

PRIZE OF WAR



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DEDICATION

*To anyone who has felt alone.
Know that God is with you.*

And Caleb said, 'I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage
to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath-Sepher.'
Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's brother, took it;
so Caleb gave his daughter Acsah to him in marriage.
One day when she came to Othniel, she urged him to ask her father
for a field. When she got off her donkey,
Caleb asked her, 'What can I do for you?'
She replied, 'Do me a special favor.
Since you have given me land in the Negev,
give me also springs of water.'
So Caleb gave her the upper and lower springs.

JOSHUA 15.13-19 & JUDGES 1.12-15

CHAPTER 1



...and the daughter of Caleb was Acsah.

— 1 CHRONICLES 2.49

“*I*’m a prize? What do you mean I’m a prize?” Acsah’s throat burned as she fought to keep the tears from spilling. How had this day turned upside down so quickly? The sky closed in on her as she stood on the open roof of her home. She struggled to breathe, couldn’t pull in enough air.

Her *abba* folded his arms across his broad chest and clenched his jaw. “You are my only daughter. I intend to see you are protected. And since you can’t seem to make this decision yourself, I felt I had to step in.”

“My *imma* never would have allowed this.”

Pain clouded his eyes. “Your imma would have seen you married by now. Perhaps I have been too indulgent.”

“How do you know ...? But what if ...?” Thoughts swirled, too many and too fast for her to complete one. “Abba, why?”

He uncrossed his arms. “Acsah, you know I love you dearly, more than life itself. I have talked to Yahweh about this. I have talked to Leah...”

Acsah's gaze shot to the woman standing next to him. Why would her aunt betray her like this? "You agree with him? How could you?"

Leah neared. "Because I love you like a daughter. This way, Yahweh Himself will choose your husband. And he will be brave, strong, a true warrior." She stretched out her hand, but Acsah backed away.

"I don't *want* a warrior! That's the last thing I want!" Her traitorous hot tears finally had their way, coursing down her cheeks. She raced from the roof, down the stairs, and through the house. Outside, she ran past the wide gates of Hebron and into the countryside beyond. Was there no way out of this deal her abba had made for her?

Breaking into a sweat, she passed Abba's golden wheat fields and sprinted up the rise leading to the enormous threshing floor beyond. Reaching the flat, packed ground at the apex of the hill, she stopped, chest heaving. She bent at the waist, her hands on her knees until she caught her breath, then collapsed on the hard ground.

What kind of old, scarred monster would she end up with? How ugly would he be? Would he be cruel? Demanding? She buried her head in her arms on her knees, sobbing until her tears were spent.

Drying her wet cheeks on her headcloth, she scanned the verdant hills of Hebron, resplendent with the fragrant flowers of early summer. The fertile land mocked the emptiness in her heart.

She surveyed the abundant grain waving in the seemingly endless fields. Being the daughter of Israel's mightiest warrior Caleb may have locked her into a marriage she did not want, but it also brought her innumerable advantages. She rose and adjusted her clothing. The time for despair had passed. There was work to be done. People depended on her.

She strode back to her house and filled a small bag with grain. As she walked along the main road that fronted the outside circle of houses, she tucked the pouch into her sash. She crossed one of the many smaller streets leading from the ring road into the center of the city. Judith's house sat on the corner.

Acsah opened the courtyard gate and let herself in. "Judith? I've come to help with the bread."

Three older women sat in the common room of their modest home near a small oven. Each sat before a large, flat-topped, stationary stone

called a quern, with a smaller handstone they moved back and forth over the grain to turn it into flour. “We were beginning to think we wouldn’t see you today,” said Judith.

“I’m so sorry. Just a talk with my abba. Nothing to worry about.” She joined their circle, sitting before an empty quern.

“How is Caleb? Such a good man.” Naomi patted her arm.

Acsah ignored the comment. She removed a handful of wheat from the bowl in their midst and began crushing the kernels. As flour was produced, she added it to another container and then began again.

Their chatter drowned out the scratching, crunching sounds of turning wheat berries to flour, and the flour into bread. Hours had gone by before the task was accomplished.

“I’ll take the bowls back for you. You rest for now. If you’ll pass me that, Miriam?”

Acsah balanced the bowl the widow handed her on top of the first one, leaving the stack of flat, round loaves that would feed the women for the rest of the day. She carried them to the storage room at the back of the house and set them on the table. Before she left, she emptied the contents of the small bag of grain she’d brought into the widows’ larger jar to replenish what they had just ground, and returned with a small bowl of dates and raisins.

“Time for me to go, *savtot*. I’ll be back tomorrow.” They weren’t truly her grandmothers, but since she had none by blood, and they had no relatives nearby, they all enjoyed the special relationship Acsah nurtured among them.

On the way home, she thought more about Abba’s pronouncement. She simply had to persuade him to change his mind. As soon as the idea formed, she knew it would never happen. She’d never known him to change course. He made decisions slowly, deliberately, after examining all the facts. After much counsel and prayer. Then he did everything possible to see his decision was carried out.

The epitome of a warrior. A commander.

She had no more chance of avoiding this marriage than the walls of Jericho had against Joshua seven years ago.



Othniel's head was so full of competing thoughts he barely noticed the lush green fields he walked through. The road from Hebron to Bethlehem was usually calming and enjoyable, but so far he'd missed most of it.

Caleb's report after his scouting mission to the nearby city of Kiriath-Sepher echoed—especially that one unbelievable statement: “I offer my daughter Acsah as a bride.”

Uncle Caleb was wealthy. He had land and silver. He had influence. He could offer anything, make anyone's life easier, better. He could set a man up for life. Why in the world would he offer his only daughter?

Not that Othni objected. To the contrary. He would do almost anything to make her his. His heart beat faster at the idea. He thought back to their life on the other side of the Jordan River, back to when they'd been children. Acsah had been not only his cousin, but also his best friend. Days of chasing rabbits and building fortresses blended into picking berries and sitting under trees, dreaming of what life would be like in Canaan.

