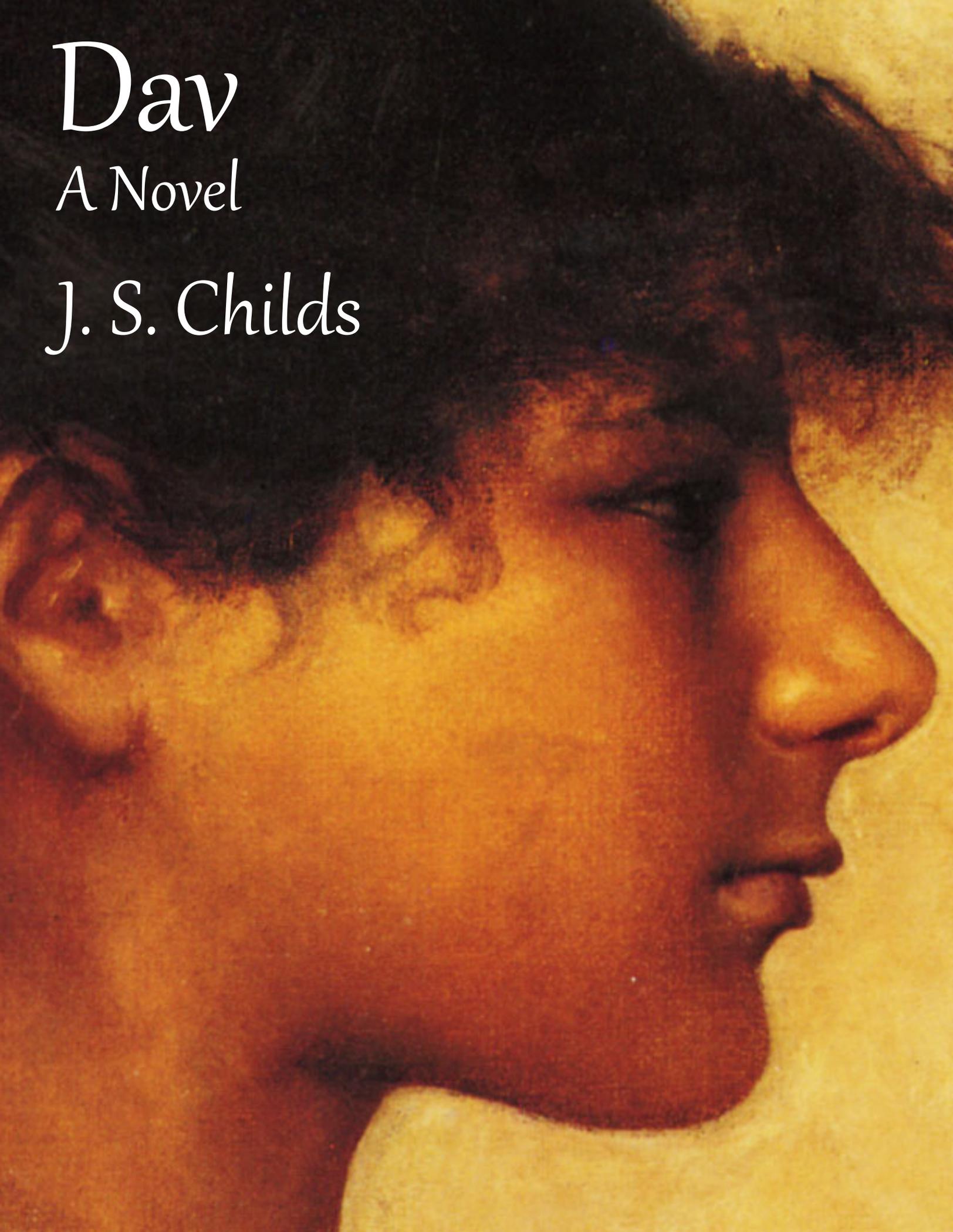


Day

A Novel

J. S. Childs



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by J. S. Childs

Chapter One

Animals were barred from the city, and so they were tethered, penned, caged by the gates in a noisy mass—spitting camels by whining leopards, great baskets of crazed partridges and doves, even crocodiles, their hides cracking in the dry air of the Judaeen hills.

Meanwhile, new delegations, which meant more animals, wound upward from the plain, strung out for miles along the broad, hard road leading to Jerusalem. Since everything was a family matter back then, the tribal headmen and the foreign ambassadors brought along anybody who could still walk, kids and wives and brothers-in-law.

At first, people were interesting to me insofar as they were owners of the animals. That's why the really backward tribes—*Ishmaelites* and *Amalekites*—had a lot of appeal. Since they remained ignorant nomads, anywhere one of them went, they all went, including livestock. Frankly, we city-dwellers were ambivalent about them; in many ways, they embodied living tradition; in a lot more ways, they were hicks. Still, you could easily imagine that some sunburned sheik and his heavily swathed wives from out back of Megiddo (seven hundred sheep in tow) probably looked a lot like Eron, or even Moisha.

My friend *Ira* came from that sort of background—dirt-poor shepherds tracking our country's always-receding pasturage. *Ira* was one of *Dav's* veterans, having survived the combats, conflicts, rebellions, and exile that were pretty much the story of *Dav's* young manhood. Early on, some Philistine had levelled out *Ira's* head with an entrenching tool; before that, he'd had another name, another life, a mother and father. None of that interested me.

As far as I was concerned, *Ira* was a source, the first of many. Standing on the wall before sunrise, waiting for the sudden Israeli dawn to turn the indigo streak on the hillside into individual people, *Ira* would tell me stories. Like everyone I knew—with the notable exception of my father and *Dav*—he lacked historical perspective. As far as *Ira* was concerned, *Yoshua* and *Reuven* were near-contemporaries. It was up to me to separate what the old veteran had actually witnessed and what he'd heard around some battlefield campfire—stories of abductions, betrayals, wanderings. The legends of the People.

I was one of those children without a childhood No, that sounds too harsh, as though my kind, intelligent father had forced me to grow up too soon. But in fact there was no reason for me to grow up at all; as a child of privilege, I could have remained a girl all my life—

through marriage, motherhood, and senility. What happened to me was that I grew less interested in the animals, and instead I wanted to know about what adults did, to understand them. What fascinated me most, I suppose, were their mysterious adult activities—herding and farming, war and politics.

A capital city, of course, is an excellent place to learn about these things. Had my mother lived, perhaps my life would have been different, but as it was I roamed everywhere at any hour—I don't like to sleep. No civilians, certainly no other children, walked the battlements of Jerusalem, especially before dawn as the tired nightshift guard stood around the brazier warming themselves, coughing and spitting.

So Ira was my best and earliest source. Like nearly all illiterate and innocent storytellers, his style was baroque. Simple narratives are the result of sophisticated training. Dav, on the other hand, couldn't tell stories at all. He was a poet, a professor of moods. He was very good at describing how he *felt* facing Goliath, what the sky looked like, his odd conversations with Jahveh, but piecing together the actual story—that was something I had to do over time, day after day, night after night.

All in all, describing my People's early history was easier than narrating these current—or at least recent—events. Those antique characters—Jahveh and Adam, Avram and Yakob—they were all firmly under my control; they did and said what I wanted them to do and say. Ira was more my master there than anyone else; I learned from him to have no fear of repetition, of doubling back, listing the lineages whose begat-and-begat comprised their own packed drama for the hill tribes listening in the late, cold desert camps.

But, as I say, for Dav I needed something else. Telling his story hasn't come easily. Both finding a way to write it and figuring out what happened have been hard. My father pointed out that their own history is the immemorial nemesis of historians.

"I can understand your frustration, Yasmin," he would say in his compassionate, measured, professorial manner, "Grasping your own time isn't easy. Maybe it's impossible. Maybe what we actually live through isn't even history."

"Most of Dav's life happened before I was born. He's an old man."

"Not so old," he said carefully. "Anyway, I wonder if your problem isn't jealousy."

"What's there to be jealous about?" I asked angrily.

"You could be jealous of Dav's youth—that you weren't around for it. That's another occupational hazard of historians—longing for some past you can't have."

My father died three years ago, and now I try to remember important parts of our conversations. I feel like a general in the middle of a crucial battle, who realizes he's crumpled and discarded his most important communiques, and now he's left fighting an enemy about which he knows nothing. I know now, too late, my father was sending me messages for my own middle and old age. I try to call them up, to reconstruct them, like the general unwrapping the communique, smoothing it out in yellow candlelight.

We had another conversation a few weeks before he died. I'd gone looking for him and found him on the roof our house. He was singing, his old voice faint in the wind. Winter had begun and watery sunlight fell on the tops of Jerusalem's bedraggled palms.

"Dav's songs," he said, "it's no wonder they're popular. The melodies – I can't quite put my finger on it – they're dissonant and soothing at the same time."

"Mostly people respond to that persona of his – the sorrowful loner with Jahveh's ear. . . and the rhythm. Unjustified hope followed by despair followed by more unjustified hope."

"You're probably right. Dav's a romantic, and holy romance never loses its appeal."

"Maybe."

"You needn't act so removed, Yasmin. That side of Dav is what draws you to him. In my opinion, his warrior-poet guise blinds you to the other things he was."

"I think I have a pretty balanced view of him," I said indignantly.

Once again, as he did so often at the end of his life, he studied me as though he were seeking confirmation of . . . What? Pride? Love? Or perhaps his suspicions. Then he surprised me by revealing the widower's classic doubt:

"If your mother had lived, you might have been happier."

"Do you mean *I* would have been happier or *you* would have been happier?"

"When you were a child, I saw in you parts of myself. The stories people told to other children only made you impatient." He paused.

"Do you remember Harsa?"

"The woman at Dav's court – the one in charge of us when we were little."

"She was a great storyteller. You children would gather around her in the courtyard at evening – every night a different story."

"I'm indebted to her. She knew the entire cycle – all the old epics."

"You had favorites, ones you listened to over and over."

"She never varied them – a great virtue in a source."

"She *was* a source for you, I think. A beginning." He gazed out over the rooftops of the royal city, toward the taupe autumn hills. "But there came a time when you grew impatient with her stories, her version of the Beginning."

"Genesis."

"A title too learned for old Harsa – for her they were simply explanations of how things began. She accepted them uncritically.

"You were ten or eleven when you started asking questions: 'Why did Jahveh rest? Does that mean God sleeps? How could Adam and Hevah understand each other? If we all come from the same two parents, how come we don't look alike?

"But those were the early questions. Later you came up with more uncomfortable ones. 'Why does Jahveh prefer cheats like Yakob? Was Yusef basically conceited, or did he just act that way because he didn't know any better?'

"I thought she might know the answers."

"She'd never even dreamt of the questions. You were very upsetting to her, Mina.

