

Woman of Flames

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Bellevue, NE

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Book Layout ©2013 BookDesignTemplates.com
Cover Design: Victorine Lieske

Woman of Flames/ Kim Stokely. -- 1st ed.
For Printed copies ISBN 10: 1492173959 ISBN 13: 9781492173953

To John

*Because without your love and support, none of this
would have been possible.*

Although based on the Biblical account found in Judges 4 & 5, this book is a work of fiction. Every attempt was made to be historically and spiritually accurate, but some details have been altered to enhance the story. Please see the Author's Notes for more information regarding the life of Deborah.

Throughout the story, the Hebrew name for the Lord has not been spelled out in deference for the Jewish tradition. Instead, the letters YHWH are used to represent His name. The correct pronunciation is Yah-way

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PROLOGUE

In The Hills of Ephraim

Winter-Late 12th Century B.C.

His wife's screams tore through the night and pierced Azareel's heart. He paced the floor of the mud brick house.

Omri, his brother-in-law, grabbed him by the shoulders. "It always sounds worse than it is. Let the women take care of her."

Azareel tried to break Omri's hold.

"She's already born you one son. Do not fret, my brother. She will live to bear you many children." Omri's strong hands pushed him down. "Sit."

Azareel sat on the dirt floor, resting his head in his hands. *Had the wait been this hard when Avram was born?* He had been younger then; his face not lined, his beard not peppered with gray. *Maybe the years had made him softer.*

He looked across the small fire in the center of the room to where his son lay. Avram was halfway to manhood, but still looked like a babe when he slept. The amber glow of firelight danced around the boy's head. Dark-brown curls obscured most of his face, and Azareel saw that Avram sucked on a piece of hair while he dreamt.

Another cry of pain echoed through the village. Azareel knelt with his face to the ground and prayed.

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Later, as the gray light of dawn filtered into the room, he heard someone approach. His older sister, Nama, carried a bundle in her arms.

"You have a daughter."

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Azareel smiled. Although not the blessing a son was, he knew his wife would love a daughter. He looked at the baby in his sister's wiry arms. "She is a big girl, no?"

Nama nodded, her hazel eyes focused on the floor.

Azareel reached out and took hold of the infant. "Avram!" He called to his first born. "Come. See your new sister!"

His son scrambled to get up. "Where is Mama?"

"We will see her in a little while. Come. Look."

Seven-year-old Avram shuffled over and peeked at the red face sleeping in the blanket. "She looks funny." The boy yawned. "Can I see Mama now?"

"We will see her shortly, she needs—" Azareel halted when he looked at his sister. Nama stepped forward. She lifted her head. Tears fell from her eyes. Azareel's legs went numb. He thrust the baby back into his sister's arms. "Sarai?"

Nama shook her head. "I'm sorry, Brother. We did all we could. The child was just too big. There was too much blood."

Azareel reeled out of his sister's house. He stumbled as he ran the short distance to his own home. A blood-stained blanket smoldered in the fire outside. The acrid stench burned his nose. He stood in the doorway, his eyes struggling to see through the dim light inside. The midwife already keened softly as she prepared Sarai's body for burial.

"No!" Pushing the midwife aside, he fell at his wife's feet. He crawled to Sarai's head, then gently cradled her in his arms. He brushed her hair from her face. His fingertip traced her lips, now a light blue instead of the vibrant red he had kissed the night before. He clutched her to his chest and rocked. With his other hand he grabbed fistfuls of dirt, pouring them on his head. He tore at the neck of his woolen tunic, rending the garment down to his chest. His own keening began. Loud, guttural cries that came up from his soul. His mourning alerted the village. He heard them join in his sorrow.

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Azareel stood alone in the village center, staring up at the gray sky of twilight. Hills rose gently around the cluster of sun-dried brick houses. He watched the leaves turn up their undersides from the whisper of a cold breeze, heralding the coming of the autumn rains. The wind grew stronger. Rushing down from the forested mountains and whipping up the folds of his torn and dirty robes, it blew his salt and pepper hair about his face. He didn't notice Nama had joined him until she placed the baby in his arms.

