

# Valley of the Shadows: KINGDOM OF HILLAEL

## *Introduction*

Squirring uncomfortably in her seat, Barloe rotated again toward the cathedral's entrance. Without exception her cousin Claire was late for every occasion. Today, however, this habit of hers had caused Barloe to become quite irritated.

The large old cathedral, with its high ceilings, ornate carvings and beautiful tapestries echoed the somber tone of the presiding reverend's words: "Please rise and open your programs. We will read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in unison."

Amid the sound of several hundred people shuffling as they rose to their feet, Barloe felt Claire's hand brush against hers as she settled in the pew. "There is no place to park around here – never was and guess there never will be," offered a breathless Claire.

"You know, you could plan ahead, like the rest of us. Maybe try being early?" responded Barloe.

"I suppose, but thank you for saving me a seat. The floral arrangements look beautiful. Aunt Mim would have been very pleased."

Barloe accepted Claire's compliments: "Thank you! Do you really think so?"

A sharp eye from those occupying the row in front of them reminded the cousins that any remaining conversation would best be had after the funeral service. Following a sheepish giggle, the women sat respectfully as the reverend instructed at the culmination of the psalm.

Well-known facts about Aunt Mim's life were eulogized, including her education and many community accomplishments. The reverend concluded the service by encouraging everyone to gather in the rectory for refreshments.

The two cousins lagged behind in the cathedral until almost everyone had vacated the structure. Over the empty pews, Claire's expression saddened as her gaze locked onto the closed coffin at the front of the cathedral. Barloe studied the program in her hand. "Why do you suppose they always recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm at funerals? I never could understand what it means."

After a brief pause, Claire responded: "Do you remember the story Aunt Mim used to tell us? Didn't it have something to do with this psalm?"

Pensive for a moment, Barloe answered: "Wow, that's a blast

from the past! Um, let's see. Wasn't there something about a king and his wife? That's so sad – I can't believe we've forgotten it!"

The sorrow in Barloe's voice was genuine as the women spent a final moment together with Aunt Mim in the cathedral.

As they entered the rectory, the cousins came to a dead stop. "Unbelievable! Look at those vultures chowing down!" Barloe quipped.

"Is that Roy? Wow, he's become a huge talent." Claire's usual sarcasm caused the two to erupt with laughter.

"With that plateful, looks like he'll be moving on to even larger accomplishments," Barloe added.

Trying to stifle what would appear to be rude behavior at a funeral, the two women diverted their attention to more serious family matters. Barloe and Claire assessed the crowd, typical for such "intimate family gatherings." They revealed to each other their most current gossip discoveries: who was living with so-and-so; who had had the most reconstructive work done; who had divorced and remarried again; and whose unruly kids were currently swinging from the chandelier. However, both came up silent when a handsome young man, approximately their age, approached the two cousins.

"Do you remember me?" he asked.

Claire and Barloe stood frozen in place, wide-eyed with gaping mouths. Barloe nudged Claire, who cleared her throat and, remembering her manners, politely placed her lips back together.

Shaking her head, Barloe managed to utter: "I'm afraid it's been a while."

"I can see that from your expressions," the young man chuckled. "I'll help you out. Here's a clue: I lived next door to Aunt Mim until I went away to college about eight years ago."

"Gil!" the cousins responded simultaneously. "We used to chase you with Aunt Mim's walking stick," Claire stated while waving an imaginary implement through the air.

"Yes, yes, I remember that all too well," Gil said in a monotone pitch as he extended his raised palm in her direction. "I can't believe she's gone," he muttered. "Spending time with her will always be one of my favorite childhood memories. I meant to stop by and visit. I just never made the time. She always had time for me, though."

"Well, it helped that she didn't have children of her own, but I know what you mean. We get so busy," Claire responded.

"I could always count on Aunt Mim. My daughter, Haley, would beg me to take her over there, and Aunt Mim enjoyed every minute they

spent together.” Barloe then turned toward Claire: “Actually, Aunt Mim had probably told Haley that story. Maybe she remembers it?”