"Finally one day she came to me deeply disturbed. 'Your daughter's blood is soured,' she said. 'Her brain is curdling.'

"She seems all right to me," I said.

"She's not all right. She's a pervert," she whispered gravely. She repeated the questions you'd been asking her.

"Those are good questions,' I said when she finished. 'I'm afraid Mina's problem isn't her questions.'

"Oh yes?' said Harsa skeptically. 'Then maybe you could tell me what *is* her problem.'

"Her problem's going to be finding answers. As far as I can see, there aren't any.'"

"I suppose I've always been literal-minded," I said to him.

The sky had clouded over. I looked at my father's face, and my body drew in, as though someone had pressed a knife point to my side. And I knew his death was already in motion, closer than the peeling hide of the hills on the horizon.

After my father died, I grieved for my mother, whom I'd never known. And I grieved for myself because I was an orphan—even though I was a little fascinated by this new role: Several times every day, and especially on the day of my father's modest state funeral, I said to myself, "Yasmin is an orphan, poor thing—she has no parents."

But for my father, I couldn't mourn. Perhaps his loss was too profound. Now, as a middle-aged woman, I feel considerably more grief over his death than I did as a fifteen year old. Maybe my feelings for him have dwindled through the years, making it easier for me to grieve for him.

In dreams I had then I stood in our silent courtyard and listened. The air was cool and still, but warmth rose from the paving stones, like an oven opening in a cold early morning bakery. I was listening, I think, for God. There were times I thought I could hear Her, but what I at first took to be Her voice turned out to be quiet, ordinary noises—birds splashed in the courtyard fountain, a clay platter clacked against a wooden table. I thought that perhaps these were the forms God's voice took.

I repeatedly dreamed this uneventful dream, and each time a new sound was added—the call of a child or a ringing bell—but it remained only that, a sound without a message.

Then one night a woman appeared beside me as I sat on the edge of the fountain. She removed her cloak, which was dusty, as though she'd walked a long way. She sat down on the edge of the fountain. She smiled. I smiled back.

Although at first I tried to think of something to say, little by little I came to understand that there was nothing to say, nothing to ask. To an extent, I felt peaceful. It occurred to me that the woman traveller was either my mother or God. Or perhaps God who had decided to adopt the form of my mother. Like a mother, she began to arrange my hair, brushing it back from my forehead. After she'd moved my hair around for a while, she spoke.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked.

"I was wondering what I'm going to do now that I'm an orphan."

"An orphan is simply what you are—it's not something you do."

"But who's going to take care of me?"

"I don't think that's going to be a problem. Like everybody else, you'll have to take care of yourself."

"I'd rather not . . . I wish I had my father back."

"I'm going to give you something—it's not anything that will replace your father—but, on the other hand, the gift goes a little way to balance out your losses."

She took my right hand in hers, and when she removed it, a small wafer lay glittering on my palm. An intricate raised pattern was traced on its dark surface, and as I studied it more closely, I saw that the tiny object must have been made by some infinitely patient craftsman—The pattern was made up of a dozen fine wires carefully wound in a design as involved and as meaningless as birdsong.

“Close your hand and close your eyes,” she said.

Prophecy is a confusing gift, like most things God gives you free of charge. And visions by their nature are murky. Although many people who have them—largely men—are confident they know the meaning of what they've seen, others of us—mostly women—aren't so sure. Prophetic visions are the worst: Since the divine glimpse lies in future history—which is to say, within a life you know nothing about—you simply don't understand a lot of what you see.

So I closed my hand and my eyes and I saw.

A woman not much older than I was working in a large chamber, perhaps a granary, although what she was doing had nothing to do with agriculture. The chamber was brightly lit, as though by sunshine, yet its walls were windowless and the light wasn't the right color for sunlight—it was bluish-white.

Her clothing was also wrong; parts of her showed, especially her legs, and her dress was dyed an impossible color, an orangish tint you could never find.

A wafer like the one I held in my hand lay on the table before her. She used a tool, which I can't even begin to describe, to impose the pattern of wires on the wafer's surface. Some distance away, other woman fitted many similar wafers into a silver amphora, one side of which had been cut away.

But all of this—the women's work and their incomprehensible surroundings—was only mildly interesting to me. Their activities, their dress, their peculiar light fixtures—well, obviously, they were objects of a prophecy. They were all part of the future, and the future never has much to do with you as an individual. The past is much homier.

The scene's central actor, the young woman bent over at her work—about her, I felt . . . kinship, I suppose. And as this feeling of familiarity began to grow on me, a voice (the voice of the woman traveller) gently intruded on the vision.

“This, O Israel, is thy heritage,” she said, loudly enough that I was at first surprised that the women working didn't hear her.

“So these people are Jews?” I asked. But this evidently was all the explanation the vision held.

At this point, the young woman looked up and gazed, it seemed, directly into my eyes. But as she was deaf to the voice, she was blind to my presence. I studied her. She didn't look like an Israeli; her skin and eyes were too pale. Yet molding the landscape of this sun-starved face were bones like my own—the long and cranky ridge of my nose, the cheekbones that went up past my cheeks and ended somewhere near my ears, the sharp triangle of my jaw.

She grew smaller, as though she were falling down a well. Darkness crept inward along the bright edges of the vision and finally swallowed it, leaving me sitting beside the traveller on the edge of the fountain.

“Consider what you've seen,” she said.

"Who was that young woman?"

"Nobody in particular . . . Maybe you could say she was generally representative."

"Representative of what?"

"That's part of what you need to consider."

"I thought prophetic visions were more definite. I thought when you had one you'd be able to tell people specifically about the future."

"That's only what happens when old men have them. Old men's minds have little else inside them besides preconceptions about what'll happen after they die. So that's what they envision – preconceptions.

"You, on the other hand, have no preconceptions worth mentioning, so that means you haven't got a framework. That will be the story of your life, I'm afraid – trying to make sense of what you see."

And then I awoke.

I wish I could say that the search for the truth has spurred my life. The court's only female scholar – that would be my father's pride, despite the fact I made most people, like Harsa, uncomfortable. It helped that I had Dav's blessing, even though the real situation was more complicated.

Yet even apart from body parts like womb and vagina, I differed in every essential from the court's other scholars. If it wasn't truth I was after, what *did* I want?

People demean the role of curiosity in life. That's why men laughingly pass it off as women's controlling passion. It's something people praise children for. But think about the word's meanings: "curious" – "out of the way," "convoluted," "intensely viginated." To be curious means that you're willing to bypass absolutes because you know that what you find out only makes everything more curious.

Once, a foreign scholar, an Achaean, came to stay at the Temple. His visit was part of a short-lived exchange program which principally failed because alien wisdom was to us at once strange and depressing. The Achaean was apparently a star at his home institution, where he was the leader of a circle calling themselves "Modernists." In various scholarly symposia, he listened to our wise men with ill-concealed disdain, his short, inky beard jutting aggressively forward.

"The wisdom for which all philosophers are in search," he would assert (thoroughly ignoring what anyone else had just said), "is the knowledge of first principles and the causes of things." This line of reasoning grew quite popular among us, but I wasn't interested in first principles and causes. With what, you might ask, have the Creation and the Wanderings to do if they don't have to do with first principles and causes? Yet what I wanted to know is why the chief actors behaved as they did. Most of all, I was puzzled by Jahveh, the most romantic of the protagonists.

I decided I'd never find anything out by listening to sleek and handsome visiting scholars. I sensed that I'd only gain knowledge through people like Ira. And so I no longer roamed aimlessly around Jerusalem. I had a mission – to make people tell me their versions of

the old stories. Sitting in the shade of the souk's galleries in the heat of the day, I'd pester the camel-herders:

"Tell me how it all began. What was the world like at first? Who was Moïshe?"

Ira would alert me to the arrival of foreigners. Before some hapless group of Sumerians or Iraqis had time to check into a hotel, before they arrived at the court or the trading floor, I was there to interrogate them:

"What do your people say about the Flood? Where was it? Who survived?"

Then after several years of assembling these stories (and partly under Dav's influence), I began to write them down, imagining motives, conversations, incidents to fill in the many blanks. I wrote feverishly, rarely revising, the way one does as a young writer. People later said that I'd simply taken down dictation from God. Maybe so: I haven't any idea where the stream of words came from.

It was the sort of impossible project you tackle in your twenties. You don't know any better—you think that it's up to you to set people straight about the scope of history. Now, in middle age, I re-read my version of Creation, the epic of the Wanderings, and I know I was in a very real sense deranged. You need the dense globule of youthful egotism to try that.

As I get older, my aims are more modest. I'm content to describe the life of one man, not hundreds of them, his mixed and muddy motives, the ambiguous crises that studded his life. One person's confused history—Dav's history—should be enough for any writer.

As a young girl, I often saw him during my comings and goings around Jerusalem. Typically, he was at the head of a mixed retinue composed of handsome, sunburnt soldiers and sallow, overdressed intelligentsia. It goes without saying that he stood out—our people don't accept leaders unless the leaders are marked by exceptional physical features. Even in middle age, Dav was extraordinary. The statuesque torso, powerful legs flicking his short skirt, his grave and unlined cheeks framed by a black military beard unmixed with gray. And although he was no taller than his tallest officers, the proportions of his body—the ratio of limb to trunk to head—had the effect of magnifying him; his body appeared to stretch upward, so that an unseen and powerful portion of him seemed to hover about his shoulders, to silently strengthen the lines of his face, lines like the invisible and remorseless currents of the Jordan in flood.

You may think to yourself, "Here obviously is a woman in love." But a woman loving Dav was unremarkable. What *was* was that one day he noticed me, a gawking child, standing in the crush thronging his courtyard. He stopped and turned to an adviser.

"Isn't this the kid who hangs around on the ramparts with the security guards?" he asked.

"That's right—she's Ab's child."

He studied me, smiling. I smiled back.

"So you're always asking questions?"

"Yes, Glorious Leader."

"Nobody's exempt—everybody gets a question . . .?"

"Yes, Glorious Leader."

"Then why don't I get a question? I like answering questions."

I didn't have to think something up: I was ready.

"Generally, why would you say God picked you for this leadership role? Has He ever said anything about that?"

Suddenly his expression changed and he embraced me with the fullness of his attention. The intensity of his awareness, filtered through his extraordinarily handsome face, was to say the least disconcerting.

"Come see me," he said. "Maybe I'll have an answer for you."

My father was uncharacteristically cautious.

"I doubt it was a serious offer," he said about Dav's invitation. "Why would he grant an interview to a thirteen-year-old girl?"

"Maybe people never ask him good questions."

"I can't begin to describe to you what things are like around a head of state. Dav's surrounded by unreality, which is partly of his own making."

"Like Moishe."

"Moishe was a peasant compared to Dav. In Moishe's time, we were only a tribe wandering aimlessly around real estate nobody else wanted."

