

## 2 Chronicles 20:21

Jorkum lay awake in the dark, waiting for death. He did not know how long he had been that way, supine, anxious and bored. His nose was cold with the morning air seeping into his room through the cracks of his door.

A figure, shadowlike, slipped in and lit a lamp.

"Uncle Jorkum. It's time to get up."

Jorkum turned over in his bed and grunted. His head felt like dry clay.

"Uncle Jorkum. Time to get up." She was pulling out his robes and laying them out on the table next to his bed.

"Yes, yes. I heard you the first time." Jorkum waved the girl away. He worked to sit himself up, aching all over while the cold enveloped his skin. Cold. He had felt so much cold for so long.

Once the girl had left the room, he pulled out his wineskin from under his bed and took a sip. His hands trembled.

He had visited the tombs of his wife and daughter the previous evening as the sun sank. Silhouettes of evergreens waved in the gentle breeze. "So, you see," he explained to the stones which marked their graves, "It will not be long before you show me the halls of Sheol. We go to meet our enemies tomorrow. All of Judah is afraid." Jorkum visited the graves three or four times a week and spoke freely to his dead wife and daughter. His hands gesticulated in broad

sweeps. At least they did not give him disapproving looks when he drank from his wineskin.

While Naava was alive, he spoke to her often of his duties as a temple musician. Her responses were brutal and pointed. "You are singing 'Have Mercy on Me O God' again?" she would complain. "We have been doing that dreadful psalm for weeks now. Why can't we do something different?"

"I don't know," Jorkum would reply. He agreed with her, which made it all the more difficult to explain the theology and politics behind song selections. "Cearney is the one who makes those decisions"

"Well, you tell Cearney that we are getting tired of hearing this psalm again and again! Enough begging for mercy! Let's have some joyful music for a change!"

"Okay," said Jorkum. But he would not tell Cearney anything, of course. No one did.

The pat-pat of two small feet approached him. His daughter, Rivka, with eyes as bright as her expectations, tugged at his robes. She gave him a thin-lipped smile, with arms outstretched. She never spoke, but Jorkum knew what she wanted.

"Yes, my lamb. I will stay." He took off his shoes and sat down on the floor. Rivka wrapped her little arms around his neck. He looked up at Naava as he toppled over, barely restraining a laugh. "Go tell them I am sick," he said. "I can't make it."

Naava wrenched her face into that look normally reserved for dead rats in the house. Doing a petty errand for her husband was bad enough. Lying for him would be intolerable. Rivka was balancing, crawling, on top of her husband's shoulders, constantly on the verge of falling off. Her husband was laughing so hard he could barely breathe. Naava put on her mantle and left for the temple.

Jorkum lost his wife to a fever. She was stricken with chills and remained under a pile of blankets. She did not get any better. Then Jorkum was left with his daughter.

Less than a year later, Rivka became listless. When she coughed up blood, Jorkum was so horrified that only his brother, Tovi, had the presence of mind to send for a healer.

Through the coughing and gasping for breath, Rivka fought for life with such desperation that Jorkum did not recognize his own daughter. Her eyes were dull, but they were still filled with expectation. He stayed at her side until the end.

After his daughter's death, he went to the temple and sang often, whether his group had duties or not. He drank more wine. His hands began to shake uncontrollably. Cold settled onto him, like dust on old scrolls. After a wall in his own house collapsed, he lived in a small room on Tovi's roof, and joined his family for dinner.

Jorkum's mother pointed her finger at him. "You need to marry again."

Jorkum did not look up. "Huh?"

"Don't play games with me, son. You've been on your own for years now. You aren't an old man yet. You must remarry."

"Hm."

"I know men. And a man needs a wife. Why haven't you found a wife yet? I am tired of my son living by himself."

Jorkum sighed.

"Or are you not a man anymore?"

Jorkum got up and left, shaking his head. He started walking into Jerusalem's streets, thinking he might go to the temple.

"Jorkum!" Tovi was chasing after him. "Jorkum! Don't pay any attention to Mom. She doesn't know what she's saying."

Jorkum stopped as his brother placed a hand on his shoulder. Jorkum stared at the ground. Like a wound that becomes gangrene, his interminable grief had festered into shame.

