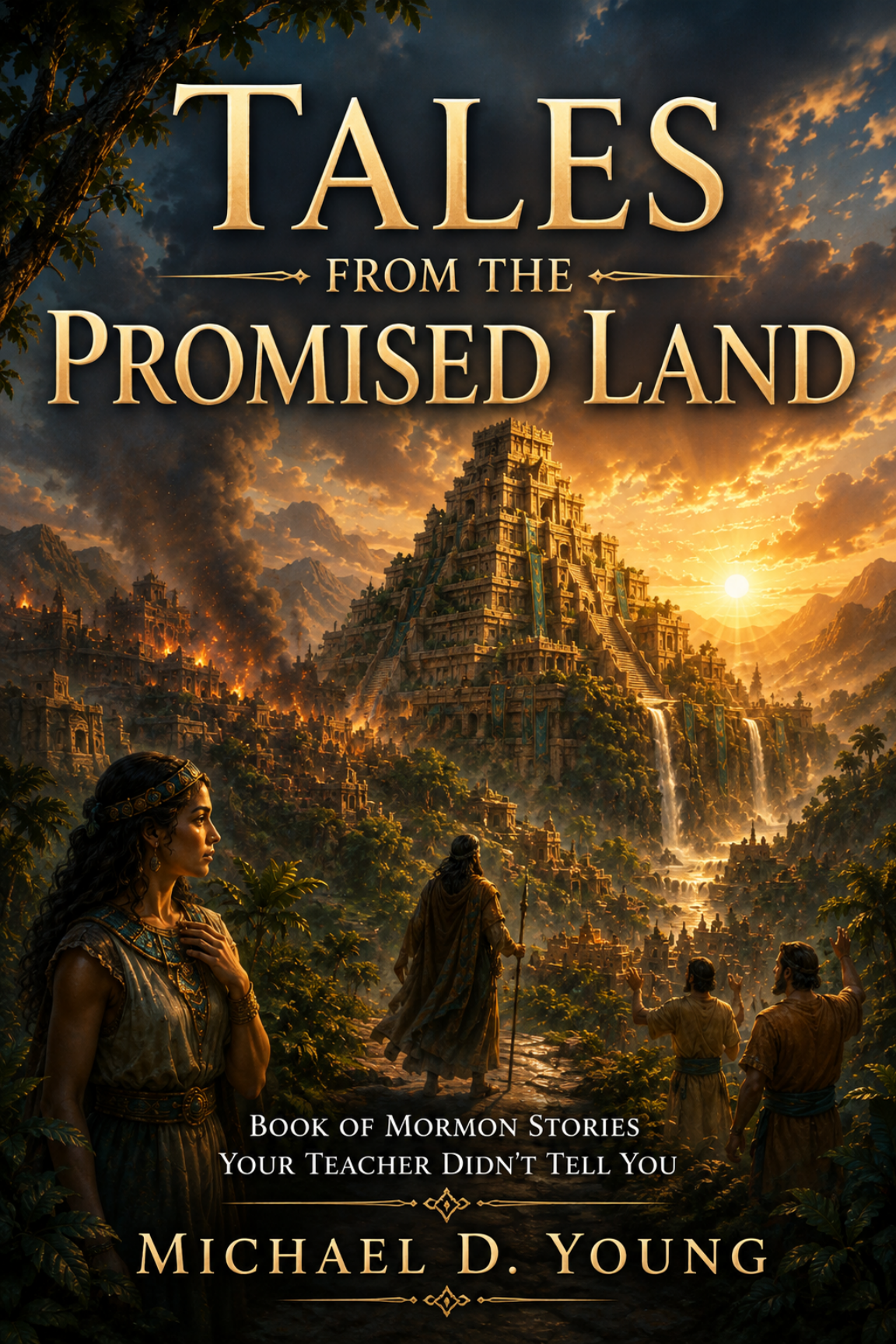
TALES
FROM THE
PROMISED LAND
Book of Mormon Stories
Your Teacher Didn't Tell You
Michael D. Young

A COMPLETE STORY FROM THE COLLECTION

ESTHER'S CHOICE

A promised land. A divided people. A legacy of faith, fear, and war.

This sample includes the complete opening story from Tales from the Promised Land.

Read on, then continue the journey with four more stories from the collection.

Michael D. Young

ESTHER'S CHOICE

Esther stared at herself in the water's reflection, combing her hair and having a heated debate. "Many of the other maidens go all the time, and no harm has ever befallen any one of them. Why should father be so worried?"

