

DEUTERONOMY 21: 10- 13

When you go out to war against your enemies and your God gives them into your hands and you carry off the non-combatants as slaves, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you take a fancy to her and take her as wife, you shall bring her indoors, and she shall shave her head and trim her nails and take off the garment she had on when she was brought, and stay in your house and weep for her father and mother for a month; and after that you shall go in to her and assume a husband's rights, and have her as wife.

PROLOGUE

Ammon, 1173 B.C.

The rock was not large enough, but there was no time to look for anything better. She was too far from the city already, almost at the midpoint of the armies, the small separation that kept them apart. They were still far away, though, the sea of men spread out before her, swordpoints catching the sunlight at the smallest movement. Leather shields mingled with the ones made of copper and iron, those held only by the mightiest of the warriors.

The very air seemed to hold its breath as the two armies faced each other, the men of Minnith on the hill, the men of Israel in the shallow valley. Not even the armor jangled.

She could not get close enough to make out faces.

Taleh's heart hung suspended, hardly beating in terror. Somewhere in that crowd of men at the top of the hill stood her father. He did not know she was here. She wondered for a moment if her mother had missed her yet. She could not explain what drew her, why she even cared, why she wanted just one more look at him.

If only she could find a better vantage point! But the stillness oppressive in the very air held her in place, afraid to breathe.

The air exhaled on a mighty shout, and the two armies swelled and surged. Taleh did not, could not, see who moved first.

A scream of pain cut through her, the first ugly sound from the battle. Taleh bit back her own cry of horror as one scream blended with another, piercing cries that should never come from a

man. Dead and dying, the men dropped, to be stepped on as the battle swept past. The blades flashed, not so brightly, and stained in red.

Taleh kept her eyes on the men of her city, hoping, praying to any god that still cared enough for her to listen, that her father would appear, whole and strong. But the armies blended into a waving mass, and the sounds were terrible, ringing in her ears, filled with pain and the crunch of men falling, dead men, more and more.

She could not see him. The scene before her blurred, but she fought the sobs. This was not the time! She would miss seeing him if she could not stop.

With sudden shock, the men were there, fighting around her, swords swinging and arrows twanging and cutting as they hit. Taleh cried out, her voice shrill above the din.

A man, a big man with a sword to match, an Israelite from the beard, glanced down. Taleh saw his eyes widen. The sword behind him ripped downward, shaking the air. She screamed again, seeing his death coming, not knowing why she warned him. He whirled away, catching the oncoming blade with his own. A red line opened on the other man, his eyes widened, and he fell at her side, spilling gore.

She shoved with her feet, back, away, against the rock, away from the man whose eyes were dead and staring, and the red pool that crept across the dry ground toward her feet.

The big man flashed a startled, questioning look down at her, but whirled and met the next blade.

And the battle moved away again, like a wave on a lake.

She stumbled to her feet, and ran, hoping her secret entrance to the city was still open.

CHAPTER 1

Taleh huddled closer to the wall, trying to still her trembling and shut out the screams that grew ever louder. Ever so much closer. Did her father still live? The battle was swinging over to the other side. She could think of no other explanation for its nearness to the city. If the men of Minnith had been winning, the fighting would never have come this close. She looked at her mother, and saw the same helpless worry mirrored in her eyes.

“Mother?” Taleh whispered, even though there was no chance anyone else could hear.

“Yes, child?”

“What will happen to us if the Hebrews take the city?”

Mara said nothing for a moment. Taleh held her breath, afraid of what her mother might say, but needing to know. If she knew, maybe she could think of something to do, some way to save herself.

“Mother, what will happen?” Taleh repeated the question. “Will they kill us all? Will they . . .” her voice trailed away. She could not put the terrible thought into words.

Mara stood. Life came back to her dark eyes.

Taleh pressed against the stone wall at her back, cringing from that measuring look. The rough stone was warming from the heat of the day. Not even its thickness kept those inside cool. A stray sunbeam crept between the slats of the lattice, locked against the inevitable advance of the enemy, and threw Mara's thin features into determined lines.

When had her mother's black hair turned gray?

Mara sighed. "Did you think you could rebel against Molech and escape punishment?"

No, she had not expected to escape. She knew she tempted the gods by staying away from the sacrifices made in ever-increasing numbers as the Hebrew army drew inexorably closer. The priests of Molech said they had to assure their gods that they, in this city of Minnith, still had faith and deserved protection.