“Our cousin, Neta, will nurse her for you. The babe can live with them if you like.”

Azareel looked at the sleeping infant. *Could he love this child who had taken his wife from him?* Maybe it would be best if it grew up in another's house. But the girl was also his last bond with Sarai. They had tried for so long to have another after Avram. For six years they had prayed and sacrificed. Sarai had bought herbs from the traveling merchants. They had all but given up when Sarai announced she was with child again. The whole village had celebrated. There hadn't been a new baby in more than a year.

The babe in his arms wriggled, squeaked and woke. Azareel looked down at his daughter and gasped. “Her eyes, Nama! Have you seen her eyes?”

Nama placed her hand on her niece's head. “We've asked the elders what it might mean. They do not know. We can only wait and see if they will change. They know it means something, but whether it bodes ill or not . . .” His sister shrugged.

Azareel stared into his daughter's golden eyes. They were the color of sunlight dancing on a dark mountain stream. He felt like he could swim in them, lose himself in their peace.

The baby squirmed again, surprising Azareel with her strength. She loosed an arm from her blanket and thrust it up toward her father. The hand brushed his beard and Azareel smiled. He took the tiny fingers in his and kissed them. The baby yawned.

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Azareel looked back at his sister. “Tell Neta I am grateful for her offer. The child will live with them until she is weaned.”

“Brother, think carefully. What can you teach a girl? She needs to be reared with other women.”

Azareel shook his head. “Our village is small. There will be other women to teach her. But I want her in my house as she grows.”

They stood quietly in the courtyard. Both watched the baby as she fussed a moment, then fell back to sleep. Azareel kissed his daughter’s forehead as he handed her back to Nama.

“Take her to Neta so she can be fed when she wakes.”

Nama nodded and walked away. She turned back. “What is the child’s name, Brother?”

Azareel thought for a moment. “Deborah. Because she has caused me pain, like the sting of the bee. But her eyes hold the promise of much sweetness, like honey. Her name is Deborah.”

On the Plains of Canaan

Spring, Several Months Later

Sisera's breath came in hot, heaving gasps. All around the young man, the sounds of battle rang; the clanging of swords, the thunder of horse's hooves. A soldier on the ground cried out in agony. Sisera stepped toward his fallen comrade. His sandaled foot lost traction on a blood-soaked stone and he crashed to the ground. His stomach lurched and heaved up bitter bile. *Please, El.* He prayed silently to his god. *Get me out of this torture!* He rolled onto his back, trying to find his courage as the battle around him quieted.

"To the King! To King Jabin!" A charioteer called as he rode by the fallen warriors of both sides.

Wiping acidic spittle from his mouth, Sisera struggled to his feet and searched through the thick smoke of battle to find the king's chariot. He stumbled forward with the other young foot soldiers, their bodies bloodied and bruised. He examined his own dark skin. Dirt clung to rivers of sweat on his arms and chest, but he saw no wounds. Ahead, the king's standard flapped in the wind. The more experienced soldiers already gathered around the iron chariot.

King Jabin shouted over the cries of the dying. "Victory is ours! Go now! Bring us the children to sacrifice to El in gratitude for our success. Take what women you want. This village is ours!"

A great roar rose from the Canaanite soldiers. Sisera watched, transfixed in mute revulsion, as mothers were dragged from their houses to be raped amid the horror of the battlefield. Other men hunted down children, binding their hands, and tying them together in a long chain. An older girl, perhaps twelve or thirteen, ran shrieking from one bald-headed soldier. She fell at Sisera's feet.

"Have mercy!" She clutched the short linen wrap that hung from his waist. Her brown eyes full of fear. "Please!"

The soldier strode like a bull toward them. His bald head and chest glistened with sweat. He grinned maliciously.

