

A House Divided

A NOVEL



AUTHOR OF *DAUGHTER OF ISHMAEL*
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PROLOGUE



Someone was squabbling, arguing over something. Shrill voices jarred her awake from a soft, dreamless rest.

Hannah opened one eye to a blur of green. She frowned. This was not her house. She tried to open her other eye, but it refused to obey her; tried to reach out to touch it but cried aloud at the pain of lifting her arm.

Then memory washed over her. Cold and bitter, it flowed through her like a knife, cutting her to her tender soul.

Her family—her husband—had stoned her. Her own son had participated, dropping that final, devastating stone, and then left her for dead.

Was she dead?

She tried again to lift her arm and cried out at the pain. No. She was still on earth. Surely there was no pain and suffering in the Spirit world.

Tears began to flow. There was nothing for her in this world. Why had the Lord seen fit to leave her here. Had she not done enough?

Had she not suffered enough?

The harsh voices, still arguing heatedly, invaded once more.

Hannah listened for a moment, but could not make out the words. Slowly, carefully, she turned her head.

The world was rosy with new morning light. The sun had not yet risen, but the air was full of the promise of another day. Hannah's eye widened as she realized it was not a group of people, as she had expected. Rather, a couple of vultures were wrangling over something. Perhaps whether or not she was dead—enough.

At her movement, they hopped backwards a few paces, their eyes on her, their cries silenced.

Hannah rested for a moment, then moved her head again. This time it was easier. She tried her arm and it, too, seemed to be hurting less. Cautiously, she looked all around the clearing. Nothing else stirred. Her family had obviously left her for dead and gone back to their settlement.

And knowing their penchant for late-night celebrations and aversion to the early morning hours, she assumed they would not be stirring for quite some time.

She tried to push herself upright, but she simply did not have the strength.

Carefully, she ran her hand along her body, seeking out injuries. There were several sore spots along her chest, arms, and legs. Her back had been rubbed raw where she had been dragged. And her face and head ached badly from the blows they had received, in particular that last, dropped stone that had been so devastating, both physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Hannah took a deep breath, listening to the air flow through her body. She felt her heart beating steadily inside her. Strangely, when tears would have been customary, she instead felt peace settle over her.

The Lord had preserved her life.

But why?

Where could she possibly go?

What would she do?

Her family had chosen the path of sin and would receive the wages of such. If she returned to them—and if they let her live—she would be forced to partake of it with them. She, the daughter of Ishmael and

follower of the Prophet Lehi. She, who had wanted only goodness in her life. Goodness and righteousness and the light of her Lord and Savior. She, who had instead received the great weight of iniquity. A weight as heavy as the stones her family had used to try to end her life.

The weight of her family's sins already seemed to press down on her.

How would it feel to have the weight of generation upon generation upon generation?

Suddenly, Hannah went still. Stopped breathing. Her hand crept to her belly. Had she really felt—? There it was again. A flutter. Just the tiniest movement.

Was it possible? With all she had endured?

She waited. Surely she was mistaken. Surely—no.

It happened a third time.

Could it be true? Was this the child that Lehi had foreseen? That Mother Sariah had confirmed?

She held her breath for another period of waiting. Then sighed as it came again. Another confirmation.

The child was real.

Real.

In an instant, the course of Hannah's whole life changed. Her work was *not* done. The Lord was calling her again. Giving her another child to raise, even in her age. This time in righteousness.

Forgetting her pain, Hannah found the strength to push herself upright. To work her way to her knees. With many stops to rest, she slowly got to her feet, afraid that any movement of hers might stop that light fluttering. Might prove she was only dreaming.

At last, she stood on her feet. Once more, she waited, one hand on her belly.

There it was again.

Hannah covered her bruised and split lips and stifled a sob. Suddenly her mother's words, spoken in a dream became clear. "*—bring your son to*

salvation. Your son. Remember what I say this day. It is important—when you have a great choice to make.”

There was a choice to make. For her unborn *son*, she must choose to abandon the family who had abandoned the Lord. And her. She must choose to follow Nephi, her prophet.

With the Lord’s guidance, she would find him.

She paused once and looked back at the quiet settlement. Smoke from the ashes of the once-great fire curled lazily into the rosy dawn. Nothing else stirred.

Hannah turned away and, taking a deep, strengthening breath, stepped onto the path leading into the light, her footsteps slow and unsteady, but her mind sure.