For days, Taleh had hidden in her room, or on the flat roof, anywhere to avoid going to the altars where the firstborn babies were dying and their mothers' hearts were breaking.

"Daughter, we warned you about the judgment Molech saves up for those who show disrespect. We tried to make you listen."

A knife in her heart could not have hurt as much. "Mother, the whole city is doomed! This cannot be my fault! Why would the gods punish everyone?" But her mother only shook her head. It was easier, Taleh now knew, to be disrespectful of the power of Ammon's gods when punishment was not in sight. What awful torments did Molech have in mind for her?

Chelmai burst into the room. Her face was stark. "Mother! Mother! The line has given way! What are we to do?"

Mara grabbed her eldest daughter's hand. "Chelmai, we must be prepared to beg for our lives." She pulled Chelmai into the sleeping room the two girls shared.

Taleh followed slowly. Why did her mother not show grief? If the line had been broken through, what of the men who had fought there all day? She knew her parents held little affection for each other. Few married people did. People married for wealth or for children, after all. But why did Mara not shed a single tear for her husband? Despite the trouble her father had put her through, her own heart ached and tore to know he was surely dead.

Perhaps her mother could not accept it. Perhaps she had to believe he had survived.

Standing next to the simple wooden box with leather hinges, Mara flung garments out with little regard for where they fell. "Chelmai, find your purple robe. You look magnificent in it. I have heard they do not kill women."

"They only do not kill the pretty ones," Chelmai said bitterly. "Taleh is sure to be saved." She turned and glared at her sister. Taleh was past wincing, but not past being hurt. Chelmai hated her. Was it her own fault that the gods cursed her with a face so beautiful that men stopped in the market to stare? Her looks had kept her in danger in her own city, until she could barely stand seeing herself in the mirror.

And her sister hated her for it. Little did Chelmai know she would have traded faces in a heart's beat just to be safe, her sister would not have believed it anyway.

And now her family might depend on her pleadings – and her face.

Chelmai was already undressing as Mara turned her attention to the younger girl. "Taleh, my little lamb, you have no knowledge of men at all. Perhaps one of the soldiers will be eager to be the first. You must make sure they see your face." Standing next to her own simple wooden box

with leather hinges, Taleh had no chance of escape from her mother's will. Mara flung more garments about, with the same lack of regard, and then Taleh heard her sigh of relief. She knew without looking which robe had been chosen.

"I knew this was in here somewhere," Mara gloated in satisfaction. "This is what you will wear. How silly of you not to have worn it before. It is so beautiful. Your father would have had his price if you had worn this when men came to offer for you. But, no, you always refused. Such a silly, stubborn girl."

Taleh listened to her mother's scolding with disbelief. What did it matter now that she had not been sold to the highest bidder as wife? If they were to escape, it made more sense to bring their ordinary clothes, not these fancy robes. Surely they did not want to attract attention on their flight, and flee she would!

Mara fluttered about some more, handing over combs, brooches, and headbands before saying, "Fine, fine. You have everything you need. Now I have myself to prepare, although . . ."

As her voice trailed off, Taleh knew with sharp pain that her mother was still herself, that fear had not snapped her mind. She also knew what her mother was thinking. Mara had been beautiful once, but that was long ago, and the years showed in the faint lines and loose skin about her face, the drooping eyelids, her thickened waist.

Taleh fought back the fear that battered her, and looked at the garment her mother thrust into her hands before she left. Woven of finest linen, it dipped low in front to accent her breasts. A richly embroidered border ran along the edge. Her mother had tucked a large gold brooch with it, to hold it together over her left shoulder. The robe was of soft yellow, a color to attract the eye like sunshine. Taleh had never worn it simply because it was designed to flatter, and she had done her best to keep herself covered these past few years.

"So, little sister," Chelmai said, her voice thick with mockery, "you finally will have to get off your little pedestal of purity. You can put it off no longer. Just think, you will not even have the satisfaction of knowing Father is happy with the price." Laughing, Chelmai flipped the edge of her robe over her shoulder, tossed her dark hair back, and left the room.