"I fancied this one, but by the look of it, boy, you've never been with a woman before. I'll show you how it's done, and then you can have a turn if you like."

Sisera shook his head. The girl clung to him, pleading incoherently.

"Suit yourself." The bull-man crudely wondered aloud about Sisera's ability to perform his duties as he wrenched the girl away. The young man had to grasp his clothing to keep her from pulling it off. The soldier dragged his prize by the hair before slapping her in the face and throwing her to the ground. Sisera turned away, not wanting to see more. He called out to an officer he knew.

"General Hagai!"

The general signaled for the driver of his chariot to stop. He looked around the carnage for the source of the voice.

Sisera waved his arm. "Over here, sir!" He jogged over to the officer.

"Sisera." The general took off his leather helmet and ran a hand through his graying hair. "You survived your first battle. This will be a day you'll never forget."

Sisera dipped his head and tried to smile. "Yes, sir. Have you seen my father?"

The general wiped the sweat from his brow. "He had the left flank. They attacked first. He is probably on the other side of the village."

"Thank you, sir. I'll look over there."

The older man grinned broadly and slapped Sisera on the shoulder. "Don't hurry, boy! Enjoy yourself as I am sure your father is!" The general pushed his helmet back on his head then signaled his driver to whip his horse forward.

Sisera backtracked over the field, ignoring the cries of pain and terror around him. He had been excited before the battle. His father had raised him on tales of war and life as a soldier. Sisera longed to make his father proud. But when the time came to draw swords and fight, it had taken every ounce of courage he'd had not to run. *Why are we killing these people? What have they done to me?*

His father spoke of honor and re-taking what was rightfully Canaanite territory. But the Israelites had owned it since before Sisera was born. He could not find it in his heart to murder people who had done him no personal wrong. He had not run from the battle, but he had not fought it either. He hoped his father could forgive him.

He spotted his father's chariot standing empty next to an Israelite hut. He recognized it by the beautiful, chestnut brown horses that pulled it. Perhaps General Hagai was right, and his father was expending his bloodlust with some Israelite woman. Sisera sat on the back of the chariot to wait.

His gaze roamed over the ground in front of him, trying to make sense of the remains of the battle. Ten or twenty Israelite men lay dead nearby, their throats slashed by swords or their bodies pierced by spears and arrows. Not as many Canaanite soldiers had fallen. The chariots were sent in the first wave of battle to strike terror into the enemy's heart. As they rode into a village, the riders easily cut down the enemy soldiers. The foot soldiers were sent in next, to clean up what was left.

A frightened squeal came from a nearby hut and another girl came running toward Sisera. Her torn woolen tunic flapped open as she ran, exposing her breasts, and the blood that ran down her legs. Sisera looked up, expecting to see his father chasing the young girl, but a different soldier stood laughing in the doorway. The girl tripped over a body, quickly regained her footing, and continued her escape.

"You, boy." The soldier walked toward Sisera. "What are you doing?"

"I'm waiting for my father. This is his chariot."

"Your father was Methael?"

Sisera's heart stopped beating for a moment. "You said 'was' Methael. What do you know?"

The soldier no longer smiled. "I am sorry. I saw him fall. An Israelite struck him with rock from a sling. Another took him down with a sword."

Anger coursed through Sisera's blood. "Where is he? Where did he fall?"

The soldier pointed across the field. "He's not far. I can see the bronze of his armor from here."

Sisera stood in the chariot. Now that the smoke had cleared and the sun shifted in the sky, he too, could see the glint of bronze from an officer's armor. Choking back his tears, he jumped from the chariot. He ran toward the body of his father.

It took less than a minute to reach him. A great gash marred his father's once perfect face. A gaping wound in his neck desecrated his corpse. Sisera let out a cry of rage as he lifted his father to his chest. He heard nothing now, save the sound of his blood rushing through his ears. A great roaring fury pulsed through his mind. He let out another anguished cry. An Israelite had stopped his father with a rock. Another had cut his body with a sword. Sisera wished the battle would begin again, for now the fight was personal. Now he was ready to kill.