She stared at her reflection and imagined a more pragmatic side of herself responding. "You are not just any maiden. You are a member of the royal family, which makes you a target."

She crossed her arms at a reflection, who returned the gesture. "I can take take care of myself. If there's one thing being raised in a household of only brothers has taught me it is that."

Her reflection glared back at her and she imagined it

saying, “But what if a group of Nephite warriors stumbled on to your hiding place? Many of the other maidens are tenderer than you and you would have no chance against their ruthlessness. They are sons of a liar, remember?”

Keeping her eyes closed tight, she kept thinking that the voice in her head sounded more and more like her father. “No one has ever stumbled onto our hiding place. We are very well concealed, and the Nephites would not dare. They could start a war if they harmed any of us, much less a member of the royal family. Do you not remember the oath they have sworn with the king?”

“Yes,” she imagined the reflection saying. “We will leave them alone as long as they leave us alone. Remember, sons of a liar.”

Sighing, she ran the comb through her long dark hair a few times more and turned from her surly reflection. She turned from the pond, intent on getting under way right away before her father returned from his hunt. When she turned however, she noticed a string of warriors on mounts, headed her direction and recognized the tall cere-

monial headdress of her father.

Glancing about, she found a tall cluster of bushes in which she could conceal herself. She had already heard rehearsed the many reasons her father would use against letting her dance with the other maidens and did not care to hear them again. Besides, she had told him that she was going berry picking that morning to prepare for the King's feast and this was nowhere near where she should be. She chided herself on not being more careful. As she waited, another warrior from the opposite direction rode up and hailed her father.

"What news?" asked her father.

"There is not much to report. We believe our patrols have rounded up the rest the Nephites that fled Noah's kingdom. We confirmed that the old, bloating king is dead. Seems like they took care of him for us. Wasn't much left to them after they were done with them."

Her father grunted and continued. "And there have been no acts of hostility? It must remain vigilant. I imagine they only await the chance to provoke us. Their hubris is

matched only by their greed. We must not let our guard down, even for a moment."

"Agreed," said the warrior. "There have been no signs of aggression as of yet, but we will remain on alert. They will not catch us unawares."

The two warriors parted ways and Esther waited until she was sure that her father and his entourage were gone for continuing down the path of that deeper into the jungle.

After she was a good way down the trail she felt herself to relax. Next time, she told herself, she would bring a berry basket just in case.

She arrived a few minutes later at Shimla, (placeholder) a beautifully concealed clearing surrounding a pristine lagoon fed by a clear waterfall. Flowers blossomed everywhere and vivid fruit trees offered their wares on low hanging branches. Indeed it seemed the ideal paradise.

She looked around and counted the other women who had come. It was a bit of a smaller group today, only twenty-four, she noticed. Perhaps the some other over-protective fathers had kept them from coming. She would need

to be more careful about letting the word get out.

Each of the women wore flowing loose-fitting clothing with beads and gems attached on tassels. A few of the women who always attended possessed significant musical skill and brought their instruments with them. One woman carried drums, another the flute, and the last brought only her voice and a great capacity to remember the details of songs.

The song had not yet begun, and so she moved about the circle, greeting the other women with warm smiles. She went around, until she got to Orpha, who would had been her dear friend since their young childhood. "Hello, Orpha, I am surprised that you managed to come today. Who is watching your little son?"

Her friend was a head shorter then Esther, but made up for it with her vibrant personality. "My mother always complains about how she doesn't spend enough time with her grandchildren," she said. "I simply insisted that that I take her up on her offer this morning. Besides, the men are out on a scouting expedition. He won't mind."

The women gathered around at the insistence of their leader, already clamoring for various songs with which to begin their revels. See the thought for a minute and called, above the rest “never trust a Nephite!”

The others turned and many of them offered their approval. Orpha took her by the arm. “We haven’t done that one for a while. Good choice.”

Their leaders agreed and they formed up in a circle around her and the instrumentalists. She began the chant with her rhythmic voice that varied and loudness and intensity. The other women wove their bodies in sinuating motions, dancing along to the chant.

Never trust a Nephite, or even get to know him.

Or you might end up like great-grandfather Zoram.
Kidnapped from Jerusalem and led by pain of death

To roam the desert for many years and suffer every breath.
Thrown into a leaky ship and very nearly drowned.

And when they reached this land of ours, still his hands were bound.

By the Nephites crafty ways and by their subtle lies.

Though he presents a smiling face, it is only a disguise.

Esther whirled and whirled again in time with a lively tune, and felt her anxiety ebbing. These excursions could only do her good. What was the point of all her father's worrying?