"Tovi."

"Yes?"

Jorkum spaced his words as he spoke. His voice came out as a hiss, harsh like a wounded cat.

"Tovi. It has been—five—long—years. And I still—love them!"

Tovi drew in a deep breath and huffed it out. He took his hand off of Jorkum's shoulder and came around to his side.

"I know, Jorkum. I am sorry. You take as much time as you need. My wife and my children—we all like you. You are always welcome in my household—and pay no attention to Mom."

"Thank you, Tovi."

Tovi returned home, leaving his brother standing in the middle of an alley. Jorkum was glad for Tovi's assurances, but he could not set aside the feeling that something was wrong with him. What could possibly be the point of such lingering agony?

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When Jorkum learned about the coming enemy, his dread was eased with the thought of being freed of his lingering aches. The news was bad. The Moabites, Ammonites and the Meunites had united and were coming with a vast army, so all of Judah had assembled around the temple. As a Levite, Jorkum was in a position where he could see their king, prone on the ground, begging the Lord for help. All traces of the arrogance regularly seen in Judah's royalty were gone.

At the end of the day, Jorkum's choral group spoke in whispers as they prepared to go home.

"The king is merely doing what his advisers say."

"He does not believe."

"He doesn't know what to do. His prayer is only a show."

"Of course he doesn't know what to do. Solomon was a wise man, Jehoshaphat is a—!"

"Shshshsh!"

"He admitted that he does not know what to do. We are in the hands of the Lord now."

"Whether the king acts on the word of his advisors doesn't matter. The enemy will slaughter us all."

The following morning, after Jorkum dressed and ate his breakfast, he emerged from his house with Tovi and Tovi's sons. Jorkum pulled his robe tightly around him against the cold morning breeze. The men of Judah filled Jerusalem's streets. The command was clear. "Take your positions and stand firm!" All were heading south where they would meet the enemy.

The journey would take a couple of hours. Jorkum sighed. His left foot would be sore by the end of the day, if he were alive at all. Jorkum, Tovi and Tovi's sons all served in the temple together. His clan had been doing so for generations; David himself had appointed his family.

Since he was a boy Jorkum remembered the music of the temple singers and wanted to be one of them. He loved chant and song, and admired the role that the musicians played in the old rituals. He was appointed to his father's group shortly after he came of age. He never had any doubt that the company of temple musicians was where he belonged.

Jorkum was not the best. He remembered one extraordinary singer in his group. Hozai sang with the clearest voice that Jorkum had ever heard.

Listening to him was like drinking sweet wine. Girls would pay attention when

Hozai sang. He knew he was talented. How could he not? He was chosen for many solos.

But more than ability was required to do well in the temple. When Cearney became the leader, Hozai's solos stopped. Cearney did not like Hozai's family. One day Hozai was ambushed by highwaymen on his way to Jericho. Many people attended his burial. That had been a long time ago.

Jorkum was not the oldest member of the group either, however old he felt. The oldest was Babatunde. Babatunde's voice was always loud—probably because he was a little deaf. He was the self-appointed percussionist. He had drums, rattles and cymbals and used them liberally. Jorkum didn't much care for Babatunde's banging and rattling, and Jorkum suspected Cearney didn't either. But Babatunde's status made his percussion untouchable. The choir and the whole temple simply had to put up with it.

Jorkum didn't approve of everything Cearney did, but he knew their leader was a master politician, clever in forwarding the interests of temple music. He had been instrumental in heading off an attempt to exclude the musicians from the harvest processions. Cearney's singers always had their share of the most prestigious ceremonies.

Jorkum believed it was no accident that David, Israel's greatest king, was also a musician. One of Jorkum's favorite paintings showed David playing the lyre, with a Menorah at his side.

But as far as Jorkum could tell, none of the kings that followed David understood a thing about music. The temple was constantly plagued with

chanting that was bland, lifeless, or unprepared. Jorkum and his father joked endlessly about the politics and the indifference that created such poor quality. It seemed that Judah had suffered through generations of kings who were tone deaf. Few in power seemed to have the expertise or the will to make improvements to the temple's music. Jerusalem's leaders had too many other struggles, political and personal.