PART ONE

The Call

1 The Hills of Ephraim

Spring-Nine Years Later

Bithia wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her arm. She sat cross-legged on the dirt floor. Her hands worked garlic and chickpeas into a thick paste.

“Deborah!” Bithia called. “For the last time, move away from the door. You are getting sand on the leeks.”

The little girl quickly scooted inside the one-room house. “Yes, Mother Bithia.” Sunlight played off her light brown curls, while dust and sand swirled on the breeze.

The older woman shook her head. A linen wrap held her straight black hair away from her face, but a few rogue strands broke loose and irritated her. Deborah watched her stepmother try to brush the hair away without getting the hummus she was making into her eyes.

Annoyed at her inability to move the hair, Bithia vented her anger on her husband’s daughter. “Why do you try and listen to the priest? You are nothing but a stupid girl. Women are supposed to learn how to run a household, not learn the ways of God.”

Deborah bowed her head and furiously chopped the vegetables on her board. She tried to keep her tears from falling onto the leeks.

Bithia’s calloused hands continued working the chickpeas and oil into a thick mush. “Answer me, Little Bee. Why do you try and hear what he’s saying? Do you think God would want a stupid girl to hear his teachings?”

Deborah’s lip quivered as she whispered, “I’m not stupid.”

“What did you say?”

Deborah lifted her head and stared at the older woman.

Bithia shivered. “Do not look at me like that.”

Deborah sighed and went back to chopping the leeks. “Why can’t I learn the ways of our Lord?”

“Because you are a girl. God does not speak to women.” Bithia scraped the mush off her fingers into the bowl. “It is our lot in life to serve our fathers and then our husbands. Nothing more.”

Deborah brought the chopped leeks over for Bithia to inspect. The woman nodded her approval at the size of the pieces and, with a shake of her head, directed Deborah to the pot in the center of the room where a simple broth simmered. The scent of garlic and cumin rose on its steam. The little girl added her leeks, then began dicing another. She worked quietly for a few minutes before speaking again.

“What about Sarah?”

Bithia sighed. “What are you asking now, Bee?”

“Father said that God’s angels spoke to Abraham’s wife, Sarah, and told her she would have a son.” Deborah smiled to herself. Her father had often told her that story before she went to sleep at night. He liked to remind her that her mother had been named for the much honored Sarah.

Bithia added some more spices to the hummus. “Do you think you are equal to our forefathers? Do you think you are as special as Sarah?”

Deborah almost cut her finger as she finished dicing the leek. “No. But God spoke to her and she was a woman.” Once this leek had passed inspection she slipped the pieces into the broth as well. She turned back to Bithia. “And Hagar—”

The older woman slapped her thighs. “Who?”

Deborah lowered her head. “Hagar . . . Sarah’s servant. God’s angel spoke to her in the wilderness.”

“Your father has filled your head with worthless stories, Bee. And now you pester me with your constant questions and chatter.”

Deborah tried to apologize, but Bithia shooed her off. “Go! Get out of here.” She pointed to a small pail in the corner of the hut. “Take some bread and cheese up to your brother and Palti. And in God’s mercy, don’t talk anymore to me today!”

Deborah quickly grabbed the pail, then ran outside. She dare not provoke Bithia anymore. She had felt the sting of her stepmother’s hand across her face before and did not desire that pain today. She slowed her step as she passed by the priest instructing a circle of young boys. Several times a year, a scribe or priest would pass through their small village. If the boys could be spared from the work in the fields, the priest was asked to instruct them in the traditions and history of the Hebrew God. The man would be fed and given a place to sleep in exchange for his teachings.