CHAPTER ONE



As she stepped from the cool shadow of the trees, Hannah lifted a hand to shade her one good eye, grunting with the effort. Already, her small burst of strength was waning.

Tears of weakness trickled down her face, mixing with the blood and dirt and making dark droplets on her soiled and torn tunic.

How was she going to reach the people of Nephi? She could not even reach the settlement they had abandoned.

She stopped, swaying slightly, and looked around. All was as it had been—was it only yesterday? She had changed so much that it was a bit of a surprise to see that little else was different.

Some fires had been started—supposedly by *King* Laman's followers last night—but little damage had been done. A couple of wood piles were smoking languidly in the morning light.

Hannah started forward again, stopping a few steps further along the quiet street. The partially finished temple stood opposite her, the walls bearing mute evidence of some frantic chopping and scraping, but, again, showing no real destruction.

Next to the temple stood Nephi and Anava's home. Here, there were more signs of a heedless and angry invading force. The door had been wrenched off and it and some of the home's furnishings tossed out into the street.

Hannah slowly made her way to a sturdy chair and, righting it, sat down. She could picture in her mind the frenzied attack. The frustration when so little damage resulted.

She smiled slightly, wincing as her aching lips protested. Then tears came to her eyes. That anger. That frustration. Both had been turned on her.

Taking a deep breath, Hannah straightened. Nothing was being accomplished by sitting here and lamenting what was. How long would it be before someone noticed that her body was no longer where it had been? How long before they came after her to finish what had been started?

Pushing herself to her feet, Hannah tried to think. She needed to get away from here. But how long would it take for her to reach Nephi and his people? First, she needed supplies.

With slow, but determined steps, she entered Nephi's house and looked around for something—anything—that may be of use to her.

There was very little. Furnishings had been tumbled about, but smaller household goods were absent. Either the invaders had taken all that was there; or there had not been anything to take. She suspected the latter.

Hannah opened a large chest pushed back against the wall.

Empty.

She straightened and looked around. Maybe in the other room?

Slowly, she made her way into the cooking area. Here, her luck was a bit better. High on a shelf was a lone, clay bottle enmeshed in a woven reed cover.

Her only problem was going to be reaching it.

With many stops for breath, Hannah pushed a chair over to the shelf. Then slowly and carefully climbed up.

Pausing there, she waiting for her head to stop spinning. Then finally reached for the bottle. By its weight, she knew it was partially filled with something. She shook it. A liquid.

Pulling the stopper, Hannah sniffed. Sour wine. Perfect for treating her many injuries.

Afraid to try to get down while holding the bottle, she set it on the chair and slowly lowered herself back to the floor.

Then she froze.

She could hear voices. Someone was coming!

Hannah crept to the window facing the main road, trying desperately not to make any noise. Peering out, she could see two people coming up the street. Her breath caught. Her brother Zedekiah's eldest son, Thaddeus, and one of Berachah's sons, Abishai. Both carried bows and well-filled quivers—Abishai's beautifully embossed and dyed a deep blue.

"Imagine their surprise when we return heavy with game!" Abishai was saying.

Thaddeus laughed. "Do not try to carry home an animal we have not yet caught."

"But we will. And I one of the youngest hunters!" The boy looked around. "I am so happy that we do not have to share the hunting grounds with any from *Nephi's* camp."

Thaddeus snorted. "We do not even have to share Nephi's *camp*."

The boys stopped at the end of the street. "How do you think they did it?" Abishai asked. "Disappeared, I mean. There is not any sign which way they went."

Thaddeus shook his head. "Maybe they flew!"

Abishai gasped and looked at his elder cousin.

Thaddeus laughed at his mystified expression. "They must have some way of brushing out their tracks so no one could follow."

"Lemuel will find them. He is the greatest tracker ever!"

At the mention of her husband's name, Hannah caught her breath.

Thaddeus nodded. "He can track anything. At some point, they will make a mistake, and then we will have them!"

Abishai sighed happily. "It is a glorious new day!" He started to run. "Come. Before the others begin to stir!"

The two young men disappeared into the trees across the road.

Hannah's heart was racing as she walked to the door and peered carefully out into the street. What if others followed? What if the boys returned? She must get out of here!

Carefully, she crept out of the house, clutching her precious bottle. Moving to the shaded side of the street, she paused to catch her breath.

Nothing stirred.

She moved to the next shadow. Then the next.

Finally, she reached the end of the settlement. Again, she turned for a last look behind.

