

LESS THAN A WIDOW

Full waterskins are really heavy. Ruth is glad the donkey will be carrying them. Tents are being packed up in the caravan's camp just outside the city gates as Naomi waves with one hand and keeps a firm hold on the donkey's rope with the other. He's not looking forward to this journey any more than the women are.

Ruth hesitates to rush Orpah's good-byes, but gently touches her arm. "We have to go."

Orpah's mother hugs her and won't let go until her sisters gently untangle their arms. Sabeen hangs a bag on Orpah's shoulder and gives her a gentle push. Orpah's face is streaming with tears as she catches up with Ruth.

"Fresh figs." Her attempt at a smile wavers as she pulls one out of the bag and hands it to Ruth. "Eat this. We can't start our journey on an empty stomach."

Ruth heads right for the donkey and adds the waterskins to his pack, careful to balance them evenly. Naomi talks quietly to Orpah, and Ruth hears only the last part.

"...stay here with your family."

"I can't...I love you."

"And I love you. That's why I want you to stay in Moab."

"But Killion..."

Naomi almost shouts as she interrupts Orpah. "Is dead! Both my sons and my husband are dead. We are nothing—women without power or protection—how can I love you and want that kind of a life for you?"

Naomi calms herself with a deep breath and touches Orpah's cheeks with her worn hand. "Look at me. I'm too old for any man to want me. I won't bear another son, and even if I did, you'd be too old for childbearing by the time he grew up. I have nothing to give you."

"But it wouldn't be right to leave you."

"Orpah, dear darling Orpah, you have a future here in Moab—your family is here. There is nothing for you in Bethlehem. Yahweh has emptied my life of all that is good. Stay here, marry again, have babies, be happy. Do this for me, because I love you."

Orpah looks back toward the city gates where her mother and sisters are still waving good-bye. The war inside between loyalty to Naomi and common sense are tearing her apart.

Ruth put her arms around Orpah and whispers in her ear. "Don't worry about Naomi. I'll look after her."

"No, Ruth! What's true for Orpah is true for you, too." Naomi's voice is hard and angry again.

"I'm sorry, Mother, but it's not. Orpah's home is here with her family, her people, her gods. My heart left Moab a long time ago, and now my body will follow it. Your people are my people; your God is my God. I swear in Yahweh's name that where you die, I will die, and that's where I will be buried."

The caravan leader bellows at the women, “You didn’t pay enough for us to wait for you!”

Ruth waves at him. “We’re coming!”

Naomi points to the crying women at the city gates. “Your mother and sisters are waiting for you, Orpah, my child.”

The three of us hug one last time, hating to say goodbye. Naomi pulls away first. “Go on, dear one. Be happy.”

Orpah takes the bag of figs from her shoulder and hangs it on Ruth’s. She kisses her on both cheeks, then kisses Naomi. Her first few steps toward her family are tentative, but soon she’s running, and they move to surround her.

Naomi grabs my arm—hard. “Ruth...”

“I can be just as stubborn as she is,” Ruth thinks and draws her thumb across her throat as if cutting it with a knife. “May Yahweh do this to me if I break my vow.”

Naomi tries to glare at Ruth, but relief shows in her eyes. The caravan starts to move. Ruth puts her arm around her mother-in-law’s shoulders, pulls on the donkey’s lead, and follows.

“Shall we go, Mother?”

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Ruth leads the donkey, and Naomi trudges alongside with her hand tangled in his stiff mane. Her body is there, but her mind is somewhere else. Most days she barely speaks.

The women’s usual spot is in the middle of the caravan—dusty, but safe. Well, safe from bandits anyway. The camel drovers are another story.

“Was that you in the boss’ tent last night or was that his camel?”

Ruth rolls her eyes. Scarface asks the same question every day, and for some strange reason his cohorts think it’s hilarious—every day. Of course, his name isn’t really Scarface, but giving them nicknames passes the time. Every day they trudge across the desert under a blazing sun. It’s brutal; it’s dangerous. But it’s the repetitiveness of step after step after step when all one wants to do is find a spot of shade and rest that wears one down.

“Maybe these filthy men are doing me a favor by annoying me all the time—it keeps me alert and moving,” Ruth’s mouth curves into a smile at this thought.

“The god of death walks in your shadow.” One-Eye steps closer and hisses at them.

Naomi waves her hand in One-Eye’s face as if brushing off a fly.

“Boss’ greed will bring the wrath of the gods on us all.” The man has been trying to get the other drovers to kill us or at least drive us away. According to the augury shown in the bones he tosses, bringing women on a trade caravan brings bad luck.