Deborah looked at the boys. Only two or three appeared interested in what the teacher was saying. The others, especially the younger boys, traced designs in the sand or stared ahead with vacant expressions. She longed to sit within the circle and learn more about their God. But Bithia was right. Girls were not permitted to be instructed. At least not in public with boys. Deborah hurried past the circle. Once she reached the edge of their little village, she ran up the hillside to find her brothers.

The bucket of bread and cheese clunked against her leg as she reached the top of the knoll. Avram liked to take the sheep to the east side of the hills so the rising sun could warm him. The same hills would then shield him from the heat of the afternoon.

It had been cool this morning and wisps of steam rose off the grass. Deborah imagined they were the smoke of incense burned at the Tabernacle as an offering to God. Moses and the Israelites had built the tent according to God’s instructions. “A map of heaven,” He had called it. She would like to see it, this tent, inspired by YHWH himself.

Deborah longed to know more of YHWH . . . El-Shadai, Raphah. Even his many names fascinated her. Her father recited the stories of their ancestors to her brothers and her every night

after dinner. But Deborah hungered for more. She wanted to see Him. Touch Him. Speak to Him. If only she'd been born a boy.

She made her way down one hill and up another, then scanned the landscape for her brothers and the sheep. The damp grass chilled her feet. She wished she could run home and warm them by the fire. But Bithia would not let her near until dinner. She would have to stay out with the boys. Deborah hoped Palti was not in the same mood as his mother. Her stepbrother liked to tease her and call her "wasp," saying that her voice was as painful as the sting of the insect. Her brother, Avram, used to protect. Now he spent most of his time in the fields mooning over Eglah, one of the girls from the village. Deborah sighed. She missed the way her brother used to be when he would play with her and teach her games.

She spotted the boys in the valley below and ran down to meet them. "Avram! Palti!"

Avram lifted his arm to wave to his sister. Palti turned and walked toward a small group of sheep.

Deborah put the pail she carried down at her brother's feet. "Bithia sent some bread and cheese for you."

Avram raised an eyebrow. "So early? Have you been annoying her already this morning?"

Deborah plopped herself onto the dewed grass. She pulled her knees to her chest and hid her face. "Everything I do annoys her."

Avram sat down beside his sister, gently laying his hand on her head. "She does not know what to make of you, little one. You are too smart for her."

Deborah peered up at her brother. His deep brown eyes looked kindly down at her. "That's not what she says. She says I am stupid."

Avram glanced over her head at their stepbrother. Palti stood too far away to hear Avram whisper, "You are not stupid. You frighten her because you are so smart. You don't behave like the daughters she's already raised."

"Who would want to act like them? Dumb old donkeys is what they are. Fat and ugly." They too, had tormented Deborah when they lived in her father's house. Always yelling. Teasing. Pulling her hair. Deborah was happy when Timnah and Marian had been married off to men in a neighboring village.

Avram shook his head and laughed. "There you go. You shouldn't speak like that of our sisters."

"They're not our sisters. Not really."

"They are Bithia's daughters. That makes them our family."

"They are not our father's blood." Deborah smiled mischievously. "If they were, they would have been smarter."

Avram touched his forehead to hers. "If they were our mother's daughters, they would have been pretty, like you."

Palti walked toward them. "What are you two conspiring?"

Avram tousled Deborah's golden brown curls. "Nothing, Brother. Are you hungry?"

Palti sat down by the pail and pulled out a hunk of bread. "I'm always hungry."

Deborah hazarded a glance at her stepbrother and wondered what he'd look like in a few years. Palti was thirteen and almost as tall Avram. His hair was straight and black like his mother's. His round face had lost some of its baby fat over the past months, but his tunic, which should hang loosely down to his feet, caught on his stomach, stretching the linen fabric taut. *Will his body lose some of its weight as well? Or will he always be plump?*

It was important for Deborah to know these things because she'd heard her father talking about giving her in marriage to Palti. Azareel didn't know she'd heard them when she was supposed to be sleeping. She knew that Father wanted to keep her close to him when she grew. If she married Palti, they could live in Father's house. She was only nine, but it wasn't too soon to ponder such things. Bithia's daughters had been married at twelve and fourteen. And Palti would be of marrying age at the same time she turned thirteen. She shivered at the thought.