All was quiet. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the road leading away from the village.

Looking down, she saw countless footsteps. She stopped and frowned. Here was plain evidence of the migration of a large number of people and animals. And only a short time before.

How had Laman's warriors missed this? The tracks were so obvious that a child could have followed them.

'And a little child shall lead them.' Her mother's words, spoken so long ago, were unexpectedly clear in her mind and, just as suddenly, Hannah knew these tracks were for her to follow. Only her.

She started walking.



A few hours later, the tracks veered off into the trees. Numbly, Hannah followed them, relieved to leave the increasing heat of the sun for the cool shade of the forest.

A short distance further on, she came across a bundle lying in the tall grass. A blanket, folded, rolled and tied to be worn as a bedroll. Lifting it, she looked it over carefully.

Surmising it had fallen from a wagonload of household possessions; she carefully drew the leather strap over her shoulder, patted the tidy

bundle, and continued on through the forest. Now she *had* to find Nephi and his people. She had to return their blanket to them.

Hannah had made many trips through the forest when she was well and healthy. Now she was discovering that this was not to be a simple stroll through nature. Her weakened condition increased her tendency to trip over roots and hummocks. So, while she found the trees a definite relief from the heat of the sun, it was only a partial compensation.

She licked dry lips. And a sip of cool water at this point would not go amiss.

The third time Hannah fell to her knees, she considered simply staying where she was.

Surely death would be an improvement over this!

As she lay there in a deep carpet of old and new vegetation, she realized she could hear the trickle of water.

Pushing herself erect, Hannah slowly regained her feet. Then stood there, trying to decide where the sound was coming from.

Glancing to the left, she saw a thick row of bushes, forming a veritable wall in the forest. Moving slowly closer, she tried to peer over them. It could not be done. Her lack of height and their tightly-meshed growth made it impossible.

Hannah frowned. She was sure the sound of water was coming from somewhere behind these bushes. She decided to turn and skirt them.

Working her way around the little copse, Hannah noted that the patch was roughly circular in shape and quite a bit larger than it had first appeared.

Soon she was again at her starting point. And still the gentle sound of trickling water teased her. It had to be somewhere inside these bushes.

She squatted down and tried to peer under them. They seemed a bit thinner down near the ground. Hannah dropped to her knees and pressed her way inside.

After a few feet, the bushes opened surprisingly into a space. Only a few paces across, it was, at once, cool, dark, and private.

A pool of clear water bubbled in one corner. Hannah knelt beside it in the soft grass and dipped her hand into the water.

It proved to be clear and achingly cold. Hannah cupped her hand and scooped the life-giving water up to her tender lips.

Having drunk her fill, Hannah pulled off her headcloth and her outer and under tunics, and proceeded to rinse away as much of the blood and gore from face, hands, and body as she could. Then she explored the damage to her face with gentle fingers. Her right eye was swollen closed and her right cheek had a long cut that was oozing fresh blood still. There were several sore spots, indicating bruising, but no other significant damage.

On the top of her head, just within her hairline, was the wound that caused her the most pain. Here was where her precious son Samuel had dropped that final stone. The one he had thought to end her life with.

Hannah sighed and traced the wound with her fingertips as slow tears welled. Samuel may not have killed her body with his dropped stone, but something had certainly died.

The tiny fluttering began in her belly again. She grew still and slid her hand over it. Something had died, yes. But something bigger had lived.

Taking a deep breath, Hannah leaned over her little pool and scooped up more of the cool water—splashing it over her face and head.

Then she dipped her headcloth into the pool and, wringing it out, sponged the rest of her body again. The temperature of the water was, at once, refreshing and soothing to her many injuries.

Feeling somewhat cleaner, she sat back and tried to work the tangles from her hair with her fingers. Grass and twigs showered into her lap. Finally, she braided it into one long plait and wound a couple of hairs around the end to hold it.

Tearing some strips from her head cloth, she poured a little of her precious sour wine over them and bound up her injuries as best she

could.

Then she donned her under tunic, folded her scratched and bruised fingers together and offered up a prayer of thanksgiving for the sparing of her life and for the Lord's guidance in directing her, and a plea that she would continue to be led until she and her child were reunited once more with the prophet of the Lord.



For the next four days, Hannah remained inside the little copse of trees. The first two days because she needed it, and the last two because she had no choice.

Frustrated by her lack of strength, Hannah chafed at the delay. Nephi and his people were steadily moving further away and she feared that the tracks she had been following would dissolve and disappear if it began to rain—which it often did—and her only chance of finding where her people had fled would disappear with them.