The song leader moved on to another verse when she stopped short, her breath turning into a gasp. Esther stopped dancing and turned around, wondering what could be so shocking. Perhaps a jungle cat had wandered into the clearing?

As she turned around, she realized that it was something far worse. A group of fair skinned men had entered the clearing from all sides, forming a larger ring around their smaller one. Their robes had been fine once, with delicately knitted patterns, but were now caked with grime and torn.

The skin of their faces was cracked and smudged with the same liberal coating of grime. Their eyes look like they had not slept well in days. They encircled the maidens and

Esther caught the notice of one of them and the hunger that she saw there put any jungle cat to shame.

Laughing and crying out, the disheveled men rushed forward. One of the men, the largest of the bunch, snatched one of the women around the waist and threw her up onto his shoulders. Though she struggled, she could not free herself from his grip.

Esther set her sights on the closest attacker and wrinkled her nose at the foul odor the barbarians brought into the clearing. One of the men lunged for her and she lashed out with one foot, catching the man squarely in his abdomen. The man cried out and fell to his knees, clutching his torso.

She stood to retrieve a nearby rock with jagged edges and let it fly at the next closest man, catching him square in the shoulder. The two closest attackers incapacitated, Esther turned to one of the men who already held one of the other dancers captive. She ran with all her might and launched her body into his back. He fell hard, releasing his captive.

Esther brushed off her friend and helped her stand. "Esther," she cried. Run as fast as you can! Bring the Warriors. Bring my father."

"Enough," called a commanding, deep voice from across the clearing. Esther looked toward the sound and saw a tall man with long, dark, hair and piercing stare holding Orpha around the neck. One of his hands held a gleaming obsidian blade to her throat. "None of you will move," he explained. "Or I will slit her throat. Don't think I won't do it. When I was Noah's chief priest, I had my pick of the harlots. This woman means nothing to me."

A chill passed over Esther's body, and she let her hands fall to her side. If she tried anything, this terrible man would kill her friend before she could even get close. She held her hands in the air, her head bowed to signal surrender.

"Here's how this is going to play out," said the man with the knife. "All of you who are going to go quietly with us. Then, each one of my men can take your pick of the women, after I have chosen, of course." His eyes scanned

the clearing, falling on each of the women in turn and Esther felt herself going even colder. She could only imagine what sorts of things they had in mind for them, and none of them were good. She wished that she could shrink away, become invisible to this wicked man's piercing stare.

In the end, however, it found her anyway. "This one can clearly take care of herself," he said. "I will take her. She obviously has a strong spirit. I like that in a woman." The others, at his signal, begin their selection. Each of them bound the hands of each of the dancers and took them by the end of the rope. Only when the final man had made a selection did their leader lower his knife.

"Good. I've selected a site for this evening's activities, and you will come along without making trouble. At the sign of defiance, I will not hesitate to slay one of your number. There are a few extra, it appears."

Esther watched in growing disbelief as Orpha collapsed, holding her face and sobbing. The leader bound Esther's hands, his eyes never leaving her. "Yes, I think this will work nicely. Don't even think about trying to run.

I'll kill your little friend first."

So many bitter retorts jumped to her mind, but she pressed them all back, knowing that even they might get her dearest friend killed.

They wandered all day and into the night, farther and farther into the jungle. Many times they followed no trail, a task made even more difficult without hands. She did not clear away many of the branches in their path and so stumbled many times.

She only hoped that all the commotion might draw the attention of jungle predators, which would cause enough confusion for them to escape.

Through the speech of the other men, she found out that her captor was named Amulon, and truly was their leader. She had heard of the Nephites of King Noah and of her peoples' great victory over him. They had never found the king's ruling council, those he called his priests, and she realized that they were probably the same men who had taken them captive. It would explain the fine robes and soft hands.

At last, the marched into a clearing, not as picturesque as the one in which they had danced, but a lovely place nonetheless. A river ran through it, and on either side, rough wooden shelters have been constructed and pits made for fire. If this is where they had been living, it was a far cry from the splendor they must have enjoyed in the royal palace.

Good, she thought. Such base men do not deserve to live in luxury. My father and uncle will find out what has been done, and they will surely send armies to rescue us and destroy these men.

She brightened at the thought. It was it would sustain her, for a while at least.

As they entered the clearing, Amulon turned and spread his arms wide. “Welcome to your new home.”

Night fell, and the men gathered Esther and her sisters around a large bonfire. Amulon stressed repeatedly that if any tried to escape that he would kill another one of the women that remained. Esther beat herself up over and over, wondering how she could have been so foolish.