Palti fixed her with a cold gaze. "What are you staring at, Wasp?" Bread crumbs spit from his mouth. Deborah looked away disgusted.

He picked up a pebble and threw it at her. "I asked you a question."

Avram stood. "Leave her alone."

Palti glared, but let the matter drop.

Avram reached a hand out to Deborah. "Come. You can help me tend the sheep."

Deborah jumped up willingly. She liked when her brother showed her things and allowed her to help him. Avram's hand felt strong. Deborah marveled at how her brother had grown. His body was lean and muscular, his hair dark, a mass of curls that touched his shoulders. The stubble of a beard shaded his jaw line and chin. Her heart grew heavy at the thought of her brother married with a family of his own.

Avram took a pouch from his waist and poured a sticky substance from it into his hand. It smelled faintly of rotten eggs. Next he poured some into Deborah's palms. He explained how sheep could be bothered by gnats and other small bugs that buzzed around their ears and eyes. He moved up behind a large ewe then gently placed his hands on its head.

"We rub the oil around their face to keep the gnats away. If we don't do this, the insects can drive the sheep into a frenzy. Palti often forgets or the sheep run from him because he's too noisy."

Deborah quietly walked behind a smaller animal.

Her brother's voice coaxed her. "Gently now. Come from behind the ears at first."

Despite her caution, the sheep scampered off.

"It takes a little practice. Try again."

Deborah picked the old speckled ewe. Moving slowly, she managed to rub the oil into the animal's wool. The sheep *baa'd* loudly when Deborah was done. "She's thanking me!"

"Yes. It is a great relief when we anoint their heads." Avram poured more of the oily sap into her hands and watched her try again. Because she was small and gentle, the sheep didn't fear her. Avram finally gave her the pouch and sent her among the flock on her own while he ate and rested by the mountain stream.

I am helping. I can do something good. Bithia often made her feel unimportant or, worse, like a burden. Deborah knew she wasn't skilled at sewing like so many women in the village. Her

hands were bigger than most girls, too awkward to hold a needle. She had too much energy to sit at the grinding stone and mill the barley into flour.

She followed two sheep up the side of a hill and used the last of the oil on their heads. She wiped the excess off on their wool then sat down on the grass. From up here, she could see the land stretched out for miles. Several other villages dotted the hills in the distance, along with the terraced fields of barley and wheat. Beyond the foothills, forested mountains reached toward heaven. The spring sky was pale blue. Small white clouds danced overhead. A crisp breeze carried the scent of the acacia tree blossoms.

Deborah shivered. The grass whispered as the gentle wind blew over it. Her skin tingled. The air seemed to vibrate around her. She thought she heard someone call her name.

Deborah.

When she looked down the hill, Palti and Avram still lay by the stream. She waited, but heard nothing more, only the bleating of the sheep and the soothing sound of the water running down the hill toward the valley.



That evening, Deborah ran alongside her brother as they made their way back to the village. Palti led the sheep while she and Avram followed behind, herding in any strays. It was too early in the year to leave the flock out in the fields at night. Cold spring rains could chill the shepherds so they sickened with fever. Or mud might rush down from the hills, causing the sheep to flee. Palti and Avram drove the flock to the pen beside the village with the other herds. Each family knew which sheep belonged to them just as they knew their own children.

“Deborah!”

The little girl froze at the sound of her name. Her father stood by the doorway to their home, a stern look on his face. She wondered what she could have done wrong for her father to look so angry.

She glanced up at Avram, but received no comfort from her brother before her father called again, “Come here!”

Deborah walked slowly with her chin down. When she reached the place where Azareel stood, she didn’t raise her head to meet his gaze. She felt his hand on her shoulder.

“Walk with me, little one.”