But she knew that her only chance of survival—and that of her unborn child—depended on her regaining her health and strength. She had weighed her options and decided that she could give herself two days to heal and rest.

Her blanket had proved a valuable find indeed, providing warmth against the coolness of the evening hours.

A few times a day, Hannah would venture out in search of food, and was amply rewarded with the discovery of a bed of field-roots and a patch of mushrooms.

By the end of the first day, the bruising around her right eye had healed sufficiently that she was able to see from it once more. After that, she tripped less over roots and outcroppings and her course through the forest became easier.

Early in the morning on her second day, she found a stream—obviously the parent to her little pool—nearby. Frowning, she stood on its banks, wondering why she had not heard its noise earlier when

hunting for water. Now, of the two bodies of water, this was the only one she could hear.

The Lord must have wanted her to find the small pool for a reason known only to Himself.

The discovery of a large patch of waternuts drove the thought from her mind, and she spent several happy moments hunting and gathering.

Soon she was back in her little oasis with fresh water and plenty of food.

By the end of the second day, Hannah was feeling much stronger. She had managed to scrub and dry both of her tunics, dry and prepare her store of tubers and vegetables, and, with continued applications of the last of her sour wine, heal her several wounds to the point of discomfort only. She was ready to go.

Dressed in her outer tunic, she had fashioned a pack from her other garment—a pack that was now stuffed with food, a water-filled bottle, and a blanket. Siding her arms into the ‘straps’ of her pack, she hoisted it to her shoulders and settled it across her back. Then she knelt down, ready to crawl through the bushes.

It was at that moment that she heard a noise.

She went still.

The noise grew louder, and finally was recognizable as a large group of people coming through the jungle toward her. Hannah stopped breathing.

Had they found her?

CHAPTER TWO



Hannah sank back to the ground and tried to become one with the shadows that surrounded her. The group of people moved closer, finally gathering directly outside her little copse of bushes.

“We will camp here for the night,” someone said.

Hannah frowned. Whose voice was that? She thought it might be one of Zedekiah’s younger sons.

“Hold!”

Hannah knew *that* voice. *King* Laman was standing a pair of paces from where she crouched.

“We will continue to travel!”

“Highness, your younger warriors are weary. We got a late start and they were up most of the night . . .”

“They are warriors. That is what they are supposed to do!”

“Yes, Highness. But they are new to it. Perhaps if you were to school them in your expectations of a soldier?”

Laman took a deep breath. “Fine. We will camp here for the night!” he shouted.

Immediately, Hannah heard the sounds of people spreading out all around her, moving through the trees, setting up a camp.

Soon, the smell of burning wood permeated her little pocket. Like a frightened rabbit, Hannah crouched in the center of her copse. This

place that had seemed so safe and secure short moments before had now become her prison. And ironically, the people she had called family mere days ago were now her jailers.

Now, the reason for the discovery of her little hideaway became apparent.

Please, Father, she prayed, over and over. Hide me! Make me invisible!



Ironically, the camp of warriors, after arguing over staying the night, remained for two more days. Listening to their conversations, Hannah learned that Laman was ill. Unwilling to make the demands on himself that he asked of his followers, he remained in his bed the entire time.

For those two days, Hannah hardly dared to breathe. Movements were made only when the group encamped mere paces away were making noise of their own. And even then, she was cautious to the point of absurdity.

Eating and drinking were accomplished with a maximum of effort and minimum results.

Sleeping was out of the question. What if she spoke or made some sort of noise in her sleep? The nighttime hours became a series of catnaps, from which she jerked awake with a gasp and a renewal of her pleas to the Lord to keep her hidden.

She passed some of the time silently listening to the warriors as they idled near her hiding place, trying to identify them by their voices. Hoping and dreading to hear the one voice still precious to her. But, surprisingly, though she had been around them for all of their lives, she could not recognize any. It was as though they had become strangers to her.

Finally, at dawn on her fourth day, Laman's voice was again heard. "Get them up and ready to march after breakfast! We have an enemy to catch."

"Yes, Highness."

The smell of roasted meats drifted on the morning breeze, accompanied by the usual sounds of meals being prepared and consumed. Then the clatter that accompanied the breaking of camp.

A burst of laughter just outside her walls startled her and she gasped, then clapped a hand over her too, too treacherous mouth.