She had thought that the clearing's secret was safe and that they did not need guards to defend it. The worst part was she might never return to apologize to her father for her great folly.

When all of the former priests and Lamanite dancers gathered around the fire, Amulon then raised his hands for silence. "My brothers, though we have fallen far and fast, let this be a day of new beginnings. Let us forget foolish king Noah. From henceforth I will be king and we will prosper. To do that, we need to be able to raise our posterity. How good of the Lamanites to grant us this gift, the fairest of their young maidens for our wives."

Esther's stomach churned at the word. Was this man really serious? Her father and her uncle would see this as an act of war. Surely, this would violate the treaty.

"Each of you take your bride by the hand, " said Amulon. "By the power granted to me as high priest and king, I do declare you all the husbands and wives to toil and live together until the end of your days. Be fruitful and we will build our new kingdom, such a one that we will forget the

old."

Amulon stepped toward Esther and placed a hand on her neck and slid it slowly down to her shoulder. She cringed at the touch and its implications. Surely the Great Spirit would not recognize the assumed authority of this pretended priest. But, if she ran, she would be signing the execution order for one of her sisters, probably Orpha in her case. She stiffened, but did not make any attempt to pull away.

"Go now to your shelters" said Amulon. "Tomorrow we will begin our new lives, but now there is time for other pursuits."

The priests murmured their approval and each of them left the circle, making for their shelters with the woman they had selected. When they all had gone, only she Amulon stood by the fire and though she stood near the flames, a chill ran through her body, delving into the very bone.

"You are very fortunate, my dear," said Amulon in a low voice. "As my wife you will be the first among your sis-

ters. You will enjoy all the rights and privileges of a queen starting tonight." His hand slipped lower down her back. "But for now, we have another matter to attend to." He pushed her along gently. "Our new home awaits."

Feeling the life leave her, she bowed her head uttered another silent prayer to the Great Spirit.

Let me die. I would rather perish than follow this man to his home.

Morning came and she found to her dismay that she was still alive. This was not at all how she had imagined waking up on the first morning after her wedding. She turned and looked at Amulon sleeping next to her and came to a conclusion. She had to bury her feelings, lock them deep way. If she allowed herself to feel, it would only hurt too much.

Esther let all of her anger and pain filter away, replaced by numb nothingness. There might come a day when she would have an opportunity to escape with all of her sisters, but that day was not now she would never be able to say when it might come.

Resigned to her lot, Esther exited the hut and gathered sticks for the morning fire. The days passed slowly, days of hard labor, while the pretended priests lounged about and gave orders. She tried to avoid looking directly into the eyes of any of her sisters, for she could not bear the pain that she saw there.

Many moons passed and she threw herself into her labor, improving the living quarters and stockpiling food. She and her sisters even gathered to dance again once in a while, while the men watched and cheered loudly. They avoided all their song about the Nephites, though Esther wanted nothing more than to bellow them at the top of her voice.

A few of the women became pregnant and before long several young children had joined the settlement. Esther dreaded the prospect herself, having no desire to propagate the seed of a such a cruel and haughty man as her pretended husband.

This time drew on, Esther noticed an interesting trend. Some of her sisters grew closer and closer to the

pretended husbands, developing affectionate and caring relationships with them. In the end, only she and Orpha held back. Orpha had been the only one of her sisters who had a Lamanite husband back home, not to mention their young son. Esther often caught glimpses of her friend's silent tears in moments when the men were not around.

One morning, she awoke to shouts in the forest and rushed outside to see the entire clearing filled with Lamanites. She saw that they have already gathered up many of the Nephites and herded them into a circle. She ran forward to one of the Lamanites chieftains, who was brandishing an ax. "What are you doing with these Lamanites women, Nephites? They are slaves?"

The Chieftain raised his ax to the the neck of one of the Nephites. "No," said the Nephite. "They are our wives. We live here in peace. We mean no harm to any of you."

The Lamanite chieftain sneered. "Liar! You have stolen them away and corrupted them. You will pay dearly for what you have taken."

Just as the Chieftain drew back his ax, one of the La-

manite women jumped between him and her husband, wrapping her arms around him and using her body like a shield. "No," she cried.

The Chieftain moved his ax away at the last moment and the Lamanite woman turned to him. "What he is saying is true. They are our husbands, not our slave masters. I know this may be upsetting to you, but please, for our sake, spare them. My husband, Samuel, is good and kind to me. There's no need to hurt him."