Deborah swallowed with difficulty as she followed her father outside the village and up a small hill. He sat under the shade of a sycamore tree. Deborah sat beside him, peeking up through the hair covering her face. Her father looked tired and worn.

Azareel let out a long sigh. “Ah, little one. I have failed you.”

Deborah shook her head. “Never, Father!”

Azareel brushed her hair away from her eyes with his calloused hand. He cupped her face with the other.

“Yes, I have. I have not raised you as a proper woman should be raised. It is causing much strife in my house.” He tilted her head slightly and kissed her forehead before releasing her. “It is time you learn how to run a household.”

“I try, Father. But I’m not good at such things.”

Her father’s voice was unyielding. “Then you will practice harder. You will learn.”

“But everything I do annoys Bithia.”

“No. It is that you question her about things she does not understand. No one taught her the stories of our God. That is what angers her. You must keep quiet and learn what she can teach you.”

“But—”

“I will hear no argument.” Azareel slapped his thigh. “You will obey me in this as you have in all things, Deborah. Bithia will need your help in the coming months and you need to learn from her.”

Her father wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “She is with child. It is not an easy thing, even in the best of times, to carry a babe. And Bithia is not a young woman.”

His eyes moistened with tears. He breathed deeply then smiled. “But it is a blessing from God. He will grant her strength.” Azareel looked toward his daughter. “And you will help her. You will go to the well and get the day’s water. Then sit and grind the barley. Whatever Bithia asks of you. And that means not speaking about God or asking her questions. Do you understand?”

Deborah couldn’t talk for the lump in her throat. *Not speak about God? Could she not even think about Him anymore?*

“Do you understand?”

Deborah whispered, “Yes.”

Azareel hugged her tightly. “I feel your sadness. Does it frighten you that you must grow up and become a woman?”

Deborah shook her head. “No.”

Her father stroked her hair. “Then what is it?”

She pulled away from his arms. “How will I be able to stop my thoughts, Father? I think about God all the time.”

Azareel’s eyes sparkled. “You must not stop thinking of the Lord. You may seek Him and His will in everything you do, everything you see. But keep the thoughts to yourself.” He tapped his finger gently on her head. “Talk to Him while you work and see if in the quiet, He does not answer you.”

“What if He doesn’t?”

Azareel pulled her to him again. “Then you will wait and ask me at night. I will still talk to you and teach you about God. But only if I hear that you are obeying Bithia during the day.”

Deborah shuddered with relief. “Thank you.” They sat upon the hillside, watching the sun set behind the forested mountains in the distance.

“Come. Let us see what Bithia has for our dinner tonight.”

Deborah held tightly to her father’s hand as they walked back toward the circle of two dozen mud brick homes that made up their village. Each hut was home to a family—grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren. As families grew too big for one house, a room might be added on for

a son and his bride. Deborah spied Avram and Palti walking to the house from the sheep pen. They made their way through the center of the village, stopping to talk to a group of men.

Father squeezed her hand. "Go. Help Bithia finish with the meal. Tell her I will be in shortly." He looked gravely down at her before setting off toward the other men. Deborah hesitated only a moment then hurried across to her home. She slowed herself at the doorway so as not to scare Bithia by barging into the hut.

A simple vegetable soup filled the home with warmth and a spicy aroma. Bithia knelt in front of the simmering pot. She looked up as Deborah stood in the doorway, her eyes narrowing. Deborah knew her stepmother questioned whether Azareel's scolding had had any effect on her.

"May I help you, Mother Bithia?"

Bithia's head tilted. "You may fetch the bread from the oven."

Deborah picked up a wooden board from one of the small niches in the wall and stepped outside. Her family shared the round brick oven with several other families, but each baker had her own mark. Deborah spotted the loaf with pinched edges that Bithia had made that morning. She slipped the wood board under the front of the loaf and gingerly pushed the rest onto the board. The round bread smelled yeasty and sweet. Her stepmother must have brushed the top with honey. Deborah brought it inside and placed it in the middle of the striped woolen blanket that lay on the floor.

