



The Lady of the Lions

A Short Story of Kephrath

~ Richard Abbott ~

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The Lady of the Lions

Richard Abbott

Copyright

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Preface

This short story takes place about 150 years before the start of the full length novel *In a Milk and Honeyed Land*. The setting of Kephraath itself in the Canaanite hill country will be familiar from the novel, but of course none of the characters overlap. A small glossary at the end will help readers who are not familiar with the novel to orient themselves in this world.

Briefly, Kephraath is one of four towns linked by custom, tradition, and a common religious and cultural leadership. The towns are grouped together in the hill country, close to one of the main routes down into the lowlands. The occupants have lived in the region for only a few generations at the time of this story, after migrating from further north. Leadership is in the hands of the town seers and priests. The role of chief, so important in *In a Milk and Honeyed Land*, is more of a token position. There is no real expectation of particular duties placed on the current holder of the title.

The Lady of the Lions

I will lift my eyes up to the hills
where will I find my help?

The first letter

The lady Belita-Labiy, seer and priest of Kephraht, moved a little closer to her window to get more light. She had practiced what she needed to write twice over, and softened the clay one last time.

A message for my lord the king, my god, who is my Sun:

This is a message from Belita-Labiy your maid-servant, who is like the dirt on which you tread. I prostrate myself at the feet of my lord the king, seven times twice over.

May my lord the king save all the land which is his from the power of lawless men, or else it will be lost. The town of Tsapuma has been slighted. May my lord the king be aware of all these things.

The last sign finished, she pushed the clay tablet away, rested her head on her hands, and sighed. Producing a letter to the regional governor in the wedge signs he insisted upon was tiring. Strictly speaking, of course, it was not for the governor at all, but for the great Mitsriy king whose palace was very far away. Hearing her sigh, Kelizzi, her husband, came over and rubbed at the tension in her shoulders. She leaned back against him, feeling the comfort of his presence. They were silent together for a while. They

looked over the densely packed marks in the hardening clay. He chuckled.

“Do you suppose the great king will actually read it himself?”

“I would be happy if it goes no further than Gedjet so long as the governor sees it. Someone will have to if we are going to get help.”

He nodded.

“It looks good to me.”

“It will do. It’s not perfect, but it will do. Will Ozen be able to take it down to Gedjet in the next few days?”

“He will. He was going to go that way today but I asked him to wait for this. Meanwhile, we have the feast of new wine to prepare for.”

“I know. But this had to be done first.”

They held on to each other for a little longer, and then Kelizzi went down to see Ozen. The rest of the evening went in a blur of preparation. The autumn feast was not just an opportunity to sample the fermented fruit of the summer, but also marked the formal start of the year. It was one of the high points of the calendar, and needed to be taken seriously even with all of the hilarity and wildness. When the townspeople had calmed down from the excess of the night, they would want to know that thought and prayer had been given to the next year’s goodness as well.

Belita-Labiy found it difficult to concentrate, though, with the news rippling around the hill country. So far the raids had not been too close, but from all that she had heard, these groups of men were swift to move, and swift to strike, wherever they pleased. Who could say which town they might visit next?

So when the festival came she knew that her dancing, while apparently as fluent and potent as ever, lacked the wholehearted commitment that she preferred. It could not be helped, but the distraction nagged at her. All the while that she danced like Taliy in the earliest garden, and later as her body thrilled and her voice cried out in lovemaking, part of her soul was anxiously flitting around the uplands, trying to guess what would happen next.

Belita-Labiy and Kelizzi were the sixth couple to serve as priests and seers in Kephraeth since the great migration from the north. It was only a matter of a few years since they had taken up office in Kephraeth after their initial time of service in Giybon. Six couples since the migration was typical for the four towns, though Woodlands had seen only four, owing to the extraordinarily long lifespan of the currently serving priest. He was still vigorous and active, but had already declared that he would stand down from office next summer.