Then they crossed the River. Her tenth summer, his fifteenth. After that, things got complicated.

He hadn't seen her in four years. What did she look like now? Surely she'd grown even more beautiful. She was a woman now—more than of age. Why hadn't she married yet?

Why hadn't he?

Because every woman he'd thought about marrying, he'd compared to her. And none of them measured up. None had her flashing eyes. Her pink cheeks. Her wavy, dark brown hair, which was so dark it was almost black...

That would all be over as soon as he conquered Kiriath-Sepher.

But first, he needed to talk to Salmah. Salmah had been with Caleb nearly every day of the wars until they came home. He hadn't run like Othni had. He'd had no need to.

Would Caleb even talk to Othni now?

Winning Acsah's hand was the only thing in this world that would make him risk disappointing Caleb again.



Acsah paced in the courtyard in front of their home, the sweet fragrance of pomegranate blossoms drifting on the air. Bright red flowers, the shape of ram's-horn trumpets, dotted the trees. The colors and scents, which normally invigorated her, crowded her space.

Maybe she could talk to Aunt Leah first, enlist her help in persuading Abba to change his mind. Acsah moved to the side of the house where Leah and Uncle Jonah's rooms were attached. She peeked through the door into their central room, but Leah wasn't there.

After rehearsing a number of things she might say to attempt to change Abba's mind, Acsah finally settled on two or three. She had to try, though it was probably useless. She spun on her heel and returned to the wide, open room that occupied the right two-thirds of the lower floor of their home. The stone pillars that held up the roof loomed larger than usual this morning.

She leaned over the low stone barrier to her left and rested her head on Donkey's nose, rubbing his neck for a long moment. "You don't have to worry about getting married, do you?" She scooped out some grain from the feedbag in the corner and held it out to him. His lips tickled her palm as he nuzzled her hand. "Not that you could have any babies if you did." Too bad her life couldn't be so simple.

Acsah headed for the stone stairs in front of the storage room that ran across the back of the house. Reaching the top, she inhaled a deep breath. If only she could suck in courage as easily as air. Maybe she could duck into one of the two sleeping rooms that took up the back part of the roof.

No, she might as well face him now.

Abba and Aunt Leah sat on a round leather mat, and Acsah lowered herself to the floor next to him. "Abba, may I talk with you about what you said this morning?"

"Yes, *motek*." He grinned. "But I won't change my mind." He could call her *my sweet*, but underneath his smile, his will was as hard and sharp as the bronze in his sword.

She glanced at Leah, then back to her father. "Why must I marry a soldier? Can't I marry someone else? Maybe one of the others?"

“You’ve already turned down five men.” He frowned at her and held up a hand, fingers spread wide. “Five.”

She squirmed. “I know, but ...”

Aunt Leah touched her arm. “Tell me what was wrong with them. Why did you always say no?”

Acsah shrugged. “I don’t know. Baruch was too old. Aviel wanted to move to Lachish. So far away—I’d never see you. Gershom ... Gershom ... he ...” She sighed deeply. “But Abba, I can’t marry *anyone*.”

“Why ever not?” He widened his dark eyes, his bushy brows disappearing under his crop of gray hair.

“Because ... because ...” She chewed on her bottom lip.

“Why?” His voice was firm, his eyes narrowed.

This was not how the conversation was supposed to go. She folded her hands in front of her, squeezed them together until her fingers ached. “Because then you will be alone. And no one should be alone.” She pulled her knees to her chest and dropped her head onto her arms.

Her father’s strong hand rested on her head. He waited, smoothing her hair until she stilled. “Acsah?” His gentle voice soothed her raging nerves.

She raised her face to his, drew in a shuddering breath.

“Why are you afraid to leave? What do you think will happen?”

“I- I don’t know. I just know I can’t.”

He reached for her and took one of her hands between his rough ones. “But motek, you must. It is the way things have always been, the way Yahweh intended. Daughters grow up and leave to marry. I assure you, I will be fine.”

He didn’t understand. How could he? He hadn’t been there that day. A thought occurred to her, and she tilted her head. “Why did you never marry again?”

He shrugged. “At the time, I only wanted to care for you. And there were wars to be fought, and then time went by, and here we are.” He aimed his penetrating gaze at her. “Would you feel better if I were married? If I had someone here with me?”

It would.

But it didn’t change the fact that she would never wed a warrior.



Othni winced. Rahab had worked hard to prepare an abundance of delicious-looking food, and he couldn't remember having tasted any of it. Had he even spoken to her, or to Salmah, during the entire meal? He put on a smile and swallowed the last of his bread, then drained his drinking bowl.

Rahab reached to fill it again then set the pitcher on the mat spread in the courtyard of their Bethlehem home. She scooped a toddler off Salmah's lap, set him on the brushed dirt floor, and stood. "Come, Simeon. Let's let Abba talk to his friend."

Instead Simeon settled onto Othni's lap and tugged on his beard. "You are Abba's friend?"

"He is a very good friend."

"Then why have I only seen you a few times?"

Rahab gasped. "Simeon!"

Othni chuckled, dislodging the child's fat fingers. "I have been fighting in other places."

"My friends don't go far away." Simeon frowned.

"Your friends are little boys, not soldiers."

"Oh." The boy shrugged and clambered off Othni's lap.

"Simeon, we are going inside. Now." Rahab shook her head and picked him up.

"He doesn't live up to his name very well, does he? He who hears and obeys?" Othni laughed as Rahab carried the four-year-old inside.

"We keep hoping he'll grow into it. The *hearing* part he gets. It's the *obeying* part he still needs to work on." Salmah's hearty laugh rumbled deep in his chest. "Just wait—you'll see someday. Anyone you have your eye on?"

"That's why I'm here."

Salmah leaned forward, grinning. "What can I do? I have no daughters for you. Only one tiny, disobedient son."

"You know Caleb is planning to attack Kiriath-Sepher."

Salmah picked a ripe fig from the bowl and peeled it. "It's one of the only cities left."