"We're still a tribe, except now we've got some real estate *everybody* wants."

"Okay, I'll be frank with you – Dav's got a bad reputation."

"What do you mean? He's the king."

"I mean with women."

"I'm not a woman. I'm just a girl."

"Maybe . . ."

In the end, it wasn't so easy getting into see Dav. I learned that simply being king doesn't mean you have much control over how you spend your day; other people organize your time for you. But I waited patiently among the slim columns of the outer court, meanwhile taking the opportunity to interrogate all the other suppliants – ambassadors, aides, sheiks, local representatives. Mostly, they shared with the common folk the same basic view of Dav, the same mix of rumor and public relations. He was the favorite of Jahveh, he couldn't lose, he was irresistible to women, he was a philanderer, he couldn't be trusted, he was the savior of his people, the harbinger of the Messiah. He was just plain lucky.

Later I discovered that all of those things were true.

As you do when you've been hanging about all day in public waiting rooms (no matter how palatial), I finally became numb. My feet were sore, and I had that dusty, stale taste on my tongue you get from being around bureaucrats. I sat down at the foot of a pillar and started to daydream. A moment later, Dav emerged from his office, stretched, and before he could be mobbed by petitioners, he looked directly at me and signalled. I leapt up, worming my way through the adults.

Back then, heads of state conducted their affairs from their bedrooms. Dav's was enormous but spare, so that the couch on which he slept, the table, the few stools made the room appear hastily furnished, as though the real furniture was going to show up later. I hadn't any notion of royal etiquette, so I hung back in the doorway until Dav pointed to a stool. We sat.

"I understand you've been using your time to good advantage out there in the vestibule."

"The foreigners are interesting—they have a different perspective on things."

"They're atheists and heathens. Eventually, Jahveh's going to crush each of them like millet under a millstone."

Like everyone else, I was familiar with this essentially sadistic motif from Dav's Psalms. On the whole, God's plans for everybody who wasn't an Israeli made me uneasy. I was more interested in the Source.

"Did He tell you that Himself?"

"Who?"

"Did Jahveh actually appear before you one day and confide that He was going grind up foreigners?"

"Oh . . . well . . . yes, you could put it like that."

"What did he look like?"

"He didn't look like anything. He was invisible.""

"So this was just a voice."

"That's right. He appears behind me and says, 'Don't turn around—I've got something to tell you.' And then He says whatever's on his mind."

"You mean Jahveh sneaks up on you?"

He laughed.

"That's pretty accurate. Yes, I'd say God tends to sneak up on you."

"Do you think that's how He communicates with the other people He favors?"

High, open archways ran along one side of Dav's room. Magenta drapes—the room's only color—hung back from them, and outside a white glow, like the reflection from white linen hung to dry, came up from Jersualem's buildings. Dav paused and looked out toward the city. Then he said:

"I don't know how God approaches other people. As for myself, you could say it's the story of my life—having events sneak up out of nowhere and whisper whatever future they have wrapped within them. My life hasn't been what I pictured it would be when I was your age."

My usual procedure was to wait until after an interview before I wrote down the essentials of what I'd heard. Doing that worked fairly well since the people I questioned usually had simple stories, even if the story-telling itself was ritually convoluted.

Dav's story began prosaically, the old tale of the Jews, the herders, the lonely boys dropped on the Judean hillsides as though they were scarce seedlings put down without much hope to take root and spread. But then it turned, doubled back on itself, lost its own thread like a sheep fallen down a canyon only to scramble out the other side. I listened carefully, as I had learned to do—all my questioning had taught me that, and I was young, and remembering Dav's story was infinitely easier than it would be now that my aging brain is filled with the voices of my various personalities.

And even so, who could forget his story? No, recalling the facts has been easy enough, despite the fact that so many years have passed since he first told it to me. Yet I wasn't ready to

tell that story then because I sensed I simply did not understand it. I knew enough to know I couldn't find the story's real line, to let it play itself out, to help it find its rhythm without getting in the way.

Nonetheless, I still possessed the storyteller's best weapon—I knew how to ask questions. Summoning up as much girlhood, as I could muster, I gazed into his shining eyes.

“What were you like?” I asked. “What were you like at my age?”

Chapter Two

Bethlehem is a town of accommodations. Bed-and-breakfasts, rustic inns, small hotels—the constant stream of travellers to and from Jerusalem has always fueled Bethlehem's economy. And because at any given time (especially around Temple holidays), strangers make up a big segment of its population, Bethlehem tolerates a wide variety of foreign behaviors.

Geographers explain its position on the Southern Road—midway between Hebron and Jerusalem—as more or less inevitable, given the normal stamina of human beings, asses, and camels: Bethlehem is about where everyone gets tired. “Let's stop for the night in Bethlehem,” the weary patriarch says to his dragging train of wives, children, and beasts. “We can make Jerusalem in the morning.” They all perk up. For one thing, Bethlehem has a surprisingly active nightlife; for another, its physical setting is both lovely and mysterious.

From three sides of the town, the long hill ridges climb, fold, and fall, the downward curve of one melting into the upward rise beside or behind it. Olive groves flow down the hillsides, whole broad patches shifting gray to pewter as you watch them, and fields of barley and millet pour between the groves, like a ruddy stream between silver and mossy green banks. In the driest part of summer, the farmers' hillpaths look like scuffs on soft leather, and in the winter rains the mists blend the grays and rusts and greens into soft purple.

The eastern view is different. To the east, a great rift runs through the uplands of Judah and Israel, as though in one of His continual spasms of impatience with the Jews Jahveh had split our country's breastbone to get to its heart, possibly to operate on it. Yet, not for the last time, He must have been disappointed with His Creation. What's there—revealed by the peeling back of the limestone sternum—is salt and alum, a sea of tears. The valley of the Jordan lies beneath morose pressure and dull heat. Torrid waves come up off the valley floor, ascending to, and never reaching, the soaring cliffs closing in the rift.

Even as a small boy sitting with his older brothers in the shade of their father's olive groves, Dav's gaze was fixed on the eastern cliffs. Secretly he felt that his siblings were the victims of a disease, one that decayed character and sight. And they weren't the only ones—my countrymen are seized with a near-sighted and debilitating greed for land. One of the symptoms of this greed is it hungers near at hand: we only hoard the groves and pastures and fields we already own, the ones God has given us. But for those we have a passionate and blind

love which we sometimes confuse with love of God. The irony of Dav's life was that he spent himself in the service of that love to which he himself was immune.

Dav was bored by the easy prettiness of the landscape rolling about Bethlehem. At night, he dreamt of the cliffs of Moab and of Ammon, whose walls rose to heaven. Perhaps these dreams were inspired by God. In any case, they were filled with that brand of uncanniness you feel when Jahveh's in the neighborhood. The storyline was always more or less the same: starting out from the riverbank, he began walking east toward the cliffs but was unable to draw near them. Even so, the cliffsides towered over him, and he could clearly see niches and platforms cut from the rock. All at once, he was standing on one of the platforms far above the plain. With dreamy certainty he knew he couldn't descend. In all the landscape stretching across to the hills of Judah, up to the Sea of Galilee, and down to the desert flattening to the south, there was no human, no animal, no living thing. And he knew that either he had died or he'd never been born, that he was in Jahveh's presence. Maybe the platform itself was God's hand.

Even as a child, Dav knew that this dream wasn't a dream at all. Perhaps it was a nightmare, yet he wasn't afraid; he sensed that an immense terror pressed against the edges of this infinite and deadened landscape, but this dread could not touch him.

The dream repeated itself. Night after night, Dav stood waiting on the ledge. Then one night God spoke.

"Climb," He said.

Dav looked up at the smooth cliff face.

"There isn't a handhold," he answered.

"I'll provide one. Start climbing."

Dav stretched against the rock, his fingers touched a small knob, his foot found a crack. He inched upward, not daring to glance toward his hands, which operated invisibly, sliding up the pitch, searching out holds.

"Don't look down," God said.

"You don't need to tell me that," Dav said.

"Look up," said God.

"I can't look up. It's all I can do to keep moving."

"Look up."

Slowly he raised his eyes and felt as though he would fall away from the cliff. He thought that falling would be a relief. Above him, the cliff's rim zig-zagged against the milky sky. Suddenly a face – God's face – loomed over the edge. Dav began to slip.

"Never fear," said God. "I'm holding you up."

If you're holding me up, Dav thought, why isn't this easier? In fact, Dav's movement up the cliff wall wasn't movement at all but a kind of staying in place, as if he were swimming against the countercurrent of the rock. After a while, he more or less forgot what he was doing. He even forgot Jahveh, who, as usual, was peering down from above.

"Not much farther now," God said.

Dav looked up, startled, and he felt himself falling away from the cliff. Yet in the next instant, he experienced a surge of vigor; his palms stuck to the rock like thistles to wool. He

travelled the remaining vertical feet effortlessly, and pulled himself over the rim, where Jahveh sat cross-legged waiting for him.

The Lord of Hosts was a beardless youth swathed in yards of tawny linen which blended tastefully into the generally brown landscape. His, or perhaps Her, face was delicate, Egyptian, and His or Her Presence was intermittent. Besides this tendency to fade in and out of the background, there was something else that Dav found disconcerting: he could taste God. He had a sharp, spicy flavor, like cardamom.

"I suppose this means something," Dav said, panting.

"Basically, it was a test."

"Did I pass?"

"It wasn't that kind of test. With Me, you don't pass or fail—you simply take the test."

"Well," Dav grumbled, "so I took it."

"I've chosen you, so your whole life will be a series of tests. This was just the first one."

Dav was dismayed.

"Are they all going to be like climbing up a sheer cliff with no footholds? What's the point?"

"No, some of them will be harder...They're to prepare you for leadership."

"And who is it I'm going to lead?"

"I've chosen you to lead my Chosen People—you're the chosen of the Chosen." God smiled, pleased with the phrase. "It's up to you to bring the Israelis into a New Tomorrow."

"That sounds some kind of political slogan."

"My son, your whole life from now on is going to be political. Get used to it."

The atmosphere shimmered. Heatwaves rose from the scree scattered about the mountaintop. Jahveh grew in brilliance and dissolved in a humid mist. Dav awoke, sweating.

He decided to keep his dream a secret. He wasn't sure what it meant, and, besides, his brothers were likely to ridicule this vision of his future kingship. They had a sarcastic turn as far he was concerned.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces were involved in the ordinary raids and counterraids with our neighbors—mostly the People's Army of Philistia, to the west. These clashes with Sol's regulars had been only distant rumors until suddenly one morning recruiters began to show up in Bethlehem. They were fine-looking men with beards that glistened like hot tar. Their skimpy uniforms (essentially minidresses) were designed to reveal long, swelling biceps, broad pecs, corrugated thighs. Basically, they operated as walking recruiting posters.

