmured to himself. "It's true, then. You are descended from Moab's kings?" He looked at her.

She tilted her chin proudly. "Yes, adon."

Boaz smiled. Her courage was all he had suspected. Leaning forward, he replaced the ring, taking his time arranging her hair. When he finished, he cupped his hands around her face instead of taking her into his arms as he ached to do. "You are an incredible woman, Ruth. Kings sired you, and yet you come here to Bethlehem with a destitute widow and choose an old man like myself for a husband. Why would you give me such hesed?"

Her body softened under his touch and a tear ran down her cheek which he wiped away with his thumb. "Hesed?" she said, her voice husky. "You have given the hesed, adon, since the day I first came to glean in your field." She paused. "You weren't surprised at the ring, adon."

"My name is Boaz. No, Pashur suspected something of the kind. The ring simply confirms what the Habiru discovered. We will have to be careful that your identity remains a secret until politics in Moab settle down." As he spoke he slid his hands down her shoulders and arms, bringing her hands up to his lips for a kiss.

"What one Habiru knows they all know." Ruth gave a little sigh, and Boaz laughed softly.

"Yes, that does seem to be the way of things with Habiru!"

"What about politics here in Bethlehem?" Ruth continued, looking him full in the face for the first time. "I'm of Moab, adon, and there will be those who are against this."

Boaz smiled grimly. "Don't worry, Ruth. I've been taunted about foreign blood since I was a child, mostly by Tobeh. I'm descended from Rahab of Jericho."

"You must be proud. She is greatly honored."

His hands tightened around hers. "Some honor her. Some think only of her Canaanite origins."

Ruth freed one of her hands and caressed his head, her fingers leaving a trail of heat behind as they ran down his shoulder and chest. A little smile flirted with the corners of her mouth. "We Canaanites should cling together, don't you think?"

Boaz chuckled softly, putting her other hand on his chest, desire pulsing through him again. "At least as closely as a man clings to his wife. And I want you for my wife, Ruth." He leaned closer, waiting for any pressure from her hands telling him to stop, and when none came, he brushed her lips with his. She was shaking again, but he didn't think it was from fear or the chill.

"The desire of my heart is to be your desire," she whispered, sliding her hands onto his back and pulling him to her.

Boaz wrapped his arm around her and met her lips with a passion he hadn't experienced

in a long, long time.

When Ruth finally pulled away, it took a minute for Boaz to gather his wits.

“I should go, adon,” she said a little breathlessly, gathering her robes and starting to stand.

Without thought, he reached out, gripping her wrist to stop her. Now that she was finally his, he couldn’t bear to let her out of his sight. “Stay with me tonight.”

Ruth stilled, and he could feel the pulse pounding under his fingers. Then she pulled back slightly, looking away.

She was going to make some excuse, he could tell. He had to think quickly, speak before she did. She couldn’t leave now.

“You not only asked me to be a goel, and I will,” he heard himself say, “but you also asked me to cover you, and I haven’t done that yet. Besides, it’s getting chilly, and you shouldn’t be walking the road or streets alone at this time of night. Stay until it’s dawn.”

He waited, afraid she would refuse and Lilith would be his only companion tonight. “Please.” He held out his cloak invitingly, and she lay down beside him again.