"He wants help."

“No surprise. He was injured so badly, I’m amazed he wants to take part at all.”

Othni winced at the mention of Caleb’s injury, then shoved it from his mind. “Amazed?”

“I guess not. I’d be more shocked if he were willing to stay behind.”

“He’s looking for a commander. He’s offered an ... incentive.”

The older man raised a brow. “Silver?”

“No. He has offered Acsah as a bride to whomever conquers the city.”

Salmah let out a low whistle.

“He did what?” Rahab’s sharp voice came from the doorway. She’d been listening?

Othni spoke over his shoulder, repeating what he’d told her husband. “I’m not sure why he would do that.”

Rahab returned and sat next to Salmah. She rested her chin on her hand and pursed her lips, but said nothing. Next to Salmah’s husky build, her tall, slender frame was even more striking.

“Well?” Salmah eyed his wife.

“I know she has refused others.”

“You’ve talked to her about that?” Othni knew Rahab and Acsah had been close when the Canaanite woman first came from Jericho years ago. Before she’d married Salmah, she’d lived with Caleb’s family. But they’d stayed that close? Then again, he’d been up north, so how would he know?

“I see her often. She’s found no one she wishes to marry, although I saw nothing wrong with any of the young men.” She drew circles in the dirt. “I’m not really sure what she’s looking for. I’m not surprised Caleb finally stepped in. She’s nearing an age when most men would no longer consider her.”

“She’s not as old as you were when I married you.” Salmah winked at his wife.

She grinned. “Yes, but you’re smarter than most men.” She turned to Othni. “You still find her desirable?”

He nodded. “And beautiful.” Her face drifted though his mind. “Salmah, will you help me plan an attack on Kiriath-Sepher? You went

with him the first time, so you must know everything I need to know, yes?”

Salmah nodded.

“I *must* take this city. Many heard Caleb’s offer. Groups of men huddled up right away, starting on their plans. They have Caleb’s ear.” He didn’t need to expound on Caleb’s opinion of him. “I need all the help you can give me. I love her. I always have.”

Salmah searched his face. “I’ll help you. And I’ll go with you.”

Othni’s gaze darted to Rahab. Her eyes closed for a moment, perhaps contemplating yet another battle for her husband. She opened them and smiled at Othni. “You will both be in my prayers, and in Yahweh’s hands.” She returned to her son.

Othni watched her leave. “Her faith is amazing. Especially considering she’s a Canaanite.”

“I think that’s why it’s so strong. She had to trust Him for her very life, before she even knew Him.” Salmah played with the seed from the fig. “Here’s what I learned about Kiriath-Sepher. For the Canaanites, it’s a royal city. Bigger, and more important than Hebron was, at least to them. The walls are higher and thicker than Hebron’s, and about as high as four or five men. They’re made of enormous stones, perfectly shaped to fit together without mortar of any kind. There is an earthen revetment outside the walls, going up about two-thirds of the wall and not quite as wide. There are many towers, and there are gates on all four sides.”

Othni blew out a long breath. “A direct attack would never work.”

“I think the only way is by a protracted siege or by trickery.”

“Like Joshua took Ai? Or Bethel?”

“Not Bethel.” Salmah waved away the suggestion. “We’ll certainly never find a traitor there.”

He nodded. “True. Which leaves a siege or a ruse.”

“Or someone, somehow, getting in and opening the gates.”

Othni frowned. “If the giants built the walls and the gates, wouldn’t the locks be much too high for one of us to open?”

“Also true. So that’s probably not our best option.”

Othni reached for a date. He ripped it in two and removed the stone, then put one half in his mouth. The fair-complexioned giants

of Hebron invaded his memory. Twice as tall as Othniel, thighs as wide as his body. Joshua's armies had expelled them once, nearly six years ago after Israel first conquered Jericho. But as Joshua and his men moved on, the *Anakim* moved back in, and Caleb was forced to defeat them again in order to claim the city Moses had promised him.

"Let's see." Othni tore the other piece in half again. And again. "A siege will deplete our resources as much as theirs, maybe more. But if we attack and then fake a surrender, we can send in a good number of men, perhaps with gifts, hide more men—armed men in baskets. It's been done before."

Salmah shrugged. "It has. And if we hadn't been at war with every other city around here, and if they weren't giants, that might work. But I think it's far too risky here."

"What if we attack, then retreat and draw them out ..."

"That might work better. Or we could trap them between two forces."

He nodded. "We have to see how many of them there are. They can defend the city with very few as long as they're inside. Once we draw them out, we have the advantage."

Salmah grasped his shoulder. "You might make a good commander yet."

If Othni wanted to win Acsah, he would have to make certain Caleb finally could see that as well.



Othni had left Salmah's house as soon as the sun peeked over the eastern mountains in order to make the long walk back to Hebron before the evening meal. A hearty meal, a good night's sleep, and perhaps he'd have a decent chance to impress his uncle.

The next day, the would-be commanders gathered in Caleb's massive courtyard to present their plans one by one. Othni watched as man after man was sent away after failing to meet Caleb's expectations.

One young man—barely a man—flailed his arms like a baby bird

trying to fly the first time. “But it worked before. We march around once a day for six days—”

Othni did his best to suppress a laugh. He glanced around and noticed several others hiding chuckles as well.

“We are not doing as we did at Jericho.” Caleb’s face reddened, his hands splayed at his sides. “Go.” Eyes closed, he growled the word.

The young man slunk out through the courtyard.

An older, chubby man advanced. “If we gather men from all of Judah, we can attack them with full force. With Yahweh’s help this will work. We can use battering rams—”

“Battering rams will never be successful,” Caleb said, “against the stones in Kiriath-Sepher’s walls.”

The man looked baffled.

Caleb hadn’t revealed much about Kiriath-Sepher in his speech to Hebron’s men, but he undoubtedly would have told anyone who’d asked anything they wanted to know. That would be just like him, to see who would gather the information they needed before formulating a strategy.