Her mocking laughter lingered behind. Chelmai's footsteps moved toward the back of the house, where the stairs were. Taleh knew she should be past letting her sister hurt her, but her heart refused to listen. Not too many years ago, Chelmai would have been the one to comfort her, but as Taleh's body had begun to mature, her sister became distant. Chelmai had been spending time at the high places then, and Taleh thought at first that seeing the terrible sacrifices had changed her, for truly who could see what went on there and remain unchanged?

Then Taleh had seen the difference in the image looking back at her from the metal mirror. She had been pleased at first with her smooth skin, the soft line of her nose, and the fine cheekbones. But with the changes had come the looks, envious from the women, something else from the men, something that frightened her and stole the pleasure from her metamorphosis. Men began coming to their home, to look and to touch with their clammy hands that pinched and humiliated, more and more as she passed from gangly child into graceful maiden.

And they offered for her. Always for her, never her sister.

Chelmai became progressively colder, for she had nothing to compare with Taleh's remarkable beauty. Her eyes were lighter in color and had no shine, her hair was brown, not strikingly black. It did not even curl. Sometimes Taleh thought Chelmai actually hated her, but

she could not forget the older sister who had doted on her as a child. Now, when she needed her most, Chelmai offered no support, no kindness, nothing.

Wild noises from the street distracted her. Peeking through the lattice, she saw disjointed figures running past her house. Shrill voices echoed in the narrow street and bounced off the stone walls. "The city is taken! The battle is lost! Run! Flee while you can!"

Mara's voice joined the confusion outside, but closer, clear even above the growing din. "Taleh? Are you ready? Taleh! Answer me!"

It was too late, there was no time to look for something else. The common robe she wore was too old to withstand the rigors of a flight. Taleh stripped off the plain garment, heedless of the tearing fabric, tossed it aside, and slid on the yellow robe. She clipped on the brooch, poking her finger in her haste, and flung the edge with its heavy embroidery over her shoulder. With shaking hands, she jerked the braided headband over her forehead.

She had no sooner finished than her mother appeared in the doorway, her terror as obvious as if it were a cape wrapped around her. Chelmai stood behind, dragged there only because of Mara's tight grip on her wrist, looking more sullen than scared. Mara held out her free hand to Taleh.

"There is no more time. The soldiers are everywhere. They are killing almost everyone, but some have been spared. I will go out and plead with them for our lives. Both of you must remain here. I will come for you if it is safe."

Taleh watched, horrified, as her strong mother began to weep. Mara released Chelmai's hand and moved across the room to her daughter as in a daze. "My beautiful child," she sobbed, "my baby girl. I would have spared you this fate if I could have."

Over her mother's shoulder, Taleh saw Chelmai still in the doorway, ignored, and the familiar guilt twisted through her again.

Heedless, Mara cradled Taleh's face in her hands, controlling herself with difficulty. "If I do not come back, you must find a way to hide until the soldiers have gone. Take your father's gold with you, and leave the city. Go at night. Go east, to the morning sun. There are cities that have not been touched."

One fierce hug and then Mara left her, crossing the room with a heavy tread, all light extinguished from her eyes. At the room's entrance, she wrapped Chelmai in her arms, kissing her cheeks and stroking her hair. Then she was gone, leaving behind only the sound of her footsteps on the stairs. Tears ran down Taleh's cheeks. When had she started to cry? The sound of her sobs surprised her, for surely all her feelings were gone, frozen with fear, lost in the creeping darkness.

"Weep all you like," Chelmai said, cutting through the misery with bitter words. "It will do you no good. I refuse to stay here and wait. Mother said that they were sparing some, or were you not listening? If you wish to leave, you will have to save yourself. Do not look to me for help. I owe you nothing." Her eyes were as bitter as her words.

Taleh was alone.

Terror goaded her into action. She knew that her mother would not be back for her. She looked frantically around the room. It sat toward the front of the house, closest to the sounds and smells of the battle. A small path ran along the back, away from the street, but the only way to get there was out the front door and along the house. That way would be certain suicide.

The sounds of many feet coming up the street told her she was too late. Heavy feet marching with purpose, male feet. Deep voices, saying, “Check every house, men!” “I have someone here!” “Stop them! Do not let them get away!” Terrible ripping sounds, dying screams. Metal on wood. More screams. And a sickening smell that slid heavily through the air coming in the lattice slats.

She looked frantically around the room, and saw the disarray, the clothes scattered carelessly about. It looked as though a mighty wind had swept through, or . . . or marauding soldiers.

There was only time to hide.