The Chieftain withdrew his ax and averted his eyes, studying the huddled pair. At last, he nodded. "Very well. But you cannot remain here. The next traveling group of warriors may not be so merciful as I will be. You will accompany us back to the land of our fathers. These Nephites may live as long as they remain with you and treat you properly. Is that understood?"

They quickly gathered what few belongings they had and set out with Lamanite warriors. Amulon said nothing, but Esther could see the boiling wrath behind his eyes. She knew that if their situations were reversed, he would show

the same Lamanites no mercy.

He preferred to travel in the company of the Chieftain and spoke quietly to him throughout much of each day. Esther lagged behind, making sure that none of her sisters were to hurt or too exhausted to continue. They traveled for many days in the wilderness, and Esther recognized none of the path.

After a few weeks into their journey, she was sure that they were lost. What had first appeared to be their salvation had turned into a terrible string of events. At least back in the clearing they had had plenty to eat and drink it did not have to travel all day until their feet bled and cracked.

Everything changed, however, one morning when they came upon a beautiful, thriving settlement. They crested a hill and a village lay in the valley before them—sturdy buildings in neat rows and bountiful crops.

Esther looked around to determine what kind of people lived here, and it did not take long to figure out. They had stumbled into a Nephite settlement. A chill settled over her as she imagined what war-like companions might

do to these people. She had always talked about despising Nephites, but had never actually been the battle, seeing them hewn down by Lamanite warriors with their women and children.

Knowing that she had to do something, she ran to the front party with her husband, and walked alongside the Lamanite Chieftain. “Amulon,” she cried. “You cannot destroy these people. I see many women and children but no warriors. They are of your own kind.”

Amulon turned on her with a sneer. “Destroy them? That’s thinking like a Lamanite. I have no intention of destroying them. It appears fortune smiles upon us. I was a king in need of a kingdom. It seems that one has been provided.”

“You will still be subject to the king of the Lamanites,” said the Chieftain. “But, yes once we have questioned them for directions, we will leave you behind with your wives and a few of our soldiers. Shouldn’t take much to keep these peasants in line.”

Amulon turned to Esther with a grin, one that held

only wicked delight. “Prepare yourself. Tonight you will be present at my side at our coronation.”

Taking only a few minutes to regroup and give orders, the Lamanite Chieftain ordered his men to charge down the hill. The Nephites in the valley offered little resistance, and before nightfall the Lamanites had seized complete control of village.

The warriors rounded up many of the inhabitants and drove them toward a single gathering place in front of a large building decorated with fine metals and carvings. Amulon stepped out in front of the crowd, and Esther joined him. “Who is your leader?” he called out to the crowd.

After only a moment, a man stepped forward, a young and handsome Nephite would you did not seem at all put out by Amulon’s brash demeanor. “I might have guessed that it was you, Amulon. Though, I am surprised that you still draw breath. The Lord God showed me the dream the destruction of Noah and his kingdom. Truly, the words of the Abinadi were fulfilled in every respect.”

Amulon stepped forward and slapped the man across

the face and spit on him. “Alma” he said, his voice thick with disdain. “Now I see your true nature. The traitor that would be king. I thought you deluded by that pretended prophet Abinadi, but now I see you only wished to take Noah’s power all along. Do not concern yourself with that now. I am in charge here, and there will be no more talk of Abinadi or your Lord God.”

Alma remained unbowed, his gaze fixed on Amulon. “If I were you,” he said in a low voice, “I would fall to my knees and beg for deliverance. It is not I that is truly captive, but you. In the coming days, I will stand in chains, but your souls are encircled about by the everlasting chains of the devil. Though you slay me as you did Abinadi, I will not cease to call upon my God and he will save me.”

Esther watched stunned as the guards dragged Alma away. She had never heard someone speak like that before. Though Alma had spoken much more dramatically, Alma’s steady and sure words had impacted her far more deeply. She had only encountered this man briefly, but something told her that this was the actual kind of man that

she would be happy to have as a king.

Early the next morning, most of the Lamanites soldiers moved on, leaving behind only enough to keep watch over the captivity Nephites. Amulon wasted no time in making the Nephites his slaves, putting them to work growing food, building new buildings and adorning the buildings that were already there after the manner they had been accustomed to in Noah's kingdom.

Amulon made a palace of what had been their place of worship, creating a throne room with many seats for the other former priests of Noah. He set the guards as taskmasters over the Nephites, giving them authority to beat them if they did not obey.