Once Jorkum learned the temple songs, he had few new demands as a musician. The temple music was old, traditional and sacred. No one dared to change or touch it. To do so would almost be as presumptuous as trying to reach for the Lord Himself.

Music at parties and other gatherings always sounded so fresh, energetic and fun. When his niece got married, Jorkum danced, sang, and hollered into the night. In the unspoken confines of his mind, he wondered why the temple could not have livelier music.

But no one played any music as the men of Judah spread out across the ridges overlooking the desert of Tekoa. Judah's thousands took their positions and beheld their enemies on the other side of the valley. Jorkum could just make out the gentle insidious movements of armies across the hills, massive, terrifying.

The temple musicians had gathered. They did everything together. They could see Jehoshaphat conferring with his advisors.

"At least he will die with us."

"The day is not over yet. Let's see what happens."



A courier arrived with orders. He saluted. "All clans of Levitical singers! You have been appointed to go out ahead of the army to the enemy. You are to praise the Lord when you go. You are to sing:

*"Praise Yahweh,*

*For his faithful love endures forever!"*

The courier saluted once more.

"How many have been chosen to go?" Cearney bellowed as he advanced in broad strides, seeking any clarification the courier might offer.

"All 288 of the appointed Levitical singers have been commanded. Assemble yourselves now!" Then the courier left.

As Jorkum figured out the consequences of the king's command, he felt the blood drain from his stomach. Outrage gripped the musicians.

"How can Jehoshaphat do this to us?"

"We are Levites—not sheep to be slaughtered in a hopeless massacre!"

"Ha! Are you kidding? We are musicians! We are nothing! He can do whatever he wants with us!"

"Perhaps the king is doing this to show the enemy we are not afraid."

"Maybe he's not afraid. But he's not going out there—we are!"

"This gesture will only enrage the enemy! It will provoke them. They will flood out of the hills and we will be the first destroyed."

Although he was terrified, Jorkum grew tired of this pointless arguing. The singers finally resigned themselves to their orders. If dying at the hands of their enemies was their fate, then so be it. They would die honorably and for all

of Judah, singing as they should. Everyone would die anyway. What difference would it make if they were first?

And so the Levitical singers organized themselves, as if for a procession. They wore their sacred vestments styled in accordance with their clan and status. Jorkum regretted that he did not thank his niece for pulling out his robes.

He had never felt so fearful, so alive. Grief, frustration—all of these feelings were gone. The singers marched together in tight formation, occasionally stepping on each other's feet. Jorkum could smell the men closest to him. The sun emerged from behind a cloud, and Jorkum felt its warm rays on the side of his face.

"Shofars!" came the command from the front. "Time to sound our shofars!" Jorkum's hands trembled as he reached into his pack and pulled out his horn. A lingering call sounded from the front. When it ended, the entire company of musicians responded. To control his shaking, Jorkum held his horn with both hands and blew so hard his right ear popped. Two-hundred and eighty-eight horns sounded long and loud. Then the single shofar in front sounded again. Jorkum lost count of how many times the shofars sounded as they marched across the valley.

When the command came to halt, they were so close to the enemy that Jorkum could see their faces. To the left, large blocks of regimented soldiers carried brilliant bronze shields and stared straight ahead. On the far right stood a vast throng of wild men, their long spears pointed straight up into the sky, as

if to defy the heavens. The most fearsome army was directly in front of them, with armor of red and gray. Their slouching bodies and cocked heads made a show of insolence made Jorkum feel like an insect. Motionless, they stared at the tiny group of musicians with eyes black as night. Jorkum wondered if they were within range of arrowshot.

He heard three shouts from the front, the signal to begin. And so, the company sang—no—they bellowed, with all the power of their chests. It sounded horrible, ugly and defiant.

*"Praise Yahweh,  
For his faithful love endures forever!"*

Jorkum and the group had sung these words countless times in the temple. And this would be their last. Over and over they sang. Jorkum drew in so much breath that his chest hurt. He took courage in knowing he would not die alone. The singers looked at their enemies, directly across from them. They might as well sing.

Then Jorkum saw an arrow fly. But it was not towards the singers. Instead it flew from the middle army to the one on the right. More arrows flew between the armies in front of them. Confusion took their enemies. Their faces were no longer focused on the singers, but on each other. The movement of soldiers pulsed across the hills, gaining intensity. Shouts rose with the clash of metal against metal, and the armies set upon each other. The sounds of war filled the sky, terrifying to behold. The great armies charged at each other in the hills.