“Hold him! Hold him!” someone said. “Do not let him go!”

Hannah could hear the terrified snarling and whining of some sort of animal.

“Here. I’ve got him. Just tie his rope to that tree.”

Another burst of laughter. “I guess he did not like that!”

“Well, what does it matter what he likes? He is our prisoner.”

“Well, when you put it like that . . .”

“What are you doing?” Someone new had joined the conversation. “He is my animal.”

“Jonah is testing his new knife. Watch.”

“Stop! He is mine! I found him!” At least one voice carried a note of sanity.

“You have become too attached in these past few days.”

“But he is gentle. He can serve us and be a great help.”

“Oh, stop whining! You are beginning to sound like an old woman.”

“I have just sharpened my knife. This is a perfect opportunity!”

The sounds of several people agreeing loudly over the protests of a single voice.

The poor animal’s whines turned to howls of pain.

Hannah crouched down in the very center of her prison, hands pressed tightly against both ears and silent tears streaming down her cheeks.

Finally, the animal’s howls were reduced to long whines.

“Well,” someone said. “That is one sharp knife! I would say you can take over knife-sharpening duty in the camp.”

Laughter.

“So what are you going to do with it?”

“The pup? Leave it. What good would it be? It will be dead before nightfall.”

“But—”

“Pack up!”

Within minutes, the sounds of the soldiers had faded away to silence.

Rocking herself back and forth, Hannah remained crouched in the center of her hideaway, dreading the moment when she would have to leave this place and risk being seen—or finding out what terrible thing had been done to another living creature.

Finally, she could wait no longer. As quietly as possible, she donned her pack.

With many stops along the way to listen, she finally made it through her little path. Once outside, she remained on her knees for a few moments, ears attuned to any sound.

The only things she could hear, apart from trickling water and birdsong, were the long whines of the injured creature.

Taking a deep breath, Hannah got to her feet and followed that sound.

A short distance from her refuge, Hannah found a large creature lying in the grass. The poor animal was thin, ribs sticking out and spine clearly visible through its furry coat.

Except that it was much bigger and yellow-eyed and the coat was a mottled light brown and black, it looked like the dogs Hannah’s family had left back in Jerusalem.

The animal was watching her approach.

It lifted its head weakly and made a show of curling an upper lip back from long, gleaming white teeth. Hannah stopped a short distance away and it lowered its head back to the ground. She looked at it. Blood was staining the animal’s fur down each side of its head.

The heart-wrenching whines kept on.

Hannah moved closer.

Again the lifted head. Again the curled lip, white teeth, and low whine.

Hannah took another couple of steps. She was close enough now, that she could see more blood in the grass around the animal. A lot of blood.

She stopped and thought for a moment. The animal looked as though it was starving. And grievously wounded as well. She bit her lip. She would not be able to help it if she could not get close to it.

Glancing around cautiously, she slid her pack off and dug out one of her precious tubers.

Holding it out before her, she approached the wretched animal.

Its eyes moved between her and the food she held out so temptingly, as though it could not quite make up its mind as to which was most important.

Finally, Hannah was close enough to toss the food over to the poor animal.

The animal sniffed at her offering, then snapped it up.

Hannah regarded it for a moment. Then she dug out another tuber and repeated the entire operation. Again, her present was snatched almost before it hit the ground.

Hannah held out her bottle of water, shaking it so the animal could hear the liquid inside.

Its head came up.

This was the tricky part. Hannah had nothing to pour the water in. She would have to step close enough that she could pour the water out for the animal. And hope that it had strength to take it out of the air.

Stepping closer, she again shook the bottle.

The animal watched her, but no longer curled its lip or showed its teeth.

Carefully, Hannah uncorked the bottle and held it out. Then she tipped it carefully and a small stream of water struck the animal in the face. For a moment, it merely blinked, then it turned its head and began

to catch the water on its tongue. Again and again, it lapped at the stream.

Finally, it turned its head away, looking up toward Hannah hopefully. She stopped pouring and corked her bottle. Then she dug out another tuber and dropped it in front of the animal.

Again the morsel of food disappeared.

Even in this short time, the animal seemed stronger.

Hannah took a deep breath. Now she was going to have to examine the creature to see just what damage had been done. Cautiously, she approached the animal.

It watched her, but made no threatening gestures. Finally, she was standing beside it. It lifted its head and looked at her. Then lay down again and gave another long whine.

Kneeling slowly beside it, Hannah reached out with one hand. The animal was watching, but made no move.

