

Hannah watched the merchant count the fresh-picked early figs carefully in the basket. Her mouth watered as the sun-warmed scent reached her. She could almost taste them. Just one. . . But, no, she did not dare. Levi might be waiting for her, and he would never allow such a luxury. He would check the coins and ask for prices, and the numbers had to match. If even one fig were missing, he would know.

He always knew. Hannah suspected him of following her, but if he did so, she could never find him, no matter how quickly she turned to check.

"One more," the man muttered, and reached down into the pile. The scale in his hand swayed gently from side to side and found a balance.

The merchant had not met her eyes since the first startled look when she walked up.

Hannah pulled her long sleeve down and tried to hide the ugly wrappings she had managed to fasten around her aching arm. She struggled to ignore the heat as the sun beat down on her over-dressed body. The day was too hot for the robe and wrappings, but what choice did she have?

It had been three days since this last beating. She would not have come today, but her food supplies were low and she could not take the chance Levi would notice how boring his meals had become – and find her.

Maybe she would heal just enough to endure before that happened.

The merchant handed her back her purchase. He still did not meet her eyes. Hannah looked at the basket's handle, and willed her other arm, the one less injured, to move. It had been hard enough to hand the basket over empty. Such a small measure of figs to cause such pain. Her arm, her shoulder, her back, pain streaked like fire as she lifted the basket and its load over the seller's cart.

She had only begun her shopping. Hannah looked down at the basket and its little load of figs, and tried not to think how heavy it would be on the long walk home. She refused to cry. It helped nothing, and when she got back home, how would she explain her tears?

"Fresh lamb's meat," a voice pealed out. "Slaughtered this morning! Fresh!"

Hannah glanced over at the booming voice. A display of copper pans stopped her cold. The face that stared back at her, distorted and orange, had dark shadows around each eye. One was swollen almost shut. A large, ugly splotch puffed out one cheek.

She gasped. No wonder the fig seller had been so uneasy! If only she had known what she looked like before she came! Levi did not permit her to have mirrors in the house. It was hard to get a good look in the wavy image of a hammered copper pot anyway, so she had worked by touch alone, trying to arrange the headdress to cover the worst of the sore spots.

What a poor job she had done.

She lifted her sore arm, unburdened by the basket, awkwardly pulled her headdress further forward to hide her cheek, and glanced around at the crowd. No one was looking her way. A woman in a green robe busily checked the edges of a length of linen. Another counted something in her own basket. Children shrieked in play.

"You had your thumb on that scale!" The sudden shrill complaint, loud and directly at her elbow, startled Hannah into a jerk of surprise. White heat burned down her spine and around her ribs.

"Never! I run an honest business!" The anger coming from the stall made Hannah's wounded muscles tighten.

Hannah left the fruit display, and stepped toward the vegetables. Her legs were stiff, every movement forced and stilted. She had abandoned her bed in the fresh hay in the sheepfold yesterday because the friendly sheep poked their curious noses into bruises and bumped into her, piling new pain on old, nudging her aside as they sought their own comfort, so she had found another last night, under the empty sacks in Levi's own shed. Why he had not looked there yet surprised her, but she was grateful. She would have to find a different place tonight. Three days was a frighteningly long time to go without being caught. She watched for Levi each time she had to venture out to make another meal, peeking out from her hiding place, creeping carefully into the house only when she knew he would be far away.

Why Levi had not come inside the day Joshua had heard her still surprised her, but perhaps it was simply his brother's presence. Joshua had even called her name, and yet Levi had remained outside. He could have strode boldly into that room and pinched and twisted in all the places that would cause pain, all the while crooning the most loving of words for Joshua's listening ears, but he had not. She would not count on such mercy happening again.

Under the spreading awnings that drooped between their support poles at each seller's stall, huge woven baskets sat on wooden tiers, their tempting display sending fragrance into the air. The rich soil of the hills of Gilead produced abundantly: grains, fruits of all kinds, from the common figs, fig-mulberries and olives, to pomegranates, apricots and citron, and vegetables, carrots and beans, onions, peas, leeks and lentils. Her garden produced the common foods, but Levi always found a way to ask for what it did not grow, seeds he would not buy for her – radishes, cucumber, spinach, turnips and eggplant.

So many ways to punish.

Hannah stared at the rich display before her. She had wept and pleaded with God, made endless bargains for the child that would spare her Levi's abuse, but God had not heard her, or if he had, he had not answered, and she had no place else to turn.

She went to set the basket down carefully, trying not to bend. It slipped from her fingers and landed with a soft thump on the ground. She reached across the piles of vegetables for the spinach at the back of the tiers of produce, so far away. The basket at her feet teetered. She leaned down to catch it, too quickly.

"Ooo-oo!" The moan burst out.

No one noticed. Children still played and yelled and ran through the market. Metal clanged from the metalworker's cart. A donkey brayed. Laughter echoed around her. People called back and forth. The woman still complained about the merchant's cheating, attracting a small crowd.

It was a slow process filling the large basket one-handed with things she needed to please her husband. She hesitated over the garlic that scented the air. Should she get some, and add it to her own bowl of stew? Would that keep Levi away from her?

The urge for subtle revenge passed, squashed by the reminder of Levi and the power of his anger. When had she become this cringing creature? How many beatings had it taken?

How much longer could she endure?