The mighty warrior took a deep breath. “The stones in those walls are as wide as the height of two men. They are far too heavy to be dislodged by a battering ram.”

“But we have Yahweh—”

“And we must also use common sense.” Caleb pounded a fist into his palm. “Yahweh’s power is not an excuse to be foolish. Next.”

The portly man left, and a tall man Othni had seen talking to Caleb the day he made the announcement—obviously a favorite—sauntered over. Othni’s chest burned. What made that man so special? He was tall, sure, but not that good-looking, at least not to Othni. Hair too straight. Nose too big. Laughed too loud.

Caleb’s weathered face brightened. “Enosh. What is your plan? I’m sure you have thought it out well.”

Enosh puffed out his chest. “I suggest a siege. It’s the only reasonable option. We cut off their water supply. They get all their water from the two wells nearby—one north of the city and one south. Without water, they cannot survive.”

“Won’t they have supplies in the city? Water? Food?” Caleb arched

a brow, accentuating the scar that ran from above his right eye to the corner of his lip.

“Cisterns full of water, I’m sure. But how long can that last?”

“Wait over there.” Caleb pointed his chin toward the largest pomegranate tree in the courtyard.

Enosh’s smirk as he passed fanned the fire in Othni’s chest. Why was he so cocky? Did he know something the others didn’t? He was the first Caleb had asked to wait, so maybe he did possess some secret information.

“Othniel.”

Snapping to attention, Othni turned to the soft but firm voice. “Uncle.”

“I’m surprised to see you here. A little young, aren’t you?”

He fought a sigh. “I fought in Hebron, Gibeon—”

“That didn’t work out so well, did it?”

Othni clenched his jaw. “I’ve fought for Benjamin the last four years, in Mizpah, Ramah, Beeroth, more. Did you speak to the commanders there?”

Caleb tilted his head. Was that a smile? Surely not. “What’s your plan?”

Othni repeated everything he had discussed with Salmah.

After an almost imperceptible nod, Caleb gestured toward the tree. “All right, wait with Enosh.”

Caleb dispatched the last two men quickly. His limp was slight as he joined the pair in his courtyard. “You two have the best plans. I shall need to consider them further.”

Movement inside the house drew Othni’s vision.

Acsah. His heart beat faster, and heat crawled up his neck. How beautiful she was—full lips, cheekbones set high against her dark eyes, a touch of pink on her cheeks. He hadn’t seen her since ... when? Since before they left Gilgal to defend Gibeon.

She accepted a platter from a young girl, probably a servant, and stepped into the courtyard with bread and cheese and a pitcher of juice. Locks of her long hair slipped out from under her scarf, and she tossed her head to get it out of her face. She neared them and set the food on a pedestal.

Caleb beamed at her. “Thank you, motek.”

“Would you like anything else, Abba?”

“No, thank you.”

“Thank you, Acsah. How very thoughtful of you.” Enosh touched her arm and grinned.

Othni tensed, his teeth grinding together.

Not that he had any more right to her than Enosh. In fact, Enosh probably deserved her more. He lived here in Hebron, likely saw her every day, knew her.

But he hadn’t loved her his whole life, like Othni had. Spent the last four years trying to earn the right to ask Caleb’s permission to marry her.

Acsah smiled weakly at Enosh, glanced briefly at Othni, and retreated. She didn’t recognize him—at least she didn’t appear to. He’d grown a cubit or two, added a good bit of muscle and a beard. He was no longer a boy.

“Anything else either of you’d like to say?”

Neither Enosh or Othni spoke.

“I’ll have my decision tomorrow morning. We’ll leave the next day.” He turned toward his house and Enosh strutted from the courtyard, as if he had the command in hand already.

Othni snatched a piece of bread and trudged toward the street.

Caleb’s voice stopped him on his way out. “Othniel, may I speak with you a moment?”

“Yes, Uncle.” He ripped the food into pieces as he stared south toward Kiriath-Sepher.

In the morning Caleb would decide who would lead the attack on the Canaanite city—which in turn would decide who would marry Acsah.

For Caleb, an important decision, of course.

For Othni, nothing less than his entire future was at stake.

CHAPTER 2



*And Caleb said, "The one who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it,
I will give him Acsah my daughter as a wife."*

— JOSHUA 15.16

"Othniel?" Acsah stomped her way across the roof. "Othniel." When she reached the far edge, she whirled around and slammed her arms across her chest. "Surely you mean a different Othniel and not my cousin."

"Of course I mean your cousin. I know of no other man named Othniel." Abba waved his hand in dismissal.

"But Othni? He's shorter than I am! And skinny."

Abba laughed. "He was the last time you saw him. That was what, four years ago? After we conquered Jericho? He's grown, just like you."

"But he was older than I am, and still I was taller."

"Girls always grow faster than boys. But the men catch up. Trust me, he's taller now. Bigger, stronger, braver."

She scrunched up her mouth, trying to imagine him as anything but the scrawny little boy she remembered. "Still ..."

"Acsah, I have not yet decided whom I will choose. It will either be Enosh ben Terah, or Othniel ben Kenaz. Enosh you know. Would you

like to see Othniel again in case I choose him? There will be no time tomorrow.”

She might as well.

Abba grinned. “He’s in the courtyard.” He limped down the stairs, leaving her standing on the roof, alone with her worst imaginings.

When she’d agreed to meet him, she didn’t mean right now. Perhaps later. But there was no time for later. She groaned and moved toward the stairs, took them as slowly as possible, then stepped into the large room on the lower floor.

A deep, easy laughter caught her attention. A tall, broad-shouldered man stood in the courtyard with Abba, his back to her. Abba said something, and the man chuckled once more. The sound was ... almost musical. Bubbly, but deep, like the springs outside Hebron’s walls.

Abba left the courtyard, and the man turned and moved toward her, his easy stride belying his bulk. His light brown hair was unruly, reaching the neck of his tunic. A shiver raced down her back at the sight of sandals laced up to his shins—soldiers’ footwear.