Though Esther had the option of staying in a makeshift palace, she often wandered the settlement, observing what was being done. Day after day, she wondered if any of them would break Amulon's edict and cry out for help from their God. They never did, and despite the heavy burdens, which their taskmasters placed on them, she also never heard any of these Nephites complain.

Several moons passed and Esther took two wandering the settlement at night, when Amulon and his followers became even more unruly and brash, continuing Noah's tradition of taking freely from strong drink and showing little respect for the marital vows.

One night under full moon, she walked on the fringe of the settlement, expertly avoiding the sentries she knew were posted. She walked along the walls surrounding a group of fruit trees, when she heard a man crying out. The angry ranting of a Lamanites guards mingled with the other man's agony.

She ran toward the noise, her heart racing and a sheen of sweat breaking over her skin. She had no particular love for the Nephites, but what the guard was doing here was wrong. She might be able to help this unfortunate man, but should she? If she was found helping a Nephite might she or her other sisters suffer for it?"

"I've caught you Nephite. Confess! You were praying."

The Nephite was barely able to raise his voice in de-

fense. Esther knew that if she did not do something, she would witness a murder.

Somehow, she mustered the courage to jump out of the shadows and called in a loud voice. “Stop this at once!”

The Lamanites turned, his rod poised to strike. “Stay out of this, wench. Have you come to take pity on this Nephite?”

Esther stepped forward, narrowing her eyes. For once, she might be able to use her position of power for something good. “I’m no one’s wench. I am your queen. Stop beating this man or I will show you the forbidden knowledge I learned at the hands of the Jaguar warriors of my fathers tribe. You will not live to see another day.”

She intensified her gaze and the guard flinched, lowering his rod. “As you wish,” he said before turning and disappearing into the night.

She’s knelt by the fallen man and tried to ask the man his name, but he could only groan.

Using muscles that had grown strong through hard labor, she lifted the man until he could stand with help,

making for the Nephite dwellings.

She deposited him within the walls and made sure that someone noticed him by doing a loud imitation of the jungle bird. As soon as she saw someone leaving one of the huts, she faded back into the shadows.

The days passed and she tried to put the incident out of her mind. It seemed, however, that the harder she tried, the more the man's bruised face came into her consciousness.

She found herself taking her walks by the Nephite living quarters in hopes that she might catch a glimpse of him again to see that he was alright. She had stopped the beating, but his injuries had been severe, and he still might have succumbed to them.

A few weeks later, she was out at night and passed the Nephite living quarters, when a figure started toward her from one of the huts. She tensed, not knowing whether to expect an attack but relaxed again as the figure fell to its knees. "Thank you, my queen," said a man's voice. "You saved my life. You are gracious and kind."

She took the man's hand and lifted him to his feet. "There is no need to bow to me. Amulon is a pretender. He stole me and my sisters away and forced us to live with them. Everything he does he does through coercion." She stated the man for a few moments found that he was same man, with shoulder-length brown hair and a warm, kindly face. "What is your name?

The man bowed slightly. "I am Helam," replied the man. I was one of the first to listen to Alma, when he taught us about God. I had never heard such teachings before. They filled my soul with light, and after a while I could not stop listening to them. Noah and his priests taught many other things, but they never filled me with the same light that Alma's words did."

A pleasant, peaceful feeling filled Esther's mind and heart she found herself asking before she had much time to think about it. "Can you teach me his words? I've always believed in a Great Spirit. That is the tradition of our fathers. Is this God you speak of the Great Spirit?"

"He is," said Helam. "He created all things in heaven

and earth. We are his children and have been sent to earth to be proved. One day, our God will send His own Son to earth to pay for the sins of us all."

Helam looked from side to side. "Perhaps it is not wise to speak of these things in the open. Amulon has many spies, even some of the Nephite. I will tell you more, but we must do so in concealment."

Helam told her the meeting place on the edges of the settlement, a quiet copse of trees where they would not be overheard. They agreed to meet there the following night and then took leave of each other.

As they had agreed, Esther met with Helam the next night and then nearly every night thereafter. He started by relating the story of Abinadi, the messenger from God whom Noah and his priests had put to death for his words and then how Alma, one of the youngest priests had believed Abinadi's words and taught them in secret.

He then told her all of the things that Alma had taught them, including how he had invited them all to be baptized in the waters of Mormon. As she listened, she felt

that same peaceful, pleasant feeling, and found that she believed all the words that Helam was telling her.

On a night about a month later, she met Helam and found that his countenance had changed. His eyes appeared heavy with weariness, but his face held childlike excitement.

She ran up to him. "What is happened? Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Yes, Esther," said Helam. "We have gotten word from Alma in prison. He says the Lord has finally seen fit to deliver us from evil."