“You have kids?” Gil asked.

“Just one, a third-grader,” Barloe explained as she popped up her index finger. “Yikes, that reminds me,” Barloe stopped mid-sentence and looked at her watch. “I’ve gotta go pick her up from school.”

“It was nice to see you both. Maybe we’ll meet up again soon?” Gil offered politely, then turned to mingle again with the crowd.

“Will you help me carry out some of the flowers? I’m supposed to bring them to Aunt Mim’s house tomorrow - you know, when all the vultures reappear there to go through all of her earthly things?” After a brief laugh, Barloe questioned: “You’re gonna be there, right?”

Barloe’s voice trailed behind her as she quickened her pace and moved back into the cathedral.

Staring in Gil’s direction, it took an elbow from Barloe to break Claire’s trance. “Hey, you in there? What are you thinking?”

Shaking her head, Claire gathered up Barloe’s floral arrangements in her arms. “There’s a story about to break from the governor’s office. I was supposed to be on my way there by now. Why am I always late?” Claire shook her head in self-disgust, then added: “I’ll probably be late for my own funeral!”

Barloe scoffed out loud at Claire’s remark. “Well, that won’t be too hard for you to do.”

“Barloe, you’re so funny. Ha ha,” laughed Claire, giving it her best caustic flair.

The women briefly hugged after depositing the floral arrangements into Barloe’s van.

“I’ll call you tonight. We have to be to Aunt Mim’s house on time tomorrow, before the others scoop up every sentimental treasure. Hey, drive carefully?” Barloe reminded as she closed the van door.

“You too,” called Claire. “And give a kiss to little Haley for me, okay?”

“Will do,” yelled Barloe as she pulled away from the curb.

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That evening after the funeral, Barloe reheated leftovers for dinner, which allowed her to make quick work of cleaning up the kitchen.

Checking on her daughter, Barloe entered the bubble gum-colored room.

“Well, are you done with your homework yet, little miss?” Barloe asked, kissing her daughter’s forehead.

In her sweet childish voice, Haley replied: “I’m done, Mommy. But I’m so sad that Auntie Mim is gone. I miss her already.” Tears began to well in her eyes.

“I know, sweetie. But she will always be in your heart, as long as you remember her.” Barloe hadn’t expected to feel the lump that filled her throat as she pulled her daughter in close to her.

Haley’s head nearly touched Barloe’s shoulder, which also came as a surprise. She hoped she and Haley would always remain close. For a brief moment, Barloe remembered Aunt Mim holding her just that way.

Before her tears became obvious, Barloe quickly dismissed them with a cheerful thought: “Now, how about some popcorn? Then it’s off to bed. We’ve got another busy day tomorrow.”

“Okay Mommy.”

Haley bounded out the room with the vibrant energy of an eight-year-old while Barloe melded memories of Aunt Mim together into fleeting moments spent with her daughter.

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“Hello?” Claire had been working feverishly to meet the newspaper’s deadline for her story later that evening when the phone rang.

“Well, where have you been?” asked Barloe.

“You know, I can tell you but then I’d have to kill you,” Claire smirked as she answered, adding a hint of mystery to her voice. “You’ll just have to buy the paper tomorrow and see for yourself.”

“It does me no good to know a reporter for this city. You know that, right?” snapped Barloe, who then conjured a mental image of her cousin in a Dick Tracy-type fedora and a tight-waisted raincoat with its collar up. “Alright, if you won’t answer my question, tell me this: what time are you supposed to be at Aunt Mim’s house tomorrow morning?” Barloe queried.

“At ten. See? I haven’t forgotten,” Claire responded with a mocking touch in her voice. Then she added: “Hey, did you remember to ask your beautiful daughter about Aunt Mim’s story?”

“Oh rats! I forgot all about it. Tonight just flew by, between

Haley's homework and trying to keep up at the flower shop..."

"Barloe, you don't have to explain it to me," Claire interrupted. "I don't know how you do what you do. I mean, as if being a single mother isn't enough, then the flower shop on top of that, and your house is always spotless, too. You're amazing!" Claire said with true admiration while looking around at her clutter-filled room.