The recruiters put up at one of Bethlehem's larger inns, where the local farmboys clustered throughout the day and into the night, listening to exciting and gory tales of hand-to-hand combat. Various new weapons were on display—bronze scimitars, lightweight clubs studded with copper spikes, slim ash lances capped with iron points. Standing in the inn's muddy courtyard, the soldiers put on a martial arts display. The locals were greatly entertained. This demonstration of Israeli invincibility succeeded in enlisting most of the young men from the surrounding area, including Dav's three older brothers, Elvin, Abe, and Shim.

On the morning the local contingent was to leave for the front, the Army chaplain—the celebrated preacher Shemuel—arrived to lend encouragement and to allay the fears of parents

and friends. The excited recruits formed up in the dusty road leading to Jerusalem, their shuffling feet and frosty breath forming a glittering cloud rising in the early morning sunshine. Since they were all now dressed in miniskirts, the new soldiers had a hard time standing still in the chilly mountain air.

Shemuel appeared in his impressive priestly robes, striped black and white, like a zebra. A high, gilt mitre, inscribed with mystic characters, teetered on his head. Everyone stopped fidgeting.

"Soldiers of the Lord," Shemuel began, "you march off to do battle with the enemies of the one true God." He glared at each of the recruits in turn. "Are you prepared to smite them?" The young men predictably cheered and whistled. "Are you prepared to slice and pierce them?" Uninhibited hooting. "Are you ready to roll over the Philistines, crushing them into the dirt which is in all significant respects their mother?" Wild yelling and shaking of new weapons. Shemuel signalled for silence.

"Then I anoint you soldiers of Israel," he said solemnly, and the young men grew instantly grave. Standing before them, one by one, Shemuel poured cups of olive oil over the tops of their innocent skulls.

Too young to enlist, Dav stood a few yards behind the column, watching the proceedings and idly wondering exactly what Jahveh had planned for him: Would God, for example, draft him as He had these young farmers? If so, did that mean that the conflict with the Philistines would drag on until he was old enough to carry a spear?

In the midst of all this, Shemuel peered directly at Dav. The old priest's face in fact looked more or less like what Dav thought God's should have looked like—heavy-browed, broad-jawed, a pewter-colored beard as thick and long as a horse's tail.

"Front and center," Shemuel ordered. Smiling nervously, Dav slipped through the line of recruits. Grasping the young man painfully by the hair, Shemuel shook him, saying, "Arise, anoint him, for this is he."

"This is who?" muttered Elvin

"What did that mean?" whispered Shim.

Shemuel let go of Dav's hair and thrust him aside.

After Dav moved back into the crowd, his father drew him roughly aside.

"Why did he pick you out?" Jesse asked him.

"You've got me. Maybe Jahveh told him to." Dav smirked.

"Wipe that smile off your face. What I want to know is whether you had any advance notice this was going to happen."

"Like what?"

"Like maybe a vision. Like maybe certain kinds of dreams."

Dav stopped smiling.

"Lots of people have dreams about God."

The old man's face had turned the color of dirty chalk; his weary eyes narrowed. Dav thought his father might be getting ready to kill him.

"Don't screw around, Dav. Tell me exactly what happened in this dream."

After Dav had described his conversation with God, his father sighed.

"I can't say I'm surprised," he said. "There was always something weird about you. When you were born, it thundered so badly we thought the house would cave in. Then it started to hail, and then the hail turned into snow. I suppose that should have told us something."

"No one can escape God's will," Dav said doubtfully.

His father studied him for a while in silence. Finally, he looked away toward the graceful ridges of the sunlit hills folding toward the sea. As he walked away, he muttered over his shoulder:

"You're not as good-looking as you think."

During the next few weeks, reports filtered back to Bethlehem. The reports were not good; on the other hand, they weren't exactly bad either. Sol's army had marched over a ridge in the Valley of Jezreel to discover the Revolutionary Army of Philistia spread out on the plain below. Given the fact that the Israelis were in a position to toss missiles down onto the heads of their enemies, this was good. Considering, however, that the Revolutionary Army was roughly three times the size of Sol's forces, this was bad. So since the Philistines had evidently decided that topography was against them and since the Israelis were reluctant to attack a host triple their size, no one had moved for several days.

The trouble with stand-offs as far as large armies are concerned is that eventually the supplies run out. Our side was particularly vexed in this area because everyone was expected to provide for himself.

Meanwhile, Dav's dreams had returned to the normal subjects—girls, lost sheep, falling down wells. He often sat on the sunny ridges watching his flocks and idly wondering why Jahveh hadn't put in further appearances: Maybe, he thought, God planned His epiphanies at intervals, probably because he had so many other meetings. It was common knowledge that God communicated with a number of key people in Israel on a regular basis, especially during wartime.

He was seated on a large rock pursuing this line of thought one morning when he noticed his father making his way up the steep hillside. The old man's progress was slow, and Dav watched him for a long time before he finally approached, sweating and out of breath.

"Why didn't you meet me half-way?" his father demanded impatiently. "Are you blind? Couldn't you see me struggling?"

"I didn't know you were looking for me."

"Who in the hell else would I be looking for out here? You're the only person around for miles."

"You never come up here."

"I've got an important errand for you. Round up the herd and come home."

Leaving it at that, Jesse turned on his heel and started back down the hillside. His progress downhill was, if anything, more difficult because the steep incline forced him to jog; as he built up speed, he continually veered toward trees or boulders in an effort to slow himself down. Once he fell. Dav watched his father until he hit the flat running, stopped, doubled over, and after a while continued down a path, limping. Dav shrugged and gathered up the sheep.

Back at the ranch, Dav's mother stood on the porch, watching him as he herded the animals into the corral. Generally, she resembled Dav's father—both were lean, worried-looking people with faces dominated by high, sloping foreheads and rings of light skin circling their eyes, giving others the impression that they were perpetually alarmed. Actually, she was a calm, good-humored woman (which may be the reason she's never highlighted in legends of Dav, since Type Bs aren't considered dramatic enough to be feature players). Dav, however, had learned to distinguish between his mother's appearance of concern and the infrequent reality. Today she was authentically worried.

"What's happened, Ma? Are Abe and Elvin okay?"

"As far as I know. Their big problem is that they're short of supplies—that's what your father wants to see you about. He's got the idea you should take some food to the front."

"Really? That's great." Dav began to suspect that Jahveh had come back into his life, providing him with an opportunity. What *sort* of opportunity he wasn't quite sure.

"It's not great, Dav. Your father's out of his mind—you don't have any business fooling around where grown men are killing one another."

His father stepped out onto the porch.

"He's old enough to lead a donkey up to the front, turn around, and come back. He won't be anywhere near the fighting."

"Who says he won't be near the fighting? This is not a big country—we're near the fighting."

"His brothers will watch out for him."

"His brothers have a hard enough time watching out for themselves."

The next morning, Dav set out leading two asses in a dull rain. Every time his route led downward, he descended into fog. The donkeys went forward, feeling their way along the narrow path. The first had disappeared, and Dav could only see the hindquarters of the donkey following. Drops continued to penetrate the mist, and Dav watched them plop and drip against the second animal's haunches. Occasionally the fog parted at his feet, and once, as the shredded clouds swept apart, he found himself walking along the edge of a precipice. Fans of clay oozed from horizontal fissures in the cliff-face. Far below a stream was in flood.

What did God sound like when He spoke outside of dreams? Dav yearned to hear Jahveh's voice in waking reality, mostly by way of clarification. Maybe he'd gotten the message mixed up. Maybe he wasn't cut out for a leadership role. As Dav and the asses inched their way along the narrow trail, he listened for the Voice. Sometimes he imagined he heard God say, "Prepare yourself," but perhaps the words were in fact "Spare yourself" or "Take care of yourself." Eight donkey feet clicked on the pebbles ahead, their packs creaking softly, muffled by the damp mist. Possible interpretations repeated themselves in a nonsensical chant—"Prepare yourself, spare yourself, take care of yourself, yourself, yourself." Dav felt sleepy.

His eyes half closed, the words involuntarily swaying through his dim awareness composed themselves into rhythms without meaning and then, slowly, into meaningless questions:

"Who shall dwell, who shall dwell, who shall dwell in the house of the mole?" Dav murmured. A new question followed. "Who shall walk, who shall walk, who shall walk on thy .

. . . on thy . . . “ On thy what? Dav idly wondered. And then, just as he was asking himself this, the rhythm attached itself to some words—“thy holy hill . . . Who shall walk on thy holy hill?”

Other lines crowded around a region just north of his mouth, as though the words were eager to be cast into beats, to be filtered through the upflow and backwash of the rhythm.

“Who shall tarry in thy tattered tent? Who shall walk on thy holy hill?”

Dav halted the donkeys and removed his guitar from the lead donkey's pack. They had risen through the fog and had emerged on a small plateau. He sat down on a large rock and played a progression of minor chords. He sang the questions, trying them out against the chords. He decided to change “tattered” to “taut-drawn.” After he had worked the words into the notes, he stopped and thought about what would come next. Answers, obviously. The song's rhythm galloped through his head, continuing to throw off nonsense sequences. He watched the donkeys shuffling around the stony pasturage.

“He whose hooves should not be shoed . . . He who's who the Good Lord fooled . . . He whose feet will not be moved.” He at once felt (felt sensuously, as poets do) the lines round out into a smooth whole—a start and a finish. “Who shall tarry in thy taut-drawn tent? Who shall walk on thy holy hill? He whose feet will not be moved.” He decided the tent and the hill probably belonged to God and that his own were the feet that wouldn't be moved.

For the rest of the day, through Jerusalem and up the Jezreel Valley, he composed the filling, which essentially described the personality traits of the immovable feet. From time to time, he stopped and worked on parts of the melody, so that when he arrived at the camp of the armies of Israel, he'd finished the song.

Oddly, even though his song addressed God, even though it described some possible relation he might have with God, composing it made him forget about God. In fact, the song made him feel a little Godlike himself. The divine breath puffed lightly through him in the form of the song's rhythm, which pumped words like blood from its separate heart. And in forming its own whole, the song spun Dav's ill-assorted parts into one smooth completion.

When he and his donkeys topped the final rise and the two armies came into view, he barely saw them. He was effectively blind to the bright flashes off the Philistine's bronze spearheads pulsing in solid streaks across the opposite hillside. He wandered aimlessly through the chaos of the Israeli camp, idiotically happy to be among the grim warriors. They looked to Dav like so many illustrations of his song, men concentrated in righteousness, immovable and invincible against their enemies.

Dav realized that these men were his natural audience. So he halted his donkeys, unpacked his guitar, and climbed atop a nearby boulder. Gradually people started to notice him. Finally, a small crowd gathered around the boulder. Prophets (or at any rate people with interesting messages from God) tend to pop up unexpectedly among us, and since prophecy is immensely various, there's a good deal of likely entertainment value.