Othniel?

Couldn’t be.

“Acsah.” The man smiled, and her heart fluttered. This could not be Othni. This was a man, not a boy. His bronzed skin boasted of hours in the sun. A strong jaw showed off a gentle smile.

Shallow breaths denied her a chest full of air. Her heart pounded in her ears. Why should she fear him? He had done nothing to threaten her, but he was a stranger to her. She walked past him into the shade of pomegranate trees, her mind racing. She wanted—needed—proof he was Othni. What piece of information, what object could Othniel possess no one else could?

It hit her, and she whirled to face him. “Show me your knee.”

“Excuse me?” He raised a dark brow. “Why should I do that?”

“Show me your right knee!”

He lifted his foot.

She bent to examine it. “Ha! There is no scar there! You are not Othni!” She backed away and folded her arms over her chest. *This* man was an impostor. She would never marry him—he was a liar.

“Scar?” His brows furrowed, then his face relaxed, one corner of his mouth tipping up. “Oh ... from the race, our last race. When I fell.” He bent to bring his face nearer to hers. “When you *tripped* me, which was the only way you could win.”

The blood drained from her face. How could he know that?

He lifted his leg again and pointed to a spot below his knee. “It moved when I grew taller.”

She stared at the white, raised mark. She winced as visions flashed through her mind—Othni on the ground, blood running down his leg. Her stomach soured. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t know there was a rock there.”

He laughed. “I know. You told me. Repeatedly.”

Her face heated, and she became once again the young girl kneeling before her best friend, blood on her hands, her tunic, the grass.

Othni touched her shoulder.

She raised her face to his, sure to find him laughing at her. Instead, his graceful smile greeted her.

“How about a walk?” He gestured toward the gate. “You could show me the orchards outside the walls.”

She stepped in front of him. If she stayed ahead of him, she wouldn’t have to look at him—or let him look at her. In one long stride he was beside her. She tried to keep her pace steady, resisting the urge to race ahead of him. They passed the first hundred cubits assigned to the Levites and came to a grove of fruit trees. “There were already some trees growing here. Would you like a plum?” She reached toward one.

Othni leaned against a tree. “You didn’t recognize me at all? Earlier?”

She glanced sideways at him. When had she seen him last? In camp at Gilgal the summer after Israel had conquered Jericho. They’d been about the same height then. Now her head came to his shoulders. Muscles bulged under the short sleeves of his tunic. A beard covered his jaw.

Perhaps he had finally grown into his name—lion of God.

No, he looked nothing like the Othni she chased rabbits with on the other side of the river.

“Where have you been?”

“Away.”

“Where? I thought you were fighting with Abba.”

“Just away.” He flinched, then smiled again. “I recognized you immediately.”

“How?”

“You look the same. Just ... softer. Curvier. Maybe a little taller.”

Heat flamed her cheeks. “You shouldn’t say things like that.” She averted her gaze.

He ran his finger along her jaw and turned her head to face him. “Don’t you think I should find you pretty? We’re going to be married.” He drew even nearer, his breath warm on her face.

Her thoughts scrambled. Her gaze locked on his—eyes the color of midnight. “If Abba chooses you.”

He straightened. “Do you want him to?”

She shook her head. “I have no say in the matter.”

“That’s not what I asked.” He placed a hand on her face.

She trembled under his touch. How could she answer that? Tell him she didn’t want to marry any warrior?

Because no matter how much he made her heart flutter, she would still do everything she could to get out of this marriage.



A drop of sweat rolled down Othni’s neck. The muscles in his back and shoulders tensed. He slid the shaft of the arrow along the string of his bow until it was stopped by its bronze head. Bracing his thumb against his jaw he carefully aimed, released his fingers, and let it fly, satisfaction taking over as the weapon sailed through the air and slammed into Enosh’s chest.

Or the notch in the wood of the wild olive tree he envisioned as Enosh’s chest. He loaded another arrow.

“What are you doing?” Salmah’s voice came from over his right shoulder.

“He picked *him*.”

“Who picked whom?”

“Caleb picked the other man.”

“Again, who?”

“Enosh ben Terah. The one with the smirk and eyes for Acsah.” He let the arrow fly.

“Oh. I’ve heard of him. Quite the charmer, I understand.”

“Well, he’s certainly charmed Caleb. And Acsah.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that.”

Othni spun to face Salmah. “He chose him, didn’t he?”

Salmah folded his arms across his chest. “What plan did he offer?”

Othni scoffed. “A siege. A ridiculous, drawn-out siege.”

Salmah shrugged. “Maybe Caleb wants to try to minimize bloodshed first. It’s been a long fight.”

“All I know is, he’ll be the one marrying Acsah. They’re up there right now on Caleb’s roof, eating and making plans.” His chest ached so much he could barely breathe, as if a giant Anak had a hand around his heart.

“Caleb is not a foolish man. I have served under him for these last seven years, and he knows what he’s doing. If he chose Enosh to attack Kiriath-Sepher and to marry his daughter, he had a reason.”

“Yes, and that reason is he still doesn’t trust me!” Othni slammed down his bow, ran his fingers through his hair. “He will never forgive me for that one mistake. All this fighting, proving myself, and did he talk to even one of my commanders to see if I ever did the same thing again? No!”

“You don’t know that.”

He didn’t know that, not for sure. Still ... “He couldn’t have, or he wouldn’t be doing this.”

Salmah grasped his shoulders. “Othni, you know your uncle well enough to know he wouldn’t do anything without talking to Yahweh first.”

Othni grabbed his bow and stormed away. He didn’t want to hear any of Salmah’s explanations. Didn’t want to think about a successful siege. Didn’t want to think about Enosh conquering Kiriath-Sepher.

But he had to. Whether he thought so or not, evidently Caleb

considered the plan a worthy one. And now it was time for Othni to fall in line and obey.



Acsah placed bowls of almonds, dried dates, and goat cheese on the mat next to a bowl of bread, then sat across from Abba.