Out of the corner of one eye, she saw Joshua, Levi's brother, tall and dark-haired, standing at another stall. She turned her head away quickly, praying he had not seen her. He was tall enough to see over the heads of most of the villagers, he could easily spot her. And if he came over for a friendly greeting and asked about her face, she could hardly tell him the truth, he would never believe it, and she did not feel up to lies. The fig seller had guessed without being told, she was certain of that, but Joshua? Never!

A hand touched her shoulder. Hannah went as still as death, afraid even to breathe.

"Hannah?"

A woman's voice. She took a breath, easing her burning lungs. The buzzing in her ears went quiet.

"Hannah? Is anything wrong?"

She forced a smile and turned. "Hello, Taleh."

Taleh's mouth dropped open in a silent gasp. "Oh, Hannah, this cannot continue." She reached out and touched a spot on Hannah's cheek. Even under her gentle fingers, it set up a throbbing. "Hannah, Javan can help you. He is one of the elders now. He can do something, speak to Levi, whatever will stop this. I thought abuse was not permitted in this land. Why do you say nothing?"

"No!" Hannah heard the fear in her own voice, and fought it back down. "No, please, Taleh, let it go. Please."

"But you should not have to live like this!"

"Has anyone in the market said anything?" Hannah tried to turn her head, but Taleh would not permit it. Her touch on Hannah's cheek was careful, but firm. "I look frightful. I did not realize."

"People should know, Hannah. Perhaps that would stop him." Gentle, mild Taleh's voice held a scorn that surprised Hannah. She took Hannah's hands and squeezed carefully, as if she feared

the simplest touch would cause more pain. "Please let me say something to Javan. We can fix this, Hannah, we can. Javan can make him stop. Maybe all it will take is the warning that people know."

Misery dragged at Hannah. How could she feel so old, and be only twenty and six? Taleh had ten years more, and seemed younger. Was that what being cherished did, form a shield against time? What will I look like in ten more years, she wondered. "Please say nothing, Taleh. Please, for my sake. It will only get worse. Besides, it is my fault. If I could give him a child, all would be well." She tried another smile, but it trembled, so she let it fade.

"Is that what this is about?" Taleh's voice was dark with disgust and disbelief. She wiped away a tear Hannah had not even known was there. It left a cool trail. "If you are afraid, come to us. We will give you safe haven. I mean it." Firm words, a promise. "Come to us. We are closest."

Hannah dared not bring another into her own horrors. "No. Your children . . ." she started.

"Javan and I will take care of our children. He was a soldier, you know." Taleh let go of Hannah's hands and started to turn away, then changed her mind and turned back, raising her finger like a scolding mother. "If I see you like this one more time, Hannah, nothing will stop me from interfering. I never thought to see women treated so in this land. I thought I had left all that behind when Javan captured me. I do not intend to let your husband bring such fear into my life again. I will make Javan take action, and I will visit you, to keep watch at least, as often as the children will permit me to get away."

Such a tiny woman, so much determination. Hannah knew enough of Taleh's history to know she meant what she said. She had endured life among the depravity and brutality of neighboring Ammon, the death of her own family in war, a trek as prisoner across the desert, the initial distrust of this village, kidnapping – why should Levi frighten her?

A little of the aloneness faded before Taleh's quiet resolve. "Thank you."

Taleh's oldest daughter, a pretty girl of about ten with straight, midnight-black hair, the most recent baby clinging awkwardly around her neck and wailing, pulled at her mother's sleeve. "Mother, please take Saul back. He will not stop crying, and I want to go play with Tamar."

"Thank you, Jochabed. You were a big help." Taleh reached out to caress her daughter's cheek like she had done to Hannah, and plucked her baby away, smothering his sobs against her shoulder and crooning.

Anguish, deep and visceral, squeezed Hannah's heart tight as she watched what she had been denied. She turned away, but Taleh must have seen. She opened one arm and wrapped Hannah in a cautious hug. She said nothing, for what was there to say, but there was compassion in her gaze.

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Hannah carried the heavy basket on her good arm away from the busy market, feeling the pain rip through her with every step. It would take longer than ever to make it back home, and the evening meal would be late.

She could not let herself think about it. She clenched her jaw and kept walking.

The edge of the village beckoned, the last of the whitewashed stone houses leaning against the thick rock walls that protected the inhabitants from the dangers outside. Above the walls, Hannah saw the grassy hill give way to the trees that framed the small town. She had almost made it outside. Just a little farther and she would be safely away from people, away from the threat of being bumped or jostled. Away from the threat that someone else would notice and ask questions, and she would have to come up with a believable lie.

Someone ran past her through the smaller west gate, likely from the lands outside the city, heedless of anything or anyone blocking the way, and shoved her in their frantic haste. Pain screamed through her. Above the agony that clamored within, Hannah noticed voices yelling and the sounds of anxious commotion. She leaned against the rough stone wall of the nearest house, shuddering as she tried to keep well out of the way of the crowd that bore down on the messenger.

The pain eased as she took careful breaths. A strange awareness grew. Fingers pointed at her, heads swiveled to look, and the crowd parted slowly, like the Red Sea in the days of Moses. At its center, she saw the runner, bent over as he gasped rasping breaths. An old man with thinning gray hair, who had clearly come a long way.

Then he straightened, and she looked into familiar faded brown eyes.

Halel, her husband's most trusted slave. Joshua stood by his side, his face a ghastly pallor. He looked in her direction, but Hannah did not think he even saw her.

"What is it?" Her voice scraped like rough gravel.

"Levi . . ." the slave only managed the one word. Hannah waited in numb stillness.

"Levi . . ." he tried again, "is dead."