Hannah caught her breath as she examined its head. Both ears had been sliced off and the remaining stubs were oozing blood in droplets. For a moment, her eyes filled with tears as she stared at the wounds, wondering at the pointless cruelty of such an action. She turned, biting her lip as she struggled for control. Finally, taking a deep breath, she blinked away the tears and turned to examine the rest of the poor creature. She gasped when she discovered what else had been done.

The animal's tail had been neatly severed close to the body.

Blood was still oozing from the stump.

Hannah sat back and put a hand on her head.

What could she possibly do to help? The poor ears, she really didn't think she could do anything for, but the tail?

Mentally, she went over the items in her pack. Food. Water bottle. Blanket. Leather tie. Headscarf bandages.

Nodding her head, she got to her feet and returned to her pack. Retrieving two of her bandages, she ripped one into thin strips. This time, when she approached the animal, it lifted its bloodied head and

when she sat down beside it, licked her arm with a smooth tongue. Hannah jumped and drew her arm back. Then, realizing the creature obviously meant no harm, she sank to the ground once more and shuffled carefully toward the wounds.

The bandage, she bound neatly around the animal's head, covering its wounded ears as best she could. Then, carrying the strips, she moved toward the severed tail.

The animal seemed to understand that she was there to help and, surprisingly, other than more whining, made no protest when she wrapped the strip of cloth around its poor stump of a tail. Cursing the fact that she had used the last of her sour wine on her own bruises and hurts, Hannah made her makeshift bandage tight and sat back.

The animal again licked her arm. This time, Hannah stroked the rough head. "That's all I can do, Little Brother. I hope it is enough." She looked heavenward. "Lord," she said. "I thank you for preserving me these past days. And now I ask the same blessing for this poor creature who has been injured, through no fault of its own. Will you heal it?"

Another lick from a warm tongue. "I guess you approve," Hannah told it.

There was a cord around the creature's neck and Hannah could see that it was tied to a nearby tree. She looked at it. Then at the creature. Deciding the animal was no more of a threat to her untied, she removed the noose from its neck and released the end from the tree.

Getting to her feet, she made a slow search of the area nearby. The soldiers who had camped here, boys Hannah had seen raised and some of whom she had had a hand in raising, were not a tidy group. Bones from animals were strewn about. Many with meat still clinging to them. Already, vultures and other carrion birds were starting to gather.

Picking up several of the meatier leavings, Hannah carried them back to her friend. The animal fell on them eagerly, tearing at the flesh.

Hannah found a small clay pot discarded with the rest of the refuse. Picking it up, she took it back to her friend, filled properly with clear

water. Setting it down nearby, she again turned and walked through the camp.

Several arrows had sprouted from the prominent bole of a large old tree. The soldiers had obviously used it as a target. And then had lacked the energy—or initiative—to climb up and retrieve their arrows afterward.

Hannah did so now. She was surprised as she plucked at the arrows, to find a crude knife in their midst. Pulling it out, she turned it over in her hands. Little care had been taken in its making—it was not as smoothly ground as other knives in the settlement and the handle had been formed simply by winding a length of leather cord about the upper part of the tang. But it was very sharp and would serve her small needs admirably. She tucked the seven arrows and the precious knife into her pack.

Hunting further through the camp, she also found another blanket, a small axe, and two earthenware cups and a plate.

Riches for someone in her situation.

Placing everything neatly into her pack, she pulled it on, adjusting the straps over her shoulders. Then knelt down one last time by her new friend.

“I’m sorry to have to leave you, Little Brother,” she said, patting the rough fur. “But I cannot wait for you to be strong enough to come with me. I’ve lost far too much time as it is.” She looked at the rope and frowned. “But I can probably use this.” She coiled it, looping it over her shoulder. “There.” She patted the creature’s head again.

The animal licked her hand.

“Good-bye, Little Brother.”

She got to her feet, adjusted the pack on her back and, without a backward glance, started off through the trees.

From the tracks they had left, it was fairly obvious the army had taken a course to the right.

Hannah decided to continue straight ahead in the direction she had been following before she had found her refuge/prison.

At the river, she stopped to refill her bottle. A noise made her spin around, heart pounding.

The creature had followed her. Weakly, it approached, trying its best to wag what was left of its sorry tail.

“Oh, Little Brother.” Hannah’s eyes filled with tears as she patted the bristly fur and saw again the wounds suffered by the innocent creature. “Of course you can come with me.” She looked upward. “The Lord will provide.”