When Dav judged that a big enough crowd had accumulated, he began to sing, and when he finished, his audience shouted approvingly, drawing other bystanders. He sang his song again, and again the crowd applauded. To Dav, like any poet, each new rendition of his poem seemed to draw out further subtleties, ones he himself hadn't noticed while composing it.

Meanwhile, much of the camp had surrounded his rock; he was prepared to repeat the song as many times as his audience wanted to hear it.

The mass of soldiers split as a small party, led by Shemuel, made its way toward Dav. When they arrived, Shemuel peered closely at Dav (whose face, hands, and burnoose were coated with grayish-red dust). The crowd was noisy, some chanting, some hooting, others (those nearest Dav's makeshift stage) singing off-key. Dav noticed that Shemuel was moving his lips.

"I can't hear what you're saying," Dav shouted.

"The night is our own," Shemuel shouted back.

"What?"

"This has the other side."

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU."

"Wheedle of old! Deeply sighed!"

Dav bent closer to the old man. Shemuel's breath smelled like moldy papyrus. He screeched in Dav's ear:

"This has been foretold!" At that point, two of the prophet's large advisor-bodyguards grabbed Dav and pulled him from his rock. The audience was dismayed. They hooted and did their best to block Shemuel's passage back through the crowd.

No sooner had they arrived back at Shemuel's tent than the bodyguards stripped the travelling clothes from Dav's back, replacing the greasy wool robes with breastplate, greaves, and armor. Dav sank under the heavy leather and bronze plates.

"We've got a problem," Shemuel said as he handed Dav an iron spear. The spear's weight tilted Dav to one side. He was awash in perspiration. "Each day for ten days the Revolutionary Army of Philistia has sent forth their champion—Goliad the Decimator—looking for a match. Understandably, nobody's been willing to take up the challenge—Goliad is unusually large."

Dav began to be worried.

"You, on the other hand, are unmistakably the favorite of God, so that size differences are basically unimportant."

Dav cleared his throat and leaned the spear against a tentpole.

Chapter Three

The wind whistled through the slits in his helmet. Other than that, the only sound that reached him was a kind of vague, widespread mumbling—the cries and taunts of the armies facing each other across the valley. Even though the armor was modern, high-tech stuff, the metal plates knocked against his knees and cut into his armpits. On top of that, he knew that his sidearms were useless: Remembering the martial arts display put on by the Bethlehem recruiters, he was sure that any really professional opponent would kill him instantly.

The worst part, however, was to come.

A man emerged from the front ranks of the Revolutionary Army of Philistia and immediately leapt forward a hundred yards. Dav decided that the heat beating down on the bronze cup sitting atop his head, coupled with his weariness, was making him hallucinate. Then he realized that man hadn't moved more than a few feet from his front lines. He was simply so much bigger than everybody else.

Dav turned around. A group of Israeli officers, with Shemuel at their head, looked away, embarrassed. Shemuel strode up to Dav.

“That's Goliad,” he said. Dav tried to swallow, but his throat felt like a dusty clay pot. He thought he might be having a heat stroke.

“He's your opponent,” Shemuel added gratuitously.

I've got to get this stuff off, Dav thought. He tossed away the helmet and began to remove his armor.

“Stop that,” Shemuel ordered. “You have to be in uniform—it's regulations.”

“I'll pass out before we get to the main event,” Dav said as he shed his tin skirt. “If I'm going to have my head crushed, I want to be comfortable.”

“You *will* have your head crushed if you don't wear your helmet. It's not safe.”

“I don't think safety's a big factor here.”

Shemuel peered near-sightedly at Dav, sizing him up.

“Well, I suppose we could say that the Lord of Israel is your armor . . . Putting it that way, actually, would be good for morale.”

“Another thing—this spear's useless. I can't throw it. In fact, I can barely lift it.”

“That's fine—you can fight him *mano a mano*.”

“You sound like my father . . . Right now I don't need sarcasm.”

Shemuel changed his tack.

"Son," he said, "the Lord has confided in me that you will, in the end, smite the Philistine—it's a foregone conclusion. On the other hand, there's no point in bucking military custom."

"You've got to capitalize on your strengths—in my case, speed and maneuverability. And I'll use my sling." Also my intelligence, Dav thought. Maybe I can figure a way to get out of this, he thought. "That's how I fought the bears and the lions."

"What bears and lions?"

"I slew two bears and a lion while I was guarding my father's flocks."

"All at the same time?"

"No, at different times. First a bear, then a lion, then another bear." They won't make a crazy person their champion, Dav decided.

Shemuel was silent, sizing him up. Then the old man looked up at the bright, blank, cloudless sky, hoping for further instructions.

"Whatever," he said finally. "Have it your way . . . I don't suppose it matters since whatever happens is ordained by God."

Blindsided by fate, Dav was seized by a kind of clear-headed panic wherein he reviewed the circumstances which had led him to be standing alone on the floor of the sun-scorched valley facing a homicidal freak. He felt as though the laws of cause and effect governing ordinary life had ruptured. All the evidence pointed to the hand of God.

"Lord God of Hosts," he prayed, "get me out of this." A hot breeze crossed the plain, carrying with it the scent of heliotrope. He could hear the rattling of armor and the clearing of throats. Otherwise, both armies were silent.

As he began to walk toward Goliad, the lines of his poem pattered in his head. "Who shall tarry in thy taut-drawn tent? Who shall walk on thy holy hill? He whose feet will not be moved."

Curiously, the verses made him numb, if not fearless. He approached the giant, who gazed at him, unbelieving.

"You're the champion of the Israelites?" he asked incredulously.

"I am the Chosen of the Lord," Dav replied simply.

Goliad shook his enormous head (which by itself was roughly the size of Dav's chest).

"No wonder your country has a bad reputation," Goliad muttered. Then after a pause, he said, compassionately, "I'll try to make it painless, kid."

Beyond Goliad, heatwaves obscured the Revolutionary Army of Philistia—maybe there were people there, maybe there weren't. Dav felt as though he and the giant were alone, that they were involved in an obscure, dreamlike project with no instructions. Goliad himself, Dav thought, was the stuff of dreams; he couldn't accept that his opponent possessed ordinary life but instead emerged out of his very earliest dreams, the dreams of infancy when everyone is a giant.

Meanwhile, on another level, the poem idiotically chattered on: "Who shall walk on thy holy hill?" it asked him. He devoutly wished he was walking on some holy hill far away from

the depressing arena formed by the valley floor. On the other hand, his feet in fact felt as though they'd never be moved. He was numb all over.

The moments passed, Goliad stood several feet away, contemplating him, he listened to the erratic breeze as it whisked back and forth across his ears. It sounded like dried rushes brushed over dried clay. Its sibilants whispered to him: "Sssssafety," it said. "Ssssure safety."

Then feeling began to return to his limbs, and not just mere sense, but irradiating and mildly orgasmic awareness. He felt the strap wrapped about his hand and the reassuring weight hanging from it, and he felt quickened by his own young body. It occurred to him that this body had carried him up miles and miles of hillsides, imperceptibly toughening; it had wrenched inert sheep from impossible crevices and carried hundredweight stones across his father's fields.

The strap whistled by his ear, drowning the wind. The stone left its sling and disintegrated into a hard line of light beaming from his hand to the giant's forehead, where a hole opened and blossomed. Goliad's eyes widened. He opened his mouth in surprise and fell neatly backward and bounced. The earth heaved once and was still.

Whatever voice had been rasping in the breeze was now silent. Ordinary sense returned to Dav's body: his neck burnt under the midday sun, sweat stung his face, his thighs twitched, a bruise rose over the length of his right arm. He felt as though he were standing by the Jordan of his dreams, the armies indistinguishable from the rubble littering the base of the valley cliffs. The men behind him were silent. Eventually, wordlessly, the Revolutionary Army of Philistia packed up and left, trailing in ragged lines westward toward home.

Dav walked over to the giant's dead body. There was nothing to be afraid of, he told himself. He was never a threat.

I'm the threat, he thought. In the space of a day, he'd grown two new additions to the up-until-now slim and featureless form of his personality—he was a poet and a murderer. He wondered vaguely if these novel identities had anything to do with each other. Maybe the result of being a poet was to become a murderer, or maybe making up poems compensated for being a murderer.

In any case, he felt certain these fresh personas wouldn't leave him anytime soon. Probably they'd never leave him, and he'd have to learn to live with that knowledge. He felt he could have used some help from God at this point, and yet he knew that God had fled the scene. Dav felt God's absence more powerfully than he'd ever felt His presence.

Gradually, he became aware of a solid wave of noise gathering behind him. He turned. At first stunned, now the Israeli army was working itself up into a collective ecstasy. Sheets of arrows shot by delirious archers flew upward, their points glittering; in their descent, several people were injured. Officers danced the hora. Enlisted men embraced. Several couples kissed, open-mouthed. Shemuel, followed by his headquarters staff, strode across the hardpan toward Dav.

"My son," Shemuel said, taking Dav's hand. "Surely thou art chosen." Although it was clearly difficult for him, the old man smiled.

"Sol has slain his thousands," shouted the entourage hyperbolically, "but Dav has slain his ten thousands."

Dav looked at the bulk lying at his feet.

"There's just one of them," he said, "but I suppose that's enough."

* * *

The army's regiments moved southward on the roads of Israel, spreading out to their homes. All along the way, townspeople turned out, greeting them with the chant "Sol has killed his thousands, but Dav has killed his ten thousands." The news of Goliad's death had flown before them. The main body, with Shemuel and Dav at its head, returned to Jerusalem.

Each time they passed through a hamlet, the scene was repeated: young girls stealing the opportunity to embrace good-looking strangers (particularly Dav himself), matrons loading older and homelier troops with bread and flowers, local politicians barring their way to make speeches and shake hands.

Dav realized that, via some sort of village-to-village telepathy, each community vied to outdo the one up the road; this momentum of acclaim was the real base of his popularity, and not his isolated deed in the Valley of Jezreel, which at once faded and expanded in collective memory.

Each legend contains its own inevitability; something dwelling within it—some flash of its hero's personality, some chance aspiration—infects the people who tell and re-tell it, so that no amount of conscious authority can diminish it. By the time the news arrived at Sol's court, the story of Dav and Goliad was fixed in our national myth.

As the news filtered in from the front, Sol became increasingly disturbed, and as the proportions of Dav's fame grew, Sol grew proportionately furious. Cabinet sessions were called three or four times a day, to assess significance, to review conditions. As far as Sol was concerned, the Revolutionary Army of Philistia was replaced as the enemy by the wild popularity of a Bethlehem shepherd.

For the third or fourth time, the express messenger who'd brought the news of Dav's victory was interviewed in council.