Aunt Leah followed with pitchers of watered wine and sat on her left.

On her right, Enosh reached for the bread and tore off a large chunk, the muscles on his arms rippling as he moved. He gobbled the bite then grabbed a handful of dates from the bowl. He tossed them in his mouth while he and Abba discussed which of the men would make the best captains, spitting the pits into his hand. When he laughed, his tunic stretched tight against his chest. Names were suggested, discussed, rejected, praised, and sullied, and in the end little was settled. Enosh snatched the last of the dates and handed Acsah the bowl without looking at her.

Glancing sideways at Leah, she rose. "I'll get some more." When she reached the stairs, she looked back to find him eyeing her and shivered. She walked down to the broadroom that formed part of the double wall that had encircled Hebron since long before the wars. Not quite half was reserved for the women, for those times they were ritually impure and had to remain separate from the men. The other half was a storage room filled with jars full of grains, dried fruits, implements and cookware. On the far wall stood a long table on which to work. Running her fingers over the pottery jars lined up on the shelves, she searched for the one she desired. Or more accurately, for the one Enosh had demanded. Wheat, barley, raisins ... There it was. Dates. She took the jar down and opened it.

As the wrinkly brown fruit tumbled into the bowl, her mind wandered. What would it be like to live with him? Would he allow her to continue to help the widows? Or anyone else? Or would he demand she stay at home all day and wait on him? He was handsome, to be sure, but he hadn't yet spoken to her during the meal. Obviously he and Abba had important things to discuss, but it would be nice if he at

least glanced her way once or twice. She replaced the top on the jar and headed back up, then took her seat.

“Caleb, will you be joining us?” Enosh snapped up more dates from the freshly filled bowl.

Abba smiled at her. “Not yet. You’ll do fine without me. I think I’ll remain here with Acsah a while.”

“Wise, since she will soon be leaving you.” He aimed a smirk her way.

Abba swallowed the last of his bread. “The moon will be full in three days. I will give you until the full moon after that to bring Kiriath-Sepher to its knees. I do not wish a long siege. Clear?”

Enosh cocked his head. “It won’t take even that long. I have it all planned out.”

“Salmah will go with you. Although you are the commander, he will be my representative there. Anything he says should be considered as coming from me.”

Enosh raised his brows.

“Is that a problem?”

Enosh smiled slyly but shook his head. He turned to her. “So, Acsah, after I return, victorious, how soon will you marry me?”

Her cheeks heated, and she looked away. Even though she was promised to him, his attitude was unnerving.

“Don’t worry. I’ll give you plenty of time.” He grinned. “At least a few days.”

Acsah grasped Leah’s hand.

Enosh stood and addressed Abba. “I’ll be at the gate. I’ll meet you there.” He bounded down the stairs.

Not even a glance, let alone a ‘thank you.’ Acsah sucked in a deep breath. It wasn’t that he needed to talk to her. She knew many women who didn’t even eat with their husbands. Perhaps Abba had simply spoiled her. But the way Enosh looked at her...

Yahweh, if he is the man You have chosen for me, please give me patience and teach me to love him.

If Abba had chosen Othni, she might have been able to reconcile herself to being given away as a prize. But this ... Enosh ... How was she supposed to live with a man who never even looked at her?

Surely he would never let her spend his money as freely as she did Abba's.

Would Enosh allow her to, as her abba once put it, patrol the streets of Hebron, searching for the sick, the widowed, and the poor to care for?

Doubtful.

Her imma would have been so disappointed.



“*H*e’s older than you are. He’ll be better able to command the men.” Caleb’s words pummeled Othni’s brain with every step along the road to Kiriath-Sepher. They pierced his heart surer than a blade.

He shoved his despair to the deepest part of his mind. Now was not the time to mourn over what might have been. He needed to focus on the task at hand. He could mope over losing Acsah *after* Kiriath-Sepher belonged to Israel, and the giants had been defeated.

He trudged on. Shimmering waves of heat rose from the sands surrounding them. He pulled at his tunic, damp from sweat.

His brother caught up to him, dropping a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry Uncle Caleb chose the other man. I know you’re disappointed.”

Disappointed? That didn’t begin to cover it. Devastated. Shattered. Destroyed. Everything he’d done for the last four years to prove himself had been wasted.

“I’m sure you’ll find someone else.”

Seraiah meant well, but the words felt like a kick in the gut. “Probably.” But she wouldn’t be Acsah. Only a poor substitute.

“One way or another, this will be over soon. You can start again, whether in Bethlehem or somewhere else. I can go with you, or you can leave everyone and everything behind and go somewhere where no one knows you.”

Othni looked to Seraiah and blinked. “You think I want that?”

“I don’t know. I thought perhaps you might want to get away from anyone who knew about Ac ... Who knew you.”

“No.” He stared at Enosh, marching unevenly ahead of him. “I don’t want to run again. I just came back. You’re all I have left.”

Siah slapped him on the back. “Good. I’d miss you. But if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll deny it.”

“Siah, all I want now is for both of us to come out of this alive.”

Siah grinned. “It’s been a long time since anyone called me that.”

Othni tried to smile, remembering the name he’d given his baby brother when he couldn’t pronounce Seraiah. It had stuck. “It’s amazing we’ve made it this far. I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

His heart ached. Until he’d returned a few weeks ago, he’d had no idea his abba had died. Two years ago, but for him the pain was still fresh.

Siah looked so much like Abba now that sometimes it shocked Othni. His little brother was no longer little. He’d grown taller, stronger. Of age to marry. Hard to believe.

The sky darkened as the road climbed gradually higher over a series of low hills. Under the light of a nearly full moon, they halted to make camp. He dropped his pack at his feet and shook out his sleeping mat. Owls hooted as they searched for food. In the distance a hyena called.

Siah placed his next to Othni’s. “We must be close if we’ve stopped.”

“Let’s just try to sleep.”