The Mitsriy had ruled the region from before the time of the migration, but their practice was to leave local chiefs and leaders in place so long as they remained loyal. The main change that had happened over the years was that

the hill country had gradually, generation by generation, bled people away down into the lowlands. Some villages that had been thriving centres in the early days were now deserted. All had shrunk from their former size. Even the four towns were not immune from the lure of an apparently easier, wealthier life along the coastal plains. The arterial route that ran north and south was well protected, and busy with trade.



Time passed. The dance had come and gone. Kelizzi was quite aware that Belita-Labiy had been anxious, but so far as he could tell nobody else had seen her distraction. Ozen had returned safely from Gedjet, though as yet there had been no reply.

It was afternoon, and she sat opposite him at the little table as they both listened to Yishmar, the seer from Giybon who had succeeded them when they moved to Kephraath. He was talking about another raid. This one had been at the small town of Tappu'ah, up along the ridge north past Sychem. An easy target, really, with no defensible perimeter, but not so very different from Woodlands or Meyim among the four towns. It was worrying.

“And so I am thinking that we need to appoint someone as war leader.”

Belita-Labiy stirred in her seat. “We have not done that for a long time, Yishmar.”

“No, we have not. But I think that we need to do this sooner rather than later. With every success they get bolder, and grow larger in number.”

“I suppose chief Abiezer cannot do this?”

They all looked at each other. The chief was well respected in all four towns, and had fulfilled everything that was expected of him for many years, but he was old. He had been a good chief in times of peace, but times had changed. He lived a few houses further down into Kephraath. Kelizzi spoke what they were all thinking.

“He will say himself that a younger man needs to be found for this. I will talk to him tonight, but here and now we should be giving thought to who can stand up for the four towns in a fight, if it comes to that.”

Yishmar nodded. “It will, before too long, I think.”

They talked for a while, thinking their way around the towns, leaving little gaps for prayer between the words. One name stood out among them all: Jarrar, from Woodlands. He was not only a good tracker and hunter, but he led a group of half a dozen men on raids down into the lowlands from time to time. Other men would follow him if there was need.

Several days later Yishmar’s prediction was confirmed. An outlying farmstead up the ridgeway track from Meyim was attacked. The various family members, distantly connected to people in the four towns, were raped or killed, the produce taken, the house burned. People in Meyim saw the

light of the flames in the night, and discovered the ruin the next morning.

The couple that served as priests in Meyim sent little pieces of burnt wood to the other three towns; it was a formal request for help. The chief walked from Kephra to Woodlands, carrying the old sword that had been brought down from their former home in the distant north all those generations ago, and gave it to Jarrar. The towns had their war leader...

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About the author

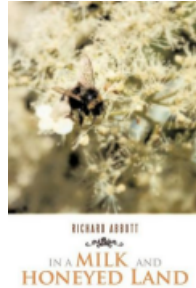
Richard Abbott has visited some of the places that feature in this story and others set in broadly the same region. As well as fictional accounts of the period, he also participates in the lively academic debate surrounding it.

Richard now lives in London, England. When not writing he works on the development and testing of internet applications, and also creates mobile and tablet apps with a focus on the ancient world. He enjoys spending time with family, walking and wildlife – ideally combining all three of those pursuits at the same time.

Look out for his other works, which include the following.

Fiction – full-length novels:

- *In a Milk and Honeyed Land*, available from Amazon, Barnes and Noble, other online retailers, and general booksellers in
 - soft-cover (ISBN 978-1-4669-2166-5),
 - hard-cover (ISBN 978-1-4669-2167-2), and
 - ebook format (ISBN 978-1-4669-2165-8).



In case of difficulty please check the website <http://www.kephrath.com> for purchasing options. * *Scenes from a Life*, a follow-up novel to *In a Milk and Honeyed Land*, being prepared for publication in 2013.

Fiction – short stories:

- *The Man in the Cistern, a short story of Kephraath*, published in ebook format by Matteh Publications and available at online retailers, ISBN 978-0-9545-5351-7 (kindle mobi version) or 978-0-9545-5354-8 (epub version).



Non-fiction:

- ***Triumphal Accounts in Hebrew and Egyptian***, published in ebook format by Matteh Publications and available at online retailers, ISBN 978-0-9545-5352-4.

