

## Hagski's Domain

### Chapter One of *Six Weeks to Yehidah*

Melissa Studdard

Texas, USA

The thing you would notice most was the rain, how the rain fell and fell and never seemed to stop. The sky was constantly swollen with it, then birthing it, swollen, then birthing again, and the hills, like greedy babies, suckled up all that rain. They shone and glistened green as the backs of frogs on bright green lily pads.

In a small village nestled in these hills lived a girl named Annalise. She had just turned ten, which was old enough to begin thinking about grown up things, like choosing her own clothes for school, yet young enough still to indulge in fanciful imaginings of enchanted trees and talking hills. Her best friends were the clouds that canopied her village and the verdant hills that hosted her most precious and outrageous dreams. She would lie on the grass with her hair fanned around her head like a halo, and there she would talk and sing and make up stories all afternoon long, with no audience but the clouds and the sheep to hear her tales. There she would stay, despite the rain, until the very last minute, when her mother called her in to supper.

But this one Friday, when Annalise's school was on vacation and she'd slept in and then eaten an especially late lunch, she decided to try to outlast the rain instead of going inside at dinnertime.

"I'm not hungry," she called back to her mother. "Please just let me stay a little longer."

"Okay, okay," her mother said. After such a late lunch, she wasn't exactly hungry herself. "But stay where I can see you from the kitchen window."

"Thank you, Mom!" Annalise called, moving a little closer to the house so her mother could see her.

Annalise spun around with her arms outstretched and then fell to the ground, laughing and singing.

"I love being outside," she said to Mabel and Mimi, the two sheep who had followed her back to the house.

It began to rain a little harder, and Annalise strengthened her resolve to stay outside no matter what the weather. She was, you could say, as stubborn as the rain itself. And even though she had good intentions regarding her mother's wish that she stay within sight, it wasn't long before she became enchanted with a flash of light off in the distance. Someone with less imagination might merely have assumed the light to be a firefly or a flickering lamp, but to Annalise it was a golden fairy riding a rain drop to a magical kingdom. In fact, it reminded her of a poem she'd written in school earlier that year. It went like this:

A frigid winter's night

Leaves on fir trees glistening with snowdrops

Fairies skip across the night sky  
Joyous in their eternal dance  
The Man in the Moon smiles fondly  
at his children on Mother Earth  
The path reflects the glistening heavens  
A fox passes, unwavering  
Unaware of the sky, the heavens,  
Concerned with the darkness,  
Finding his way

She recited the poem to herself as she watched the flickering light, and soon her mind went the way of her imagination, and she began to create new poems about fairies and rain drops and foxes on trails, and not a thought was left in her head about staying near the house, much less near the open kitchen window.

Annalise chased the flashing light to the base of the hill, all the way down to the river bank where she watched it dance atop the glistening water and skip from pebble to pebble. After landing briefly, the light darted into a cluster of trees, then dashed up through their tops, up into the clouds and back down again, where it skipped from treetop to treetop, twirling in between.

“I’ve seen this imp before,” Annalise said to the sheep who had followed her to the base of the hill. “But now that I’m closer, I don’t really think it’s a fairy. It must be some other sort of magical being, something even more unique. I’ll stay here and figure out just what it is. Then I’ll write a story about it.”

True to her word, Annalise stayed in the valley between the hills, even after her mother had called her home again, which, being so far away, she did not hear. The rain, stubborn as it was, remained also, and the magical light flickered and danced a merry show for Annalise and the sheep. The river rose, and evening turned into night, and as Annalise remained oblivious to the passing of time, her mother grew concerned and began to look for her, eventually calling the local authorities, who put together a search party.

When by the next morning, the villagers had still not found the little girl who was as obstinate as the rain itself, the floods started to reach the tops of the hills, and the search had to be abandoned so that helicopters and boats could take local families to safety.

Annalise, in the meantime, had fallen asleep right in the midst of singing “Zip-a-dee-doo-dah” and had then awoken to find herself, Mabel, and Mimi transported to the other side of the clouds, the place above where rain is made.

\*\*\*

It was the brightest waking up she’d had in many Saturdays, so even though she felt some curiosity as to her whereabouts, she decided to christen the morning with a song, “Sunny Saturday,” which she made up as she went along.