"I'm not getting the picture here," Sol said, "I must be missing something."

The messenger (a slim, intelligent young man who looked on his job as a stepping stone to further government appointments) tried desperately to think of something he might have missed.

"I took notes, Glorious Leader—I was very careful to write everything down . . . despite the fact that everybody says I have an excellent visual memory."

"So under category three of the Sidon Convention, the Philistine negotiators agreed to trial-by-single-combat?"

"That's right, Celestial Authority . . ."

"On the one hand, they had an obvious shoo-in, the Enormous Goliad; on the other hand, what did we have? Had anybody thought of that?"

"Shemuel told us that the Lord would provide."

"As it turns out, He did, didn't He?" Sol paused. "Okay, then what happened?"

"Just like I told you, Serene Purpose, the kid and Shemuel went into a huddle, then the kid took off his equipment and went out to meet their champion and then he killed him."

"With a sling . . ."

"Yes sir, with a sling – he got rid of his spear while he was talking to Shemuel. But the actual slaying, that's the part I'm not so sure about. It happened too fast. The stone flew out of his hand like a beam of light."

"Speaking figuratively."

"No, Supreme Chief, like a real beam of light, like a flash. And then the next thing we knew, there was a hole in the giant's head, and he flew straight backward, stiff, like a tree."

"Nothing else unusual happened? Nothing happened you could identify as coming from God? Any strange birds flying around the kid's head, for example?"

"It was all pretty straightforward. Except the kid seemed to be talking to himself as he walked out."

"Possibly he was praying – that's natural enough." Sol, who had been standing during this interview, sat down and propped his head on his hand. Nobody said anything. After a while, Sol raised his head.

"Then afterwards, when he'd killed Goliad, that's when they started that chant?"

"Right afterward, Sun of Our Hopes – they said, 'Sol has killed his . . .'"

Sol interrupted him.

"I don't need to hear it again," he said.

Once again, Sol buried his face in his hands. He muttered to himself, or possibly he was sobbing, quietly. It was hard to tell. The assembled courtiers shuffled nervously, and the messenger wondered if he'd been dismissed. Everyone was silent for a long time, watching the king as he brooded. They had grown used to his bouts of depression.

Finally his son, Jonathan, drew near and placed his hand on his father's shoulder.

"Come on, Dad," he said, "it's time for you to lie down."

Chapter Four

I think that Dav's core energy, the deep-lying energy which attracted and repulsed us, surfaced as he grew older, transforming itself into incessant business. He was never at rest, a perpetually spinning generator of activity, like a waterwheel endlessly revolving against the flood of state business. And all the time he talked, as king, Dav was also king of the talkers. We're a nation of talkers. Business, legend, spite, endearment—one broad stream of unsegregated speaking fills our days, and Jerusalem is the Capital of Talk, the headquarters of all jawing Israelis. You have to be wary when we stop.

One day, he was in the process of telling me about Sol and about Sol's anger when he suddenly went silent. The day had been hot, with that sort of sere, still air which made parchment crackle and splashes disappear as soon as they hit the ground. After the sun got low enough, we'd gone out onto his balcony. Cool evening air had already begun to press down on the radiating stones of the city.

We leaned on the balustrade, looking out over the urban center that they had made together, Sol and Dav. Before that, Jerusalem had been a big village, nothing to compare with Memphis or Ur or even Tyre. Now we had a metroplex, and Sol had laid its foundation.

From time to time, I glanced at Dav. I wanted to stare, to drink him in, but I was ashamed of that impulse. I was too old not to care if he caught me ogling him, too young to know why it made me hot with chagrin when I imagined he might. But even so, that picture of him, leaning out over the balustrade as though it were the prow of some ship pressing through Jerusalem's sea—I remember every detail.

I especially remember his arms, maybe because I could stare at them without his noticing. The hair on his hands was golden, and there were golden spots spread across his knuckles. Two corded muscles stood out on each of his forearms, and his skin was the color of lamplight. I desperately wanted to touch him, to run my hand down to his wrist and encircle it.

Meanwhile, I had utterly forgotten what he'd been talking about, about his triumphal march into Jerusalem and about Sol's anger. When he once again began to speak, it was hard to pay attention.

"No matter what happened, even at the end," he said quietly, "I was never Sol's enemy . . . After all, he was the king."

* * *

As he interviewed Dav, Sol stretched a strand of cheap yarn, held between the thumb and forefinger of each hand, before him. His Reception Hall was packed; the crowd gathered to see the youthful hero displeased him.

Silently, he tied knots at each end of the string. Then, as he spoke, he carefully tied other knots randomly along its length.

"You're by way of being a poet as well, I understand," he said, concentrating on a half-hitch.

"If writing one poem makes you a poet . . ." It was more nerve-wracking to have an audience with the king where he *didn't* look at you, Dav thought, than one where he did.

"Oh, one poem's enough." Having evidently filled the first string with a sufficient number of knots, he picked up another from a pile beside him and tied the first to the second with a carefully executed sheepshank. "As the centuries roll on, that's all people usually remember anyway—the one poem. If the first one's good enough, why bother with any others?"

Dav didn't know if this was an actual question. He tried to think of a suitable answer.

"Like everyone else, poets waste their lives repeating themselves." He paused to tie two more knots. "My humble opinion is that once you've done something to your own satisfaction, you should move on to something new."

For the first time, Sol looked up and gazed at Dav: "Does that sound like the opinion of a sane man, do you think?"

"Um, well, yes, Glorious Leader, I . . ." Dav stopped short, frightened by Sol's eyes.

The king continued, speaking in a strange, high-pitched voice.

"Actually, the soul wears many garments, casting one off as it grows outdated and donning a new one." He resumed his normal tone. "That was a proverb—did you recognize it?"

"No, I . . ."

"You didn't recognize it because I just made it up. That's *my* literary talent—making up proverbs—'The Book of Sol's Proverbs' is what they'll call it centuries from now."

"It's a wise and unusual proverb."

"Why do you say 'unusual'? Does 'unusual' mean 'abnormal'?"

Sol gently laid the knotted string on his lap and gently looked up. Dav was even more frightened than he had been.

"Certainly not, Sun of Our Worship. I meant that it wasn't hackneyed and obvious, as proverbs generally tend to be."

This answer seemed to satisfy Sol, and he returned to his knotting.

"The aim of my proverbs is to jar people out of their conditioning and free their psychic energies. This, combined with diet and appropriate handiwork," he held up the gnarled yarn as illustration, "releases the ego from its preconceptions. Ultimately, my aim is freedom. Both for myself and others."

He placed the finished string in a neatly laid-out pile of other knotted strings, which lay adjacent to the fresh strings. He shifted in his throne so he could look out the high windows of the Reception Hall, which happened to be curtained since it was night. Everyone else in the Hall looked toward the draped windows as well, but as there was nothing to see, they looked back at the king.

“The current emphasis of my research is how much of a role God has in Creation. I view the creation of my proverbs as a kind of thought-experiment—What exactly, I ask myself, is God doing as I compose a proverb?”

He shifted his mild gaze from the curtains to Dav. “That's why I've decided that you'll join my court.”

To give Sol some credit, we hadn't yet gotten used to having a king. Kingship was a fashion, one which other major powers (nations we aspired to imitate) had long accepted. According to them, having kings was something God had laid down in the hot and foggy times of the Creation. The Egyptians, the Iraqis, even the Philistines—they never doubted that one of their number should sit in some luxurious building dispensing arbitrary opinions that the rest of the population had to incorporate into their lives.

So even though we weren't convinced of the antiquity of this custom, it didn't take us long to get it right, and most of the credit for defining what an Israeli king should be goes to Dav. All you need do is compare Sol to Shelom. One was a brilliant lunatic, alternately gaining obedience through terrorism or making his subjects feel sorry for him. We had no building program under Sol, no foreign policy (except search and destroy missions to other people's outlying districts), no litigation.

We have all those things under Shelom, in their most modern form. Shelom is unquestionably evenhanded, competent, far-seeing. Of course, he's also comparatively boring, but that's exactly what an established ruler should be.

Meanwhile, Dav was homesick. He longed not so much for his home itself as for the hillside pastures and mountain trails encircling Bethlehem. He often wanted to be by himself, impossible for anyone attached to a court. And Sol's court was in this respect doubly onerous: Like anyone who rules badly, Sol was overly personal. Court life was intimate. Members of the royal entourage were expected to be in more or less constant attendance. Even Sol's bodily functions were a matter of public notice. Male courtiers stood by him as Sol completed his daily evacuation, while the royal females waited just outside the door.

Among the royal family and courtly hangers-on there were a number of people Dav's own age, especially including Sol's sons and daughters. Dav was handsome, clever, and very cool—sure guarantees of instant popularity with other teenagers.

Sol's daughters were an attractive but indistinguishable mass. They went about in a group, staring at Dav and giggling. Jonathan, the eldest son, was also clearly smitten.

On his first morning at court, Dav woke to find Jonathan standing by his bed, staring at him.

“Is there something you want?” he asked.

“You've got a great physique. You must work out a lot.”

Dav wrapped a blanket around his hips.

“I think you handled yourself well with my father,” Jonathan continued. “It's easy to lose your equanimity. There's a way he has . . . Like he'll be talking about exports, say, and you're listening to how many ephods we've sent out this season and how many ephods we sent out last season, and then, like right in the middle of the sentence, he says, *What* we do is simply

a case of *how* we do,' and you're trying to tie that into the ephods, but finally you realize that what he's just said has nothing to do with ephods – it's a proverb.”

Dav began to wash his face and Jonathan paused to watch him.

“The knot-tying doesn't help,” he said, handing Dav a towel.

“He probably has a lot on his mind,” Dav said diplomatically.

“Everyone says you're one of God's favorites,” Jonathan whispered. “They say He speaks to you like He speaks to Shemuel.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“Around here, it's not a good idea to publicize your relationship with God.”

“But this is the Court of Israel, the executive office of the Chosen People.”

“Oh, it didn't used to be this way. My father used to have God's ear, but he did something wrong.”

“What?”

“We're not exactly sure. My father's done everything he can think of to make amends. At first he thought it might have to do with the sacrifices – we weren't offering up the right things. So he started varying the selection. People brought all sorts of things from places we'd never heard of – flamingoes, wildebeests, ginseng. Everyday a different animal or vegetable would be tossed up on the altar and burned.

“But apparently this just made God angrier. By then, the only time he spoke to my father is when He was furious. Being the object of God's wrath tends to make you preoccupied.”

“Frankly, my dealings with God are pretty indirect. Once in a while, He appears in a dream.”

“There's nothing unusual in that. Dreams are where he mostly appears.”

“That's what people say.”