Much too soon, Othni opened one eye and then slammed it shut as the sunlight pierced it. He groaned and rolled over, smacking his dry lips. The short midsummer night meant he’d slept little, and the day promised to be long, hot, brutal—and potentially deadly.

He grabbed his waterskin, guzzled some, and splashed more on his face. His ears rang with Enosh’s voice as the commander strutted among the men, making sure everyone was awake—and knew he was in charge. Clenching his jaw, Othni slapped the clay stopper in his skin, then grabbed his belt, cinched it around his waist, and tied the skin on it. He strapped on his quiver and checked his bow for the tenth

time in two days. Finally, he attached the sheath for his sword on his left hip.

Why did he still not feel ready to face giants?

Yahweh, give me courage. Give me strength. Help me make Judah safe for Your people.

For Acsah. Even though she would be the wife of another.

By midafternoon Kiriath-Sepher was in sight. Soaring towers sat atop gargantuan walls. The city boasted massive gates on the north, east, west and south.

Desert valleys surrounded the city on all sides. The *negev* was devoid of neither life nor water, however, especially here bordering Judah's highlands. Huge vineyards and olive groves on terraced hill-sides hugged the city.

East of the city lay a valley filled with fig trees. Their shallow root systems meant water lay not terribly far below the surface. Enosh ordered the older boys they brought along to serve as camp helpers to start digging while the soldiers set up camp.

Othni tossed his mat on the ground and joined Salmah at the top of the valley. Giants continued their daily activities as if the Israelites didn't exist.

Othni watched the Anakim prune vines, tend to olive trees and herd goats. "They have to know we're here, don't they?"

"There's no way they can't. The landscape is too wide open to even try to hide our arrival," Salmah said. "I think they just don't care. We represent no threat to them whatsoever."

Which was why a siege probably wasn't the best idea in the first place.

But it wasn't up to him.

Enosh strolled up the rise and stood next to Salmah. "I've posted archers on the ridges above the wells. So as of now, the giants can't access them. It shouldn't take long in this heat for them to surrender." He turned so Othni could see his face. "Which is good, because I have a wedding to get back to." He tossed a smug look in Othni's direction and sauntered off.

Othni tried to concentrate on the war to come and ignore the one

in his heart, but he was failing. In that particular battle, Enosh was far too powerful an adversary.



“It appears I will soon be married, *to a warrior*. The one thing I did not want to happen.” Acsah held the hem of her tunic as she waded in the shallow water of her favorite spring outside Hebron.

Simeon slammed his open hand on the surface, sending splashes high above his head and dissolving into fits of laughter.

Rahab grasped Simeon’s hand and pulled him closer. “Acsah, what makes you think your abba cannot survive without you? He’s a grown man. He raised you. He can certainly take care of himself.”

“Of course he can take care of himself. That’s not what I’m worried about. But I don’t want him to be alone.” Her mind wandered to that day, so many years ago.... Her chest constricted against the pain that welled up. Nobody should be alone.

“Acsah?” Rahab’s voice called her back to the present.

“Hmmm?”

“Are you all right?”

“Of course. Why?”

“You were scowling. What were you thinking about?”

“Nothing.” She scanned the shimmering water reflecting the afternoon sunshine. “You know, this is where I come when I want to think, to pray. There’s something about the water, the birds, the flowers. I feel safe here. I can feel Yahweh here. I can hear His voice.” She paused as a butterfly flitted past. “I’ve been coming here quite often lately.”

Rahab rubbed her back.

“Let’s sit.” Acsah gestured to an outcropping of rocks. “Abba said he might get married.”

“He did?” Rahab brushed dirt from the rock. “To whom?”

“I don’t know.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“He asked if I would feel better about leaving if he were married.”

“That doesn’t mean he has anyone in mind or even any plans to start looking. It only means he might start thinking about it.”

Simeon played at their feet in a cluster of brightly colored blossoms. “Imma, look at all the flowers!”

“They’re beautiful, my son. What are you going to do with them?”

“Some for you, and some for Acsah.” He gathered a bunch, divided them between the women, and then ran off to find more.

Rahab inhaled a deep breath, cast a sideways glance at Acsah. “Did you meet the ones your father chose?”

“Enosh I know a little from town. And the other choice was ... Othni.”

“But your abba did not choose him.”

Acsah recalled Othni’s dark eyes, his soft laugh, which she’d heard for but a moment. “No, he did not.”

Rahab stared at her, then her eyes widened, and a smile spread over her face. “You wish he had!”

Acsah’s face warmed. “I wish no such thing.”

Rahab laughed. “Oh, yes, you do.”

She looked away, chewing on her lip. “What I wish does not matter. Not to Abba, not to Yahweh.” She plucked a flower from the bouquet and twirled it, then tossed it to the ground.

“Oh, I think you are very much mistaken.”

“If what I wanted mattered, someone would have asked me.” She suppressed a smile as she remembered their conversation under the trees. *Othni did.*

“Tell me about him.”

“You already know him.”

“Well then, tell me about Enosh.”

Acsah sighed. “We ate a meal together with Abba. He ate an entire bowl of dates, then shoved the bowl at me and expected me to fill it again. He never said please, thank you, hello, goodbye—in fact, I don’t think he spoke to me once.”

“Not once?”

She shook her head. “Well, actually, he did. He asked me how soon after he returned I would marry him. He is an excellent example of

why I never wanted to marry a soldier. He's rude, arrogant, demanding ..."

"Is he at least good-looking?" Rahab grinned.

Acsah smiled. "Yes, Rahab, he's very handsome. So whenever he's at home and not off somewhere fighting, I can at least admire his face while he's ignoring me."

Rahab chuckled. "Don't forget, in order to marry you, Enosh has to *win*."

"I don't see how he can't. He's a perfect warrior." Her voice trailed off.

