

The Bethlehem Sword

Micah is a metal worker in Bethlehem. He took over the workshop and business some ten years after Herod's cruel and jealous massacre of young children in the town

It amazes me still how it is possible to live and work close with someone and yet not really know them. It is nearly ten years now since I came to Bethlehem and took over the forge. Chelal had been here long before me, learning the work alongside his father. We had laboured shoulder to shoulder at times, our sweat mingling as it hissed into the red hot metal, and yet I hardly knew him. There's many a time I tried to get him to talk, but his meagre conversation consisted of grunts more than words. The only times he really spoke much was when callers talked in guarded whispers about the occupation; then he would curse every Roman, right down from the Emperor to the meanest legionary.

In those moments, briefly animated, he changed. His lip curled and you could see hatred in his eyes. There was bitterness in every line of his face. Thinking back, it seemed as though an unseen hand was cruelly squeezing his life. He was never offensive though, and whilst I warned him how dangerous it was to speak like that in the workshop, I never made a fuss about it. He was too good a craftsman to lose.

He was a good worker; brilliant at putting an edge on an adze or chisel and meticulous in beating copper. People have been known to come out from the city to buy his work, especially at festival times. I still get callers asking for his bronzes. Chelal was respectful to customers, but none of them could get much more than a responsive 'shalom' from him. He always left the sales and the haggling to me, especially if the offer was from any Roman official, or religious for that matter.

It was only a couple of years ago I learned why that was. Enoch told me. *His boy was one of Herod's children*, he said. I hadn't a clue what he meant until he told me about the night fifteen years ago when Herod's soldiers came to the town and slaughtered a dozen infants and a couple of mothers who resisted them. I asked him why, but all he said was, *Nobody asks why Rome does anything!*

It was easy for Chelal to keep himself to himself. Out here on the edge of town we are fairly quiet apart from customers and passing travellers. He rarely left the place. He would work all hours. Miriam would provide his meals, but he never ate with us. He preferred to keep to his own place. He had the old stable room, up at the end of the workshop there. It only had room for a bed and a box for his belongings. He spent most of spare time there, that was when he wasn't walking the hills. I came to rely on him always being around.

So, I was surprised when one morning he had not roused himself and got the furnace lit. I went to look for him. I had always respected his privacy, and had only been in his place a few times. He had always rejected Miriam's offers to wash and clean for him. However, this was different. Hearing him groan, I pulled the door open. Inside, the little space which was home to him, was tidy. I should have expected it from such a careful craftsman. Chelal lay on his mattress, staring at nothing.

His words came slowly, but they were clear enough for me to hear.

It's a stroke or something. I can't move my arms or legs.

I'll get help. I said.

No! No-one can help me like this.

I sensed that whatever it was had been gripping and strangling him was about to do its worst. He shivered.

You're cold. Let me put another blanket on you.

I reached out for another cover I had seen on the box beside his bed.

No. His spoke strongly, but with effort. Ignoring him, I pulled at the extra cover. As I did, the dim light from the workshop caught the brightness of steel. I laid the cover over him, then picked up the gleaming two-edged Roman sword.

What's this? This was never crafted in our workshop! Where did you get it?

It was then that, slowly he told me the story, as though it all had to be said and explained ... before he left ... It took all morning and I never opened the workshop that day.

It IS a Roman sword, he said. I took it from a legionary, that night. The night of Herod's children? I prompted him. *Did you kill?* That would explain much of his withdrawnness.

No. But I should have! Even lying there paralysed, there was a cruel bitterness in the words which made me shiver, as you do when you bite into unripe grapes.

He continued, struggling for words. *The legionary was hiding here, behind the workshop. His horse gave him away. I didn't know what was happening in the town then. I grabbed an iron from the fire and struck this sword from his hand. He fell. I stood over him. He was pleading for his life. He told me he was waiting for the rest of his company. He kept saying he wasn't going to kill children. I did not know what he meant then. He argued with me that if I killed him, Herod would send an army to destroy the whole town. I thought of my wife and child, and I let him go. But I'll keep your sword, I said. In case you change your mind.*

Chelal paused for a long time, then said. *I should have killed him. But someone else must have done because he never came back. While I was sparing his life, his mates were murdering my wife and my boy. Why? What was it all about?* I asked him.

No-one seemed to know. We just assumed it was one of Herod's flashes of madness. There was talk about a group of strangers who had been in town a few days before and people wondered if they had upset him. I think I know what it was all about though. I'm sure I do.

Chelal was weakening now and I had to wait a while to hear the rest of his story. I sat him up and offered him water. He took a few sips, then pushed the cup away. Eventually he went on, mouthing his words as though desperate to tell the whole story. *I met up with a shepherd I knew from way back, Sered. He told me an amazing story about seeing angels on the hills and the birth of a baby here. He believed it was the Messiah. He was born the same day as my son.*

He went on to say how other shepherds had confirmed what he had said, but not many people believed him. A shepherd's word doesn't count for much. However, Sered had kept in touch with the child's parents, and discovered that they had fled east at the same time as the strangers had left town. *Sered believed Herod was after the child and killed them all to be safe. Chelal lifted his head. And I believe him.*

That's fifteen years ago. The boy will be coming to manhood now, and getting ready. The Messiah and the new Kingdom will be here soon. Then he'll sort out Herod's son and his kind. He'll even overthrow the Emperor! I kept the sword for that day! I wanted to stand with him.

I looked closely. Chelal was staring hard and everything about his eyes shouted 'revenge!' His twisted mouth spoke hatred. I could not let him die like that.

Perhaps the Messiah will not be a man of the sword, I countered. Chelal's face contorted, but I went on.

Swords mean more swords, and sharper ones. There's never an end to fighting. I hope the Messiah is coming and I hope he'll find another way. Look what the sword has done for you! It's twisted and destroyed your life. It's sapped the love and goodness out of you like a fearsome leech.

I stopped as I watched a tear form below his eye. Chelal breathed out. A long slow breath. He was gone.

The workshop stayed closed all that day. Early next morning, before the world came to life, I lit the forge, and pumped the bellows till the fire became red hot. I plunged that sword deep into the heat, and when it glowed, I hammered, and hammered till I ached, beating all the pain from its deadly blade.