CHAPTER THREE



*H*annah and her new companion crossed the clear water and continued through the forest.

A short distance from the stream, she reached a point where the sun was shining down through a break in the trees. There she again picked up the tracks of dozens of human feet, as well as those of numerous sheep and cattle, horses and donkeys.

She smiled. “Thank you, Lord,” she said.

Little Brother licked her hand.

The unlikely companions continued to walk, stopping often to rest and eat. They found several more patches of mushrooms and tubers. Water was plentiful. And Little Brother proved he was much more than a mere companion when he chased and caught a large, fat rabbit.

Hannah was surprised that, though she ate it raw, the meat was sweet and tasty. She was forcibly reminded of earlier days wandering in the wilderness. She smiled sadly. How bittersweet those memories had become.



For two days, they travelled slowly. Hannah told herself it was for Little Brother’s benefit. But in reality, she still had not recovered, and the pain- and fatigue-enforced slow pace was exactly what she needed as well.

At the end of the second day, they stopped beside a great stream of slowly-moving water. The tracks Hannah had been following continued on the other side, so she knew she must find a way across.

Little Brother waded in, lapping at the water. When he was chest deep, he turned and looked at Hannah.

Biting her lip uncertainly, she paused at the very edge. "Do you think it is safe?" she asked her companion.

Little Brother merely looked at her, bright yellow eyes sparkling, red tongue dangling from his mouth.

"Well, if you think so—" Hannah waded in.

The water was remarkably clear and she could see right to the bottom. Flashing slivers of silver darted back and forth in front of her.

"Fish, Little Brother!" Hannah stopped and watched them. "I wish we could catch them!"

She continued forward. The water was cool. Comfortably so. She pushed ahead. The current was slight here and she was grateful because the water was growing steadily deeper.

Lifting her pack above her head, Hannah continued toward the opposite shore. The water climbed to her waist. Her chest. Then, just as she was considering turning back, she realized that it was growing shallower once more. Soon she was climbing out on the other shore, her tunic dripping, but her head and shoulders—and her pack—dry.

Heaving a sigh of relief, she turned to watch Little Brother swim toward her. He waded out onto dry shore and happily shook himself.

Hannah moved closer. Somewhere in the stream, he had lost the bedraggled bandages she had tied around his head and his stub. He turned and licked at the larger wound, then bounded toward her.

Two days of food and attention had made a remarkable difference in the animal. His bones were already a little less prominent and his eyes were brighter and his whole demeanour more alert.

With Little Brother following closely behind her, Hannah turned and walked over to study the tracks which continued in a straight line

through the forest. She shook her head. No tracks could have been easier to follow. She lifted her head and looked in the direction Laman and his warriors had taken two days before. How could they not see?

It was all as the Lord intended. That was the only explanation.

Her heart brimming with gratitude, Hannah turned away and began hunting for a suitable spot to hide away and rest for the night. A place close to the river.

The trees in this part of the forest grew thickly and there was little vegetation in the form of bushes and shrubs on the ground. No comfortable hiding places at all. Hannah was becoming quite discouraged when she noticed several dark spots in the ground ahead. As she drew closer, she realized it was a series of rocky gullies. Most were mere openings in the ground with no way in or out. But one of the larger was partially collapsed and the rubble formed natural 'steps' leading down.

"Little Brother!" she called.

The animal bounded up, eyes snapping and long red tongue lolling.

"Should we camp here?" Hannah stepped down onto the first ledge.

The animal turned and sniffed the air, then started down ahead of her, jumping enthusiastically from step to step.

Soon, he had disappeared from view.

Cautiously, Hannah followed.

The natural steps led down and around a curve and finally ended at a rocky pocket with a sandy floor. Solid rock walls rose all about her and the steps she had followed proved to be the only way in or out. She felt hidden here. But trapped as well. If anyone—or anything—came down those steps, she would have no escape.

She looked at Little Brother. "What do you think?" She made a quick, closer examination of the walls. "Do you think we can safely stay here?"

Little Brother had done his own examination. Now, he curled up against the sun-warmed side of the enclosure and closed his eyes.

Hannah raised her eyebrows and smiled. "I guess that is my answer."

She pulled off her pack and laid out her blanket, knife, and some tubers. Her water bottle was nearly empty. She stood and looked at her companion. "Why not rest there while I go to refill our bottle?" Hannah laughed. "Or you could do it for me."