"You never know what Yahweh will do. I could never have predicted what my life would be like now. When I was in Jericho hiding my husband and your abba from the soldiers, I thought surely we would all be killed. When I was begging Joshua to save my family, I thought there was no way he would agree. When I was struggling to learn all of Yahweh's laws, I thought I'd be lucky to live among you, *if* I ever learned them all." She glanced at Simeon, giggling as he tugged more blossoms from the soil. "And I never thought someone as wonderful as Salmah would ask me to marry him, or we'd have such a beautiful little boy who gives me wildflowers."

Rahab wiped a tear from Acsah's cheek. "Give Yahweh room to work."



The wells had been guarded for two weeks. The giants didn't seem to care. The Israelites stayed in camp and watched from behind their hill as the Anakim led their animals out to the fields every morning, tended to crops, and brought them back each evening. They even carried water outside in great buckets to fill troughs for their cattle and sheep. How much water could they possibly have stored inside those walls?

Othni ripped a leaf into pieces as he sat with the other captains around a fire. The good part about being the attackers was they didn't have to hide, allowing them the luxury of a nightly fire.

Salmah stood a few strides away, arms crossed. "This is not

working.”

Enosh paced. “It hasn’t even been two weeks. We need to have patience.”

“By this time there should be some sign their water is running low. They cannot have enough water stored for that many people for this long in the heat of summer.” Salmah shook his head. “They’re getting water from somewhere.”

“No. We just need to wait them out. A siege always wins. Caleb himself said so. That’s why he chose *me*.” He glared again at Othni.

Salmah stepped nearer. “What he said was, a besieging army will always outlast those behind the wall *as long as* the food and water are securely cut off. They obviously aren’t.”

“They are. They have to be.” Enosh stalked off, mumbling to himself.

Siah took a bite of cheese and leaned toward Othni. “I certainly don’t wish to spend many more weeks out here sitting around waiting.”

“We won’t. Salmah won’t let that happen.” Othni lifted his skin and squirted a long draw into his mouth. “He’ll—”

“You two.” Enosh stomped toward the fire, fingers pointed to Othni and his brother. “You stand guard at the gates, all night if that’s what it takes. I want to know how they are bringing in water. Take some men with you.”

Othni looked at Salmah.

Enosh closed the distance between them in three strides. “I am the commander! He does not need to approve my orders! Move, now!” His face reddened, and Othni and Siah jumped to their feet. Enosh stalked away once more.

Salmah shrugged. “Can’t hurt. Stay out of sight.”

Othni grabbed his bow, quiver, and skin. “Siah, gather eight or ten more. Might as well have company.” He approached a group of archers.

Siah grinned. “Yes, captain.”

“Malachi.”

A young man, all arms and legs, rose onto his knees. “Yes?”

Othni jerked his head. “Come with me, cousin.”

Malachi's face brightened like a child who had been given a honey cake as he bounded up the hill after Othni, bow in hand.

Othni should have made him stay back in Bethlehem. Malachi was too young. Othni knew that, but he'd let Malachi talk him into coming along. To refuse would have meant arguing with him in front of the entire town. Malachi would have hated him, but he would have been safe. All Othni could do now was ensure he kept him as far away from the real fighting as possible.

When Siah returned with the men he'd gathered, the group crept toward the crest of the hill, just below the walls of the fortified city.

Othni split the group in half. He sent half north with Siah and took the others south.

The south gate was much smaller than the massive eastern gate. That gate was on a trade route, so presumably the western gate was the same size, large enough for Canaanite iron chariots, while the north and south gates only needed to allow the residents to access the fields and wells.

After half a night of watching, Othni had had enough. The giants were not coming out at night to draw water, and everyone knew it. They had to have some source of water inside the walls, and he was going to find it. He touched Malachi's arm. "I should be back before dawn. If I'm not, get back, and I'll meet you at camp." He scurried off before anyone could lob any questions at him.

He skirted along the southeast section of the wall, running his hands along the gargantuan stones perched atop one another. Standing at the base of the wall, craning his neck, he marveled at the sight. The wall seemed to go on forever, reaching to heaven itself. He tried to stick his fingers between the stones. No space. He slid his hands along the cold rocks, searching for an opening. There was nothing. Rock solidly against rock.

These walls would be impossible to bring down.

He scanned the hill below. If there was a well, there had to be an underground source of water. And since they'd managed to hold out this long, it seemed the giants had found a way to get to that source. And if so, maybe there was an outside entrance. He'd seen it before, in Megiddo.

The source would likely be directly below the well. He worked his way down the hill until he was south of the well. Sand would, in most ways, make it far more difficult to hide an opening than brush and leaves. The waning moon's light made searching difficult. He dug through sand, an arm's length deep, holes about half a man's height apart.

He was just about to give up when he hit stone. He brushed away more sand and revealed a wall. This had to be where they had blocked the entrance to the spring. Could have been a natural cave or grotto to begin with, or perhaps a tunnel. Hard to tell in the dark. He'd seen both. He shoved sand back over it. Whatever it was, it needed to be properly examined, and there wasn't enough time left before dawn. They'd have to come back tomorrow night, earlier and with more men.

Othni headed to camp to explain what he had found. He sat by the fire and grabbed his waterskin.

"What do you think it is?" Siah looked from Othni to Salmah to Enosh.

Enosh glared. He had resisted Othni as a captain, but Caleb had prevailed, and Enosh missed no opportunity to make his displeasure known. "Don't be foolish. There's no tunnel to the water."

"Almost every walled city we have come across has a way to outside water for this very reason—to withstand a siege. This makes sense. How else are they surviving?" Othni took a long draw from his skin.

Siah stroked his beard. "If we can truly cut off their water, they'll come out to fight. We have at least twice the men they have. If we can get them out in the open, we'll win."

Salmah stood. "We should send men to check it out tomorrow night. Take some torches with a tiny amount of tar on them for very low light."

"I'll think about it." Enosh growled the words.

"I'm getting some sleep before then," Salmah said. "A messenger arrived while you were away. Caleb's expected tomorrow." He headed for the bottom of the hill.

Othni was too tired to move. He lay back on the sand. He'd just sleep by the fire.

Nothing more would happen until tomorrow night.