"And I'm always on time," Barloe added.

"Yes, there's always that too." The loathing in Claire's tone gave way to a lighthearted laugh from both cousins.

After a few moments of silence, Barloe spoke: "What's up? I can hear you thinking over there."

Claire's fingers ran along the program from Aunt Mim's funeral. "Oh, I'm still wondering about this psalm. Hey, wait a minute. Didn't Aunt Mim's story have a shepherd in it?"

"Yeah," Barloe chimed in, "I think there was. Or was it a prince? You know, we might remember that story yet! Hey, um, I better get going here. I still have a load of laundry to get done tonight. See you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow, Cuz, 11 a.m. sharp," joked Claire.

"What?" Then catching on to her cousin's use of humor, Barloe replied, "Honestly!"

Both women laughed while hanging up their phones, but Barloe wondered how much truth there was in Claire's jest.

The evening sped along and before she knew it, the clock signaled that it was 11:30 p.m. – nearly a new day. But Claire had made the newspaper's deadline with a half-hour to spare. Again she held the printed information from Aunt Mim's funeral in her hand. Gently running her fingers over the words, she recited aloud: "The Lord is My Shepherd.' My, what a handsome prince Gil would be."

With a heavy sigh, Claire then lay back on her bed, closed her eyes, and drifted to sleep amid thoughts of her dear aunt and the forgotten story...

## 1.

*Fiendizmal stepped into the light. Cerche gasped at the sight of her. Until this time, she was considered one of the most beautiful queens in the region. But the light of day cast an unkind shadow in the queen's direction, revealing dark crescents circling her sunken eyes. Her flowing red hair had been the envy of every woman. This day, disguised in a loose black shroud, Queen Fiendizmal's shaved head would garner no jealous admiration. Sorrow and shame weighed heavily on her countenance. Barely raising her eyelids, the KinKadean Queen lifted a small leather bag toward Cerche.*

*Queen Fiendizmal's voice trembled as she spoke. "You will find your vitneh beyond the southern ridge. After my return to the castle in KinKade, I will await the Kaebreans' signal. Let us pray it is not too late, and they will accept this rare gift and end all our suffering."*

*"As you wish, my queen," Cerche bowed, as he accepted the satchel from Fiendizmal.*

*Rising quickly, Cerche turned away from the queen while walking toward his horse. Securing the small bag within his shirt, the deceitful vitneh lus smiled.*

*Though Fiendizmal was unable to visualize his facial expression, perhaps she sensed something amiss.*

*"Take care to uphold our agreement, Cerche, so it will be well with your heirs. A regrettable tragedy it would be, when your descendents finally ascend to the throne of Hillael, to have my people invade their territory," Fiendizmal warned.*

*High on his horse, Cerche shot a disinterested glance at the queen's "shadow" before galloping toward the vitneh.*

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"Your majesty? Chief Grecondet Nijabe has arrived. He waits at the palace portico," the castle guardsman announced.

"Splendid!" replied King Dantekar with enthusiasm. He opened his chamber door and rushed down the marble stairwell.

Out on the castle grounds, there was much excitement as parchmels gathered to watch their sons depart. It was time to send another group of boys off on their yearlong Assurant journey. As usual,

Nijabe was on hand to remind each Assurant of the guidelines, rules of conduct and emergency information.

“My king,” Nijabe bowed as Dantekar breezed through the palace foyer.

Dressed in his official chief grecondet attire, Nijabe smiled broadly as Dantekar approached.

Embracing Nijabe’s arm in a hearty but discreet hug, the king welcomed the chief. “Were we ever that young?” Dantekar whispered as he lifted his chin in the boys’ direction?

“Never,” Nijabe replied with a chuckle.

(This is a free excerpt which is given at our website, [www.valleyoftheshadows.net](http://www.valleyoftheshadows.net). For additional information or any of the remaining 18 chapters, please contact [amrecortadino@valleyoftheshadows.net](mailto:amrecortadino@valleyoftheshadows.net).)