The two young men now stood silently, inspecting each other. Jonathan was a little taller than Dav, less muscular, with a lean, rosy face spotted with patches of fine black hair, the beginnings of a beard. His owlish brown eyes peered unreservedly into Dav's, in that way thoroughly unselfish people have of diving into you.

Dav met Jonathan's unguarded gaze with reserve. He sensed that, if he allowed it, the king's son would slowly and gently graze on his spirit until it was bare and scruffy. Jonathan would do this in a kindly fashion, in well-meant adoration, but given an opening, he would do it all the same.

They left Dav's chamber and wound their way through halls and porticoes until they arrived at the Hall of the Court, where, Dav soon discovered, most of his days would be spent.

Sol slept erratically, sometimes not at all. His wakefulness meant that his staff was continuously on call, ready to keep vigil with the king. Some mornings Dav arrived at Court to find twenty exhausted courtiers, barely able to stand, surrounding their agitated leader. They'd been up all night, taking turns allaying Sol's anxiety which, as deep anxiety will, had infected them all in their weariness. These were times of paranoia and state fantasy. Jahveh had abandoned – or was about to abandon – Israel. Secretly marshalling untold military strength, Philistia (Egypt, Iraq, Syria) was about to descend on and devour Israel.

But Sol's worst fear was predictable: The subversives of Israel from within.

The Party of God (which has always been Israel's only party) traditionally supports whomever God appears to have chosen, although the divine primary process through which the choosing is achieved isn't always evident. Nor is the candidate himself (God mysteriously confines his Choices to males) immediately apparent; the Court pundits spend weeks debating the Signs and publishing contrary predictions.

In Dav's case, however, the Signs seemed transparent—even though nobody said so out loud. But like most psychopaths, Sol wasn't stupid, and it wasn't hard to figure out why, within a few days of Dav's arrival, the king commanded the young hero's constant attendance at Court. The old man wanted to keep an eye on the challenger.

Meanwhile the friendship between the two young men was tidal—Dav the fixed and noble shore, Jonathan the inconstant flood, lapping about his friend's reserve and, occasionally, flowing back into himself, into melancholy. He was his father's son. In any case, their closeness was fostered by long days spent attending the king.

Dav's descriptions of life at that Court only slightly lessen the difficulty I have of imagining it. Maybe I could envision it better if I hadn't grown up in other, very different royal circles—Shelom's. The hardest thing for me is to imagine the purposelessness with which Sol's courtiers daily lived . . .

Dawn, several days after Dav's arrival. A number of people are already standing about the Hall. They've been standing there since three a.m. The king is sitting by himself, stroking a length of knotted string, staring at a doorway, which happens to be the one through which Dav now enters. Sol sees Dav, he winces and turns away. Immediately he jumps up and orders breakfast. The caterers (who have been waiting in the wings for two hours) rush in: Tables are set up, place settings are laid, bowls of fruit appear. Relieved at least to be able to sit down, hoping that food might revive them, the weary courtiers find their places.

But as soon as they begin peeling oranges and plucking grapes, Sol decides that it's not the right time for breakfast. Perhaps it's too early, or too late. Anyway, he orders his Chief of Staff to begin the morning briefing. The staff descend on the tables, lifting them uncleared—bananas and granola clutter the floor as they rush out of the hall. The members of the National Security Council—now hungry as well as exhausted—assemble about the throne.

"The situation in the west . . ." begins the Prime Minister (a sleek and worried man who has valiantly mastered a severe stutter in his climb to power).

Sol interrupts

"Where in the west? *Philistia* in the west? Or the southwest? The points of the compass are as arrows, the might of the Lord's Anointed is as a bow." Sol looks around the Council to see what effect this might have.

"The sssssituation," says the Prime Minister, beginning again, "in wuwuwuwestern *Judah* . . ."

"Ah, *Judah*," Sols whispers.

"The sis, the sisisis,"

"*Judah*, thou art my wagon wheel and my flagon!" shouts Sol, leaping from his throne. "Stop! This is getting us nowhere! Individual interviews first."

The Council backs off, leaving the king and his minister to consult. Then, one by one, people are called before the throne. Some of these people have to be sent for—Sometimes they live a half-day's walk away. Others have nothing whatsoever to do with the running of the state (to say nothing of the fact that they're entirely unprepared for an interview with the King of Israel, making them no more coherent than the impeded minister). Sol sends for a camel herder, and when some terrified wrangler is finally pulled from the camel personnel near the souk, he's questioned about yearly rainfall estimates in Syria.

Unable to provide an answer, the camel driver (who has fainted) is dragged from the court by two nasty-looking security guards. Sol searches for Dav in the crowd of courtiers, finds him, and smirks triumphantly. Dav smiles pleasantly in return. The king scowls and clears the court. He's left by himself, slumped forward, head in hands, his shoulders pumping and heaving. Perhaps he's sobbing, maybe he's laughing. Who knows?

These performances by the King of Israel were unsettling for everyone who witnessed them, but most particularly for Dav because Dav was apparently the audience for whom they were staged. Sol bullied, ridiculed, ranted, sobbed—yet no matter how distracted he became, Dav felt that the king's behavior was focused at him and that within his madness there lay a still, small place of concentration wherein Sol watched the quality of Dav's response.

Dav prayed. If God had mapped out a political career for him, now was the time, Dav thought, to start sending instructions. But there were no voices, no visions, no psalms. At night, he dreamt pointlessly of dim, crowded corridors where he was crushed against enormous sweating ambassadors who stank of leeks. In the dreams, he fell from roofs and high walls, but no one caught him up.

He'd felt less fear facing Goliad. That was momentarily terrifying, but the terror left exhilaration in its wake, and afterwards he was filled with a sense of invincibility. Now he moved in a dull cloud of anxiety, a new experience for him.

The weight was lifted somewhat during those times that Sol sent Dav, accompanied by Jonathan, on errands outside the city. But Dav remained suspicious of the prince, who undoubtedly acted as his father's spy.

This was before the fashion among noble youth for horseback riding, which has lately been picked up in imitation of our more up-scale neighbors. Quite to the contrary, young men of Dav's generation disdained being ridden about on large, expensive beasts, and instead, they often ran, or at least trotted, to their destinations. Thus, early one late summer morning, Jonathan and Dav set out from the city gates, jogging briskly.

They ran through the crowd of travellers and their animals just rising in velvety shadows under Hebron's walls. They ran down the slope falling from the gate, over a dry streambed, and were soon loping along a tiny path cut along the spine of a ridge. The sun rose, their shadows stretched before them. Small groups of shepherdless sheep and goats grazed the hillsides falling away on each side of them. Early morning exercise made Jonathan voluble.

"I hope you don't think too harshly of my father," he panted lightly.

"He's got a lot on his mind," Dav replied, diplomatically.

"He's a brilliant man. Sometimes I wonder if he's really cut out for this kind of work. I picture him in a more intellectual setting."

"You mean like a priest?"

"Something like that – something more scholarly."

"The way parents act, it's mysterious." Dav considered his own father and his father's clear preference for some of his children as opposed to others. He continued: "That's to say nothing of the demands they make."

"What they want you to be . . . They're impossible."

A zephyr blew over their path, carrying within it a tiny scent of the sea. The ridge abruptly rolled upward, like an oxen's hump, and the boys stopped talking while they labored on the incline. When they reached the top, they paused for breath. Far to the west, the ocean lay like a tarnished swordblade against the horizon: To the north, more hills, more ridges, distant and invisible enemies.

"In your case, I'd have thought the future'd be pretty well sewed up. Eventually, you'll be king yourself. Ruler of the Israelis."

"Not a pleasant thought," Jonathan said, sitting down. Crossing his ankles, he leaned back, and turned to smile at Dav. "What would you do?"

"As king? Abdicate."

"I'm not the brightest guy in the world, but there's one thing I'm absolutely certain of."

"What's that?"

"I'm not cut out for it." His smile had faded, but his face remained pleasant, alert and bemused. He gazed tenderly at the landscape. "Anyway, I doubt I'll live to see it."

"Live to see what?"

"Being king. Something'll happen. Maybe I'll be assassinated."

Dav surprised himself. "No, that won't happen. I won't let it."

Jonathan turned to Dav and smiled, as though privately amused. Then he lay back, hands behind his head. Two birds of prey, rising slowly from the valley below them, ascended past their feet to eye-level. Dav observed them.

"Chickenhawks," he said.

"What?" Jonathan didn't bother to open his eyes.

"There are some chickenhawks."

"I imagine you accumulate a lot of nature lore as a shepherd."

"It's specialized. You learn to identify various hawks, eagles – threats to the sheep."

"They say you single-handedly eradicated a marauding pack of bears."

"Bears don't travel in packs."

"They also say you strangled a lion."

"I didn't strangle it. I'd be dead now. My father and I trapped it in a cage and pushed it off a cliff." He paused, watching the hawks, which were now two buff and silver streaks rising like stray tufts of lamb's-wool in the valley's updraft. "It wasn't a very big lion. And it was probably sick."

"Who built the cage?"

"My father. He's got an aptitude – he can build things he's never seen. He just imagines them and knows how the parts should go together."

"It would be nice having a father who could do something besides tying knots in string."

"You're not his son. He's a real bastard sometimes, particularly as far as I'm concerned."

"Oh, why's that?"

"I wish I knew. Maybe it's got something to do with being the youngest son. I can't describe it—it's like he's suspicious of me."

"My experience has been that fathers are always suspicious of sons, particularly fathers who are kings. Kingly fathers have been known to dispose of their sons as a result of various suspicions."

"You mean murder them?"

"Actually, it's quite common."

"I guess my father wouldn't go that far. But he's come close."

"Mine wouldn't set out to kill me—he wouldn't have a plan or anything—but he might do it spontaneously, when he's having a fit. On the other hand, he could murder just about anybody when he's that way—like you, for instance."

"I don't seem to have much luck with the older generation."

"Apparently. But you're immensely popular with the young, so that makes up for it."

"I am? Like with who?"

"You're popular with me. You're also wildly popular with my sisters and their friends, which is putting it mildly."

This news gave Dav pause. Like nearly everyone at that age, he gyrated wildly between self-disgust and irrational conceit, these feelings being generally focused on his appearance. When he glimpsed himself reflected in streams or, more recently, in the shiny bronze household items of the palace, he was unsure of what he saw. Sometimes the mottled image looking back at him looked breathtakingly handsome; at other times, the surface held a picture of horror—a nose like an onager, piggy eyes, a face like a misshapened beggar's, a freak.

So he depended almost entirely on the whims and opinions of people around him to describe himself to himself. Up till recently, these people had been his family, and his family held no very high opinion of either his prospects or his looks. Now, however, a new group of people had given him a revised outlook. Still, he was sensible enough to understand that all these opinions, pro or con, probably didn't have much to do with reality.