"Father said to tell you he'll be in soon."

Bithia nodded. "Get some water from the cistern so that they can wash their hands."

Deborah filled a pitcher with water from the large container inside the home. Limestone gullies on the roof of the house caught the winter and spring rains, carrying them down into the large clay cistern inside the home. This water was used for cleansing their bodies and the household utensils. Water from the well outside the village was used for cooking. It remained sweet and clear, while the rainwater collected small pieces of dirt and debris on its journey to the house.

Deborah took the wine jug down from its shelf in the wall. "Would you like me to pour the wine?"

Bithia stirred the pot of soup. "You may set out the cups, but I will pour the wine when Azareel is home."

The little girl replaced the jug and set the clay cups on the blanket. She heard the raised voices of the men as they approached the hut.

"It is foolish to think of such a thing, Avram. Besides, you're not old enough to fight."

Azareel and Avram ducked their heads as they passed through the doorway. Palti followed a few steps behind.

"I am seventeen, Father." Deborah had never seen Avram so angry. "That should be old enough!"

"The age for the army is nineteen. You know that."

"But—"

"Enough!" Father waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Daughter, bring the water so we can wash before the meal."

Deborah dutifully poured water into the large bowl and set it on an empty shelf. Azareel dipped his hands, rubbed them, and then rinsed them in the bowl again. Deborah brought him a small towel. Her father dried his hands and returned it to her. She repeated the ritual for Avram, Palti, and Bithia before washing her own hands. She emptied the bowl of water outside the doorway then sat down with her family. Bithia scooped the soup into wooden bowls and passed them to the men. Azareel bowed his head and gave thanks for the meal. After the prayer, he took the bread. He ripped a large piece off, using it as a ladle for his soup.

They ate in silence until Palti finally spoke. "I don't understand, Father. Who are these people attacking us?"

"They are Canaanites. King Jabin and his army. It seems the young king is restless. His father rebuilt the city of Hazor and his palace there. Jabin needs to prove his own worth now."

Avram glared at his father. "By attacking us!"

"They are not attacking us, Avram. They are attacking our neighbors to the north. Those in Nephtali and Issachar."

"But they will come here soon enough, Father. If they are not stopped."

"They have been attacking the northern tribes for ten years, and are no close to driving them out." Father's voice rose. "Besides, how do you suppose we should fight them? These Canaanites with their chariots and spears?" Azareel roughly tore another piece of bread from the loaf. "Will you take your sling shot against the mighty wheels of a chariot? The Canaanite warriors will run you down and stab you through the heart."

Avram jabbed at the vegetables in his soup with a piece of bread. "To sit and do nothing cannot be the will of God."

Azareel slashed the air with his hand. "We have no leader. There is no one to unite the tribes, and Jabin and his army are too big to fight alone."

Avram's eyes smoldered. "There must be something we can do."

"Yes. We can pray." Azareel paused and looked toward Deborah. "We all can pray to our God that He will see fit to spare us this punishment."

Deborah felt empowered by her Father's inclusion into the conversation. "May I ask a question?"

Azareel's eyes darted quickly to Bithia, who scowled slightly. "One question."

"Why are we being punished?"

Avram picked up his cup of wine and stared into the red liquid. He took a large mouthful. "Our people have turned their back on the Lord and His laws. There are many who worship at the temples of Baal and Asherah, offering sacrifices of blood and their own bodies to these foreign gods. Our God will not be mocked. He will wipe out the evil that permeates His chosen people. We must pray that we can turn His wrath away." Azareel swallowed the rest of his wine. "No more talk tonight. I want to eat in peace."

Deborah lowered her head. *How could anyone worship another god? Could an idol carved by a man create anything on its own? No!* She would do what Father asked. She would pray for God's

mercy on her people. She would pray that her village, and all of Israel, would follow the Lord Almighty.