Esther shook her head. "How will you do this? You have no weapons, nothing to bargain with. You do not know Amulon as I do. He will never let you go. I do believe that he would rather kill you first."

Helam held up his hands. "He did not say how it would happen, only that we should be prepared to leave tomorrow night. We have been quietly collecting our provisions and making ourselves ready to travel. Beyond that, we must only have faith in God."

Esther's chest tightened. She wanted to believe, but she could not see how such a thing could ever happen. It was too difficult to believe something that she could not experience with her senses. "How can you be so sure this will happen? If you try to escape and fail, Amulon will kill many of you."

"We know that," said Helam. "God has delivered us before. We were in spiritual bondage under King Noah and most of us did not even know it. He softened Alma's heart, a man who was one of King Noah's own priests, and gave him power to free the rest of us. The rest of the priests wanted to kill Alma, but the Lord protected him and led us here. I do not know why we've had to be in bondage for such a long time, but I do know that Alma is a man of God."

He bowed his head for a moment, and when he raised it, he met Esther's eyes without blinking. "I want you to come with us. You are as much as safe here as we are. You can be with those also believe in God and free from these wicked men."

The tightness in Esther's chest grew more pronounced. "Amulon has decreed that if any of us Lamanites should try to escape he will kill one of the others. If I go with you, it will mean the death of one of my sisters." She desperately wanted to say yes, to seize this opportunity to leave once and for all, but did not know if she dared do it.

"Then bring your sisters with you," said Helam. "They are all welcome with us. Do not let these evil men control your lives. Isn't right."

Esther pictured the faces of her sisters, especially Orpha, when they had first been taken with Amulon's knife at her neck. She could not convince them to come with her. They would surely die, and Orpha's hopes of one day seeing her child and her real husband again would be forever dashed. The pressure is her chest grew crushing and she shook her head. She could not do it.

"I'm sorry, Helam. Thank you for everything you have done for me, but I cannot do it. I must say here, whatever the cost. I will not put my sisters' lives at risk." She turned to go but stopped for one last backwards glance. "I really

do hope that your God delivers you."

Helam nodded. "Not my God, our God."

Esther returned home and found the palace silent. Perhaps the priests had outdone themselves in drinking and had now passed out all over the floor.

She entered quietly, but saw no one. She took a few more steps, and, for the first time, noticed movement from the shadows. "How good of you to return," came Amulon's voice from the darkness. "Where is it you go?"

Esther froze. Had she been followed or seen? She had tried to be so careful, but she knew Amulon was a crafty one. Perhaps he already knew the answer. "I simply wander the settlement to clear my hand. Does this displease you?"

"No," he said. "But there is another matter that does."

In that moment she felt strong arms around her and a blade held at her throat. "Tell me, you little harlot. How long have you been conspiring with the Nephites against me?"

She drew a swift breath and felt the edge of the knife

against her skin. “I am not conspiring with anyone. Why would I put my sisters in danger?”

“You have already, foolish girl,” Amulon whispered in her ear. “You have been seeing meeting with Nephites, and I am especially concerned by your private rendezvous with a Nephite man. Tell me those meetings were innocent.”

She wanted to scream, to lash out and tell him that they were, but she knew that he would not believe her. “Yes, I was talking to Nephites, but only to learn more about them. I grew up thinking that they were all evil, but I have come to find that many of them are good and kind.”

“You lie,” said Amulon, with a growl, pressing the blade tighter against her skin. “I know they are planning something against me tomorrow night. Imagine their surprise when I execute their pretended prophet instead. Unless you would like to share his fate, you will tell me what they have planned.”

She did not know exactly what they had planned, but saw no harm in telling what she knew. “They believe that

our God will deliver them from you tomorrow."

Amulon lashed out, driving Esther to the floor. "Our god? Are you also one of the followers of Alma? How could you be drawn in by his lies? You answer only to me, not to some pretended god, whom no one has seen and no one will ever see!"

"No," said Esther, rising partially. "It is you who are a pretender." She felt all of her pent up rage boiling finally to surface. "You are not a real priest, you are not a real king, and most of all, you are not a real husband."

Amulon bellowed and kicked her hard in the side. "I would kill you now, if it would not bring me such satisfaction to seem you die next to your pretended prophet."

Esther rushed forward to grab the knife from him, but felt a duo of guards catch her by the arms and hold her fast.