In a few moments, the battle built to wild levels of fury. The musicians stopped singing and grew silent, half in wonder, half in horror. They tried not to call attention to themselves. Jorkum did not move or even slouch. Groups of soldiers thrashed in all directions like barley being ground into meal. The movements of their enemies made no sense. Jorkum saw no tactics or strategy in the throbbing pushes of battalions—only blind slashing and killing. Behind the singers, Judah’s armies remained immobile in the hills.

Jorkum thought of his wife and was filled with the strangest desire. His fear left him, replaced with a consuming wish that Naava could have been with him at that moment. Although it was horrible, it was also an incredible wonder that he wanted to share with her. But that would have been impossible, even if she had been alive.

The battle raged for hours, and the singers became exhausted from standing and watching the deadly mayhem before them. Jehoshaphat's pleas to the Lord were moving and understandable, but Jorkum still could not understand this massive wave of death. And what could it mean for him to be so close to such terrible power? He would never understand.

As the fighting slowed, the singers relaxed. The dead lay piled up in the hills. Blood gathered in pools. The shouts, the clangs of weapons faded. Finally, the noise died out altogether.

The cool breeze of early evening blew across the backs of the singers. It carried the sweet smell of lavender. And then Jorkum felt something that he could understand.

It was Naava, his wife.

She was with him. He could perceive her in a way that he trusted more than his eyes or ears, or even his sense of touch. Rivka was also there, holding her mother's hand. And Naava was speaking to him. He recognized her voice—deep and raspy, with clipped consonants and a pitch that inflected downwards at the end of her statements. Her words were clear and peaceful as the evening sky.

"It's all right, Jorkum.

"It's all right.

"You can let us go now.

"It's all right."

The breeze kicked up and Jorkum's robes flapped. The smell of lavender was everywhere. The heat of the day had eased, giving way to the refreshing cool of twilight.

And Jorkum felt the interminable agony leave him, like the breath of a sigh.

The singers looked at each other as the joyous shouts of Judah reached their ears. Then they broke into their own shouting.

"We won! We won!"

"No! The Lord has won! This is a victory for him! We didn't have to do anything!"

At the command from the front, the musicians advanced towards the hills before them. Jorkum and the singers tread with caution as they reached

the killing fields, watching for any attack, any trick, any movement. Death and its horrors were everywhere. Like sour milk, the smell of blood filled Jorkum's lungs. He collapsed onto his hands and knees and vomited. The men of Judah began to collect a vast supply of weapons, clothes and armor.

Jorkum gathered what he could, and then walked home with his brother as dusk turned to night. His left foot did not bother him at all. He felt tired, invigorated and sickened, all at the same time. When he arrived home, he tossed his robes to the floor and collapsed onto his bed, depleted. Jorkum thought he would spend another wakeful night, taking in the horrors he had witnessed that day. Instead, he fell into a dreamless sleep.

He woke to shouting and the sounds of horns. The morning sun leaked through the cracks of his door. Jorkum's nieces and nephews burst into his room and carried him outside as he shouted "Wait! Wait!" He was wearing almost nothing. They ignored him. The celebrations had begun.

The streets were mobbed and raucous, but the noise was just beginning to build. Amidst the shouting and rejoicing, Jorkum and the singers took their place at the head of the procession. Women draped wreaths of olive branches and flowers over their shoulders. A girl thrust a wineskin into his hands. The singers were breathless with elation as they danced, sang and stumbled their way through the center of the city. People pressed into the streets from all sides. Jorkum walked arm in arm with singers, soldiers and a great many people he did not know. Everyone was wild in an ecstasy, glad to be alive while the musicians sang and trumpeted at the center of the celebrations.

"This day will be remembered forever!"

"Praise the Lord who has saved us!"

"The singers shall be remembered forever!"

Jorkum doubted that anything the singers had done would be remembered. Whoever thought about temple musicians? But he did not care. As he looked at the jubilant faces, he saw so many pretty women that he had never noticed before, smiling and looking at him with warm eyes.