“I’ll figure out where I am in a little while, when I find someone to ask,” Annalise thought, and then she began singing her song, which went something like this:

Oh, it’s a Sunny Saturday

(baaa)  
Sunny Saturday indeed  
(bleat)  
For here I am  
On the other side of the clouds  
(baaa)  
With my favorite sheep  
Mabel and Mimi  
(baaa baaa)  
Sunny Saturday  
Sunny Saturday indeed  
Tra La La Li  
Tra La La La  
Everything is so fluffy and white  
(baaa)  
Mabel, Mimi, and me  
(bleat)

It was a full chorus. Annalise was lead, and the sheep, who could only say “baaa” and “bleat,” were back up.

But that all changed in an instant, because Mimi did something unexpected. No sooner had the song ended than she shouted out what she thought to be “bleat,” which meant, of course, “lovely job with the song, my dear companions.” However, what came out when Mimi opened her mouth was not “bleat” but the *actual words*, “lovely job with the song, my dear companions.”

Mabel, Mimi, and Annalise were so surprised that for a moment they all just stared at each other in complete silence. Then Mabel said, “Why, Mimi, you can speak real words.”

“And so, it seems, can you,” Mimi replied.

The two sheep, who were excited beyond measure, spent the next several minutes trying out new words on each other and practicing pronunciation, while Annalise, whose vivid imagination made her an expert at managing extraordinary happenings, remained unsurprised and busied herself making up real words to replace the “baaas” and “bleats.”

“Try this,” she said, humming a few bars to the sheep. Then she hummed again, and the sheep hummed with her. “Now for the words,” she said, lifting her arm like a conductor holding a baton. But before she got to the words she was interrupted by the most horrid voice she had ever heard. It seemed to come out of nowhere, and it sounded like a car screeching to a stop in order to keep from hitting a dog.

Annalise, Mabel, and Mimi looked all around, but there was no one in sight. “Who is that singing in my domain?” the voice demanded.

Annalise jumped backwards, startled by the voice again, as she still could not see a body to go with it. Then, regaining her composure, she replied, “Why, it’s just me.”

“And who, exactly, is this ‘just me’ who is bold enough to reply to the divine Hagski?” the voice demanded.

“Me, Annalise,” Annalise responded, shuddering. Although she could see this Hagski nowhere, she imagined her exhale as she spoke to be a gassy cloud of black fumes, like the exhaust from an old car.

“Not me and you?”

“No, just my sheep and me, Annalise.”

“Annalise of?”

“What?” Annalise said.

“Annalise of the Enchanted Forest, Annalise of the Queendom of Munchkins, Annalise of the Hundred Acre Wood, Annalise of the Shimmering River, Annalise de la Mancha, you know, Annalise of—”

“Um, well, Annalise of The Verdant Hills, I guess.”

“You guess? Well, what is it, girl? Are you from the Verdant Hills or not? Are you orphaned? Adopted? Exiled? Restricted? Did you trespass? Are you a clone? Is your brother a dung beetle? Did you escape from a firing squad? Were you mortally wounded and then left for dead only to be rescued and given to a king who was not your father but who would rear you as his own until you discovered, mistakenly, that you were destined to kill him and so you ran away, only to end up accidentally killing the man who was actually your father, thereby fulfilling the prophecy?” Hagski paused for effect, then said, “How can you not know which Annalise you are or from whence you hail?”

“Well, I don’t know about clones and dung beetles and all that stuff,” Annalise replied. “But I am indeed Annalise of The Verdant Hills, and you can tell anyone I said so.”

Hagski now appeared before Annalise, and Annalise saw that she was indeed a hag, and quite a frumpy mess besides. Her hair was primarily black, but big chunks had been dyed pink and orange, and one side was matted to her face as if she had just woken up from a sweaty nap. She wore a wrinkled beige button-down shirt that had mud colored stains scattered about it.

“Oh, a feisty one,” said the hag. “I like that. Are you a Yahoo or a Houyhnhnm, Easterner or Westerner, male or female, Christian or Buddhist, living or deceased, vegetable or meat?” And with this, she began to poke at Annalise with a chopstick that she pulled out from over her ear.

“Skinny little thing, ain’t ya?” she said.

“Stop it!” cried Annalise. “That hurts!”

“Ah, meat it is, then, definitely,” said Hagski, pulling out her notebook and jotting something down. “Most who come here are. It’s been a long time since the carrot girls were here, or the green bean boys.”

Annalise took advantage of the fact that the hag was writing instead of asking questions for the moment, and she began to look around to try to comprehend where she was and what was going on. She figured that if her sheep could now talk, she must be in a land with new rules. Then it dawned on her that she was not really in a “land” at all. She was in the sky, and gravity

no longer had the same effect on her. It pulled her, yes, but only to the top of the clouds, which she found surprisingly firm to walk upon.