[1]Within minutes, she found herself in the old granary, which had been repurposed to serve as the prison. The other Nephites had been forced to build walls within the building, which created individual cells. The guards had

hurled her in and pushed a heavy stone into place to block her exit.

Alone, bruised and bleeding, she finally unlocked the door that had held back the tears for so long. Her tears fell into the dust of the floor, creating a bitter sludge. The prison smelled of stale air and human waste, leaving her longing for even a single pure breath.

There in the musty dark, Esther's mind drifted back to the words Helam had told her, and why prayer was so important to them. She knew that it had been forbidden, but now that she was already going to die, she figured she might as well make the attempt.

Her hands trembling, she glanced toward the ceiling and opened her mouth. It took her several moments to find the words, but once she started, they flowed freely.

"Oh, Great Spirit, Lord God. Helam has told me that you deliver those who call on you and believe in you." She paused, fighting the lump in her throat. "I will die tomorrow if no one delivers me and I have no one else to turn to. Please, I want to see my home again. I cannot die without

telling my father how sorry I am."

She collapsed in a torrent of tears as she slipped away into a fitful sleep.

She awoke to the sound of grating stone. Rolling over, she then jumped to her feet and watched as someone pushed the stone away. Was it morning already? Had they already come to take her to her execution?

Instead of Amulon or one of his guards, however, Helam walked into her cell, his face beaming. "Esther, thank the Lord that you are safe. I feared that Amulon might have already done away with you." He jumped forward and wrapped his arms around her. They embraced only quickly before Esther pulled away."What about the guards? Did you distract them?"

Helam shook his head, his smile larger than ever. "No, Esther. I didn't do anything. It is the deliverance of God. Come, I will show you."

Helam led her out of the cell where two guards lay on the floor. Esther gasped. "Are they dead?"

"No," assured Helam. "But a deep sleep has come

upon them. We must go before they awaken."

He tugged on her arm to go, but she resisted. "What about my sisters? We cannot leave them behind?"

Helam's smile finally faded. "They have all fallen asleep. I am sorry."

She felt the tears returning as she thought leaving them, especially Orpha. Amulon was bound to be furious when he woke up, but then again, she could not stay here any longer. It would mean certain death.

"The Lord will take care of your sisters," said Helam. "He has saved all of us, and we would be ungrateful not to take the chance to flee. We do not know how long we have."

Esther ran out of the makeshift prison, tearing her way through the settlement, traveling a path she had dozens of times. She might not be able to save all of her sisters, but she could save one.

Barely slowing, she burst into Orpha's quarters and found her friend snoring, slumped onto the ground in an awkward position. The man who had claimed her was

nowhere in sight. Esther bent low and hoisted the much smaller woman onto her back.

Helam met her outside and helped support the sleeping woman who still made no indication of waking. "You are serious about this, aren't you?"

"I will take her all the way to the great waters if I have to. She has a real husband and a little boy."

"Very well," said Helam. "Then we will carry her together. God made the other burdens the Lamanites put on us seem light. He will lighten this one too."

They met up with the other Nephites and traveled hard all through the night with Alma at their head, leading the way. Esther and Helam took turns carrying Orpha with the help of the other Nephites.

"How does he know where to go?" asked Esther. "Where is he leading us?"

"Perhaps back to Zarahemla, perhaps somewhere else. The important thing is that the Lord is leading him."

When they could go no further, they pitched their tents in a valley, and just as Esther set Orpha in her tent,

her friend's eyes fluttered open. "Esther?" she asked, blinking sleep from her eyes. "Where are we?"

Esther collapsed next to her friend and related all that had befallen them. When she had finished, Orpha threw her arms around Esther and did not let her go for a long time. Outside, she could hear the shouts of joy, as the Nephites raised their voices, praising God for what he had done for them.

After they had each had a few hours of sleep, Helam burst into the tent. "We need to move. The Lord has warned Alma that Amulon and the other Lamanites have awoken and are pursuing us. God will stop them in this valley, but we must be far away from here when He does."

They traveled hard for the next twelve days until the walls of the great city of Zerahemla came into view. While they were still afar off, the city gates flung open, and a group of mounted warriors rode out to meet them, greeting them with raised voices and friendly hands.

Helam hung back with Esther who turned away from the city. "How can I enter the city? I am a Lamanite. They

will never accept me."

With his signature smile, Helam placed a hand on her shoulder. "We may look different, but you are still one of us. The people of God have no race."

"But you are forgetting something," said Esther. "I am not one of the people of God. Not yet."

Helam raised his eyebrows. "Would you like to be?"

Esther's lips raised to match Helam's smile. "Only if you will baptize me."

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