The animal opened one eye, then closed it again and lapsed back into slumber.

Still smiling, Hannah clambered up the stony stairway. Poking her head above the top rim, she looked cautiously about. Seeing nothing, she climbed out of the hole and onto solid ground.

Everything remained quiet.

Hannah took a different route back to the river, careful of calling attention to herself by repeating any movements.

She reached the shore of the river and knelt beside the calmly flowing water.

Something was floating toward the center of the river and she stared at it as she corked her bottle.

Strange, Hannah thought. *It looks like an arrow.*

An arrow!

Hannah froze, her eyes riveted on the bobbing stick of wood. If there was an arrow here, could that mean there were warriors or hunters here as well?

Several more arrows joined the first, forming a small network of sticks that bobbed quietly as they moved slowly downstream.

Hannah got to her feet and slid into the deeper shadow beneath the nearest tree, silently lamenting the lack of undergrowth in this part of the forest. From this place of relative anonymity, she again looked around.

Nothing stirred.

She glanced over at the water again.

The arrows had moved further downstream and now, Hannah could see something else. Something nearer the shoreline. A quiver!

It too was moving downstream, rolling a bit as the heavier part of it dragged along the river bottom.

A quiver. That she could definitely use!

Darting out from the shadows, Hannah stepped into the shallows at the river's edge and snatched the leather bag from the water.

Then she moved back into the shadows and looked around.

Still nothing moved.

Hannah turned the long, water-soaked bag over in her hands. It looked familiar— beautifully embossed and dyed a deep blue—and she frowned as the memory of where she had seen it before eluded her. She shook her head. Somewhere—

She gasped. This bag had been slung across the youthful shoulder of young Abishai, Berachah's son only a handful of days before. She would swear to it.

But where was the young hunter who had embarked with his elder cousin with such hope in his step?

Hannah looked upstream. Surely the arrows and quiver had come from there.

She detected movement and her heart sped up as her eyes quickly and anxiously sought the source.

There was something in the river. Something moving slowly toward the shore.

Hannah darted behind the nearest tree and hefted her tunic to her knees, prepared to run. She peeped out one last time from her hiding place. The 'creature' in the river had resolved itself into a person.

An obviously weakened one who was struggling against the slow current with only one arm and minimal support from his legs.

The current rolled him over and Hannah's heart stopped as he disappeared from her view.

A moment later, he had again emerged—gasping and coughing weakly—a little closer to her and to the shore.

Hannah stared at him, willing with all her mind for him to make it to dry ground.

She scanned frantically up and down the river, looking for a companion or another of Laman's followers, both dismayed and relieved to see no one.

Finally, just as the figure was about to be carried past her, he managed to heave himself far enough up onto the shore that the river lost its claim on him. Panting he lay there—facedown—still partly submerged, and completely spent.

Again, Hannah looked up and down the river, her eyes darting this way and that, trying to detect movement.

Something behind her growled viciously and she jumped and spun around.

Little Brother had finished his nap and come looking for her. The coarse hair on the back of the animal's neck had been raised and his head lowered as he now regarded the helpless figure through narrowed yellow eyes. Another growl issued forth and Hannah could see the lips curl, showing sharp, white teeth.

She turned back to the person, but he made no reaction to the sound of the animal a mere two paces from where he lay. He appeared to have moved past consciousness into somewhere that pain and panic did not enter.

Cautiously, Hannah crept forward, her eyes darting constantly around her.

Finally she was close enough to touch him. Reaching out, she prodded him with two fingers.

He did not stir.

She prodded him again and pulled back, waiting.

Still no movement.

Carefully, she reached out to grasp the leather vest he wore over his tunic and pull him further from the water's grasp.

Little Brother kept up a constant growl, backing slowly away as she pulled the figure further onto the shore and away from the water. Looking back, Hannah could see a long streak of blood trailing behind him.

With a last burst of energy, she finally heaved him onto a patch of grass away from the sandy bank of the river. He moaned slightly, then relapsed into slumber. Carefully, she turned him onto his back and noted two things. First, that he was younger than she had first expected and second, though he had to be someone she knew, Hannah did not recognize him. His face was badly scratched and bloody, very swollen, and heavily streaked with sand and dirt.

She could see that the left sleeve of his tunic was rapidly becoming stained with blood. She lifted the sleeve hem to see the limb beneath, and then gasped as she realized that there was no limb beneath.

It had been torn away just above the elbow.

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