“Pardon my directness,” said Mabel, “but where are we?”

“You are in Hagski’s domain,” said Hagski. “What comes here stays here. We are a democracy, and I am the dictator. You are my new slaves. Here are your rules:

Rule #1 Always follow the rules

Rule #2 Be prepared to recite the rules upon command

Rule #3 If you break the rules you will be punished

Rule #4 Anyone caught trying to change the rules will be exterminated

Rule #5 No discussing the rules with other slaves

Rule #6 Any misinterpretation, misrepresentation, mispronunciation, misinformation, misjudgment, misunderstanding, misplacement, misconduct, miscounting, miscuing, misfiring, mishandling, misspelling, or misreading concerning the rules will be punishable by law.

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yes, I do,” said Mimi, leaning towards Hagski in confusion.

“What exactly *are* the rules?”

Hagski looked furious. “You nincompoop,” she screeched. “You half-witted, turnip-brained, baaaaaing, bleating, comedian wannabe sheep. I just clearly outlined the rules for you, one through six. Follow them!” She paused her diatribe to roll her eyes. Then she asked, “Does anyone have any *real* questions?”

“Yes,” said another screeching voice from a nearby cloud. “I have some questions.”

Annalise, Mabel and Mimi craned their heads around and even turned their bodies to try to see where the voice was coming from, but there was no one to be seen. The second voice began its list of questions:

1. Have these rules been approved by the rule approval committee?
2. Do they contradict previous rules, current rules, or rules that are to be made in the future?
3. Have they been revised by the rule revising committee?
4. Have they been edited by the rule editing committee?
5. Were they passed by the rule passing committee?
6. Have they been catalogued and cross-referenced with other rules?
7. Have they been printed on committee-approved paper, with committee-approved ink?
8. Have they been numbered and labeled?
9. Were there rules made to determine how these rules would be evaluated by the evaluation committees?

10. Were subcommittees created to monitor the progress of the primary committees?
11. Was there a committee formed to make sure that all committee members were on the appropriate committees?
12. Is there a meeting planned to address these questions, and if so, has this meeting been approved by the meeting planning committee?

“Excellent questions!” said Hagski. “I’m so glad I’m not the only one with a brain around here!”

Soon Hagski and the second sky voice digressed into a verbal skirmish regarding the fine points of a rule which neither of them had yet identified. Annalise thought it sounded like they were arguing about two different rules and that if they identified the rule, maybe they would find that their differences were not so great after all.

“Perhaps you should identify the rule,” Annalise said.

“Hogwash,” said Hagski.

“Cockamamie,” said the other voice. “We both know we are arguing about Rule #207, 928, Section 72, Addendum A, Revision #39, Amendment Pending Results of Rule #132,” said Hagski.

“Actually,” said the other voice, “I was talking about Rule #17.”

“Well,” said Annalise. “The thing to do, clearly, is to first discuss Rule #17, and then, in a separate discussion, talk about Rule #207 and whatever else you called it.”

Surprisingly, Hagski and the other sky voice agreed, after which they promptly appointed Annalise as chairperson of the Rules Discussion Committee of the sky, with her sheep, Mabel and Mimi, as her only committee members.

“Hagski,” said a new voice from behind a haloed cirrostratus cloud. It was a voice that was bold but kind, and filled with humor. “Are you hazing the new arrivals again?”

“Why, indeed, no,” said Hagski. “I’m just having me a bit of fun, a little poking and a little prodding, a little singing and a little songing, a joke here, a whistle there, tilting a windmill every now and then. I’d never slay a sleeping dragon.”

Annalise acted quickly upon hearing a kind and sensible voice.

“Hello,” she offered.

“Hello back,” volleyed the haloed voice.

“To whom am I speaking, please?” she asked. She stood on a thin line of clouds, her two sheep beside her, and Hagski facing her. The cirrostratus from which the kind voice emanated loomed large in the distance, the sun shining behind, around and through it.

“You are speaking to Me,” the voice replied, sounding as warm as the sunlight that seemed to be its source.

“Me who?” she asked.

“Me Anyou.”

“Pardon?”

“Don’t worry about it right now. We need to get you situated. Do you know why you’re here?”

“No,” said Annalise. “I don’t even know *where* I am, much less why.”

Hagski shuffled around, looking a little embarrassed. It was not Hagski’s Domain after all. Me Anyou was clearly in control, a fact which made Annalise, Mabel, and Mimi feel quite pleased.

\*Note\* The poem recited by Annalise was written by Roz Williamson