

Betta's Song by Marcy Weydemuller

Screams pierced Narah's dreams. She sat up, startled, not sure where she was. Thunder shook the ground. Dust and smoke filled the air. Fire. A fire in the village. Narah ran through the stream, heedless of the rocks cutting into her feet.

"Betta, Betta," she sobbed.

She scrambled up the steep bank, and ducked instinctively as a huge, black horse reared, narrowly missing Narah's head. Horses? Narah cowered in the grass. Through the smoke she could barely make out figures. Soldiers and horses were dragging women and children into carts, then setting the huts on fire. Narah choked. "Grandmother!"

Narah crawled toward their hut. More horses galloped to the channel's edge, reared and turned back. Narah flattened herself against the bank, sobbing. Two people struggled above her. Narah gasped. Iscah was desperately clinging to a large water basket. The soldier wrenched it from her grasp and flung it into the stream. Iscah let out a piercing wail and collapsed into a heap. Narah slid down the bank toward the water. The basket had lodged between two boulders and was rocking back and forth. Jael. Jael must be hidden inside. Trembling, Narah looked up. Black smoke billowed over the bank. She dashed into the water, grabbed off the lid. Jael crouched inside choking on sobs. Narah pulled her out and kicked the basket loose to drift.

"Come, Jael, come."

Narah hugged Jael tight and ran as fast as she could back down the channel around the bend. She stopped at the cave to push Jael in.

"Go, Jael, go the back."

Jael whimpered and clung to Narah. Narah took deep, gasping breaths. "Narah is coming too." Narah crawled into the narrow opening. Jael buried her face in Narah's lap. "Big sister," she cried, and then sobbed silently.

Narah stiffened at the sound of splashing in the water. She edged backwards and lay on her stomach, eyes hidden behind the grass window. Narah froze. Their footprints were scattered all over the damp bank. A large, burly man rushed from the bend. Balak. Narah shook as Jael continued to cling, whimpering. Balak stopped for a moment and tilted his head as if listening. Then he strode upstream.

Narah reached for a branch. Leaning forward as far as possible, she brushed their footprints, smearing them. She couldn't reach the ones near the water. The ground shook again. The horses were in the stream. Narah pulled Jael to the back of the cave. The thunder grew closer. Eyes fixed on the grass curtain, Narah rocked herself and Jael back and forth.