Fortunately, reality didn't matter much where girls were concerned—at least that had been his experience until recently. If these high-born girls thought he was attractive, then he probably was. In coming to this conclusion, he conveniently ignored the fact that he otherwise considered the girls idiots.

Sunshine flooded the hilltop, and around them poppies and cornflowers and dry grass clicked and scraped, crickets rasped, the breeze played animatedly over them. Jonathan appeared to be asleep. Dav too began to doze.

He dreamt lightly of girls. The girls wore flimsy garments, some only a kind of linen loincloth—like the Egyptians. One bent to raise a pitcher from a well and the cloth parted to reveal her strong, copper-colored thigh: a tiny golden fleece shimmered along the contours of her muscles. Another girl had come up behind him and had laid her hand on his neck. She was

idly playing with the curls falling over his nape, and little rivulets of pleasure ran like a kind of delicious sweat down his shoulders and over his spine.

He woke up. Jonathan's fingers were twined in his hair.

"What are you doing?" Dav asked sleepily. Jonathan continued gently twirling a single curl.

"You have hair like fleece. I admired it from the first day I saw you—I had to touch it."

"Don't you think that's a little unusual?"

"Your hair? Yes, I do."

"Not my hair—the fact that you're fondling my hair."

"Why?"

"You know why. It's not something men do to each other."

Jonathan smiled and stopped twiddling Dav's curls. Then he sighed and stood up, carefully brushing dust from his buttocks.

"Ah well," he said, "lots of things that are unusual around Bethelhem turn out to be pretty usual everywhere else."

Dav rose, sat up, and scanned the hills and ridges to the west of them. The hillsides were going through their pre-midday color change—indistinct dark brown slope ranging to ochre, then green. The ridgeline against the cobalt sky was like a line of glaze incised in terracotta and slowly heated. A line of figures, possibly sheep, possibly people, appeared against the skyline of a nearby ridge. The hazy forms grew distinct, and Dav saw that they were men—pig-tailed, curly-bearded, and armed. More men, travelling in a line, appeared on the ridge's horizon.

Jonathan, smiling and humming to himself, was meanwhile oblivious to his surroundings, thinking about Dav. Dav seized his arm and turned him silently toward the file of armed men. Jonathan's smile lingered. He knew that there was something in this situation to be grasped, but he couldn't understand what it might be. There were men, who had apparently popped up out of the hillside, and that was oddly menacing: But why should that be so? The two young men weren't far from Hebron—in fact they could see it clearly to the east from where they stood. He looked questioningly to Dav, who whispered to him.

"Lie down . . . slowly." They slowly crouched and then lay prone. "Now crawl backwards."

"I can't do that," whispered Jonathan.

"We're in a lot of trouble. Crawl backwards."

"This is ridiculous," Jonathan said, standing up. "Why are we in trouble? Where's the danger? Who are those people?"

The men heard Jonathan's voice, which carried easily in the warm, empty air. They scanned the ridges until they spotted him, then one man dispatched several other men down the hillside into a small valley dividing the soldiers' ridge from their own.

"Run back to the city." Dav said as he watched the men starting toward him up the hillside.

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"Please do what I say—run back to the city. As fast as you can."

"I'm staying with you."

"All right, then we'd both better starting running, right now."

Harboring the vague notion that he was somehow obliged to exchange his safety for Jonathan's, Dav had intended to lead the pursuers away from the prince. But he decided, as they pounded down the track toward the city, that this was after all not a very good plan. Amid these smooth and treeless hills, their enemies would have clearly seen that they'd divided up and divide up themselves.

Running, it occurred to him that he'd recently begun acquiring enemies, and he wondered if one of the conditions of adulthood was that you were supposed to *make* enemies—as though you could manufacture them, like Jahveh, from clay—but as far as he knew, he hadn't actually done anything to bring that about. Possibly, he thought, the Goliad episode was an ill omen, one of those actions that opened the floodgates for all sorts of further mischief. Israeli history illustrated this tendency all too well.

Jonathan was speeding down the path far ahead of him. Behind him, about a sling's-throw away, four heavily armed men were in pursuit. He called to Jonathan.

"Slow down. Save your strength." Jonathan looked over his shoulder and then sped up.

Probably, he thought, this would be a good time to call on God.

"Save me, O God," he prayed. "You may not have noticed, but my enemies—your enemies, O Lord—are chasing me. I'm fairly confident that these strangers' hearts are filled with evil, otherwise why would they be chasing us with spears and swords?"

Despite their armament, the pursuers had begun to gain on him.

"Maybe you'll recall that in the past, my God, you stepped between me and disaster. I'd like to suggest that it's time you did something similar."

Now the men had drawn close enough to commence heaving their spears, one of which sailed over his head and plunged smoothly into the hard soil by the path. Although the soldiers were closing the distance between them, Dav held to his pace, running just below the threshold of his own endurance. He doubted that his pursuers, laden with weaponry, would be able to maintain their speed. Ahead of him Jonathan had begun to slow down.

Dav drew up to him. Jonathan's hair was plastered about his pasty face like an ill-fitting helmet. He glanced at him despairingly.

"I can't I can't go any"

"You've got two choices," Dav panted. They ran several steps while Dav drew breath to continue. "You can die from running." He caught his breath. "Or you can die with an ax through your skull."

Jonathan looked over his shoulder. Among the horrible men pursuing them, there was in fact one with a battleax. He ran on, grimly.

They had hit an incline. Their impetus carried them the first few strides upward, but then the hillside began to fight back, and Dav felt as though some malign mineral spirit were reaching up from within the earth, clutching his feet. Cramps ripped down his thighs, his throat scorched, his forehead felt as though an enemy were already clubbing his skull. Beside him, Jonathan groaned and stumbled.

Dav caught him up and dragged him on, while behind them the hunters closed.

He happened to glance up. Two purplish swallows cavorted in a balmy updraft. He struggled upward against ground that clung like clay to his sandals, harried by anonymous villains, while at the same time his surroundings wore a countenance of cheerful and idiot happiness The whole package seemed awfully familiar. Suddenly he realized all these components belonged to a common dream.

“This is it, Jahveh my protector,” Dav prayed out loud. “You’re not going to get another chance.” Two arrows whistled past them like large, vicious splinters. Now the soldiers too had reached the hillside. At first they loped like wolves up the steep path, but their confident pace didn’t last long. First one, then another, and then a third soldier collapsed in the track. Only one pursuer now remained, but he appeared to be fresh, strong, determined.

Dav and Jonathan topped the hill, and, one ridge away, they could see Hebron. A large flock of sheep grazed on the slope below them. Dav looked back to the remaining soldier, gauging his speed and the distance between them. Then he walked, slowly, amid the sheep, who glanced up, identified him as a human familiar with sheep, and went back to gnawing the hillside. As he and Jonathan exited the far side of the flock, their pursuer topped the ridge.

Although not nearly as large as Goliad, he appeared far more menacing. His face was hard, cunning, implacable. A scar like some terrible strip of permanent regalia ran beneath his right eye and across the bridge of his nose before angling down his left cheek.

With a practiced eye, Dav considered the sheep until he had satisfied himself that he’d found one who was especially jumpy. Then he howled. The sheep looked up, startled. Dav leaped in short hops toward the one he’d chosen: It looked around at the other sheep, hoping evidently that Dav was heading toward one of his friends. When it realized, however, that this hopping, howling human was coming in his direction, the sheep turned and fled uphill. The other sheep, sheeplike, followed, plummeting directly into the puzzled soldier, bowling him over.

Dav now turned and ran, pulling Jonathan after him, while the pursuer struggled to his feet surrounded by crazed livestock. The roiling sheep, being low to the ground and rather bulky, made standing up impossible for more than a few seconds before a maddened lump of mutton and wool caromed into his knees. He began slicing at the sheep, clearing his way, but it was too late.

Dav and Jonathan had disappeared over the final ridge and were running full-tilt across the plain approaching the city.

Chapter Five

Dav's voice when he sang wasn't like a voice at all, not like the ordinary noisemaker with which we all come equipped. The melody blew flutily in his throat, borne upward by the drumheads of his lungs. I could especially imagine his tongue. How it fashioned lyrics so that the words' sounds seemed part of some other scale, notes made up partly of air, partly of spirit, partly of his body itself. That they were his own lyrics, his psalms, probably lent a lot to this effect, and he was a great poet. I think that that part of it—his poetry—was his own, entirely Dav. But the voice: In that he had part ownership with God.

Listening to Dav sing, I wondered if God spoke to him in poetry, with musical accompaniment, which of course isn't to say that I thought God's voice would very often be pleasant, melodic. I knew that if God used songs to communicate to him, the result might be end up being raucous or terrifying, atonal or percussive.

He was someone to whom God had once talked, and had he done nothing else—had he spent his days herding livestock—he still would have been marked. In the end, that was all that counted with us: he'd been an intimate of the God of Israel. Still, he was different than the rest, Moishe or Yakob, neither a prophet nor a law-giver nor a saint. For some reason nearly as inexplicable to him as to the rest of us, God had chosen to make through him a divinely obscure political statement through him.

Sol became addicted to Dav's singing exactly in the way men become addicted to wine or moly. But the relations between Sol and Dav grew more complicated as the old king's love and resentment swelled in equal measures. When Dav picked up his harp and began to croon, Sol did not necessarily lapse into happy reverie, and the general paranoia was worsened when from time to time the king rose from his apparent lethargy and lashed out at Dav or some random listener, himself made dreamy and remote by the concert.

The worst of these episodes, one that stuck in everyone's memory, happened one day as Dav was in the middle of the second verse of "Listen to Me, God."

The martial arts were at that time enjoying a fad among the upper classes. Wealthy men with nothing better to do spent a lot of time hanging around archery ranges and (an import from the Achaeans) gyms, and when they weren't actually practicing these skills, they carried their weapons around with them. Even women, influenced by Deborah's rather dreadful example, wore long, wicked-longing bodkins strapped to their hips.

Sol himself kept by the throne an array of weaponry – slim bows made out of the latest composites, light-alloy stabbing-swords, long-range throwing spears. He liked the spears especially, the way the thin, springy shafts keened through the air and made a satisfying “thunk” as the bronze heads sank into various nearby furniture, pillars, architectural supports. Some even sailed clear out the window. These missiles were probably not aimed at anyone, although they passed near enough overhead to make people wonder.

Dav’s singing now sparked within him no frisson of excited egotism, although he knew that he still aroused his listeners, making them think of God, of love, of battle whether they wanted to or not. He enjoyed, in other words, any effective poet’s temporary powers of manipulation. Yet as he sang and strummed his way through his repertoire, and as the frightened, susceptible throng of courtiers was passively rapt by his singing, he imagined them as sheep, very little different from his father’s flocks, who gazed empty-headedly into the near distance and masticated.

Adults tend to regress when they’re told stories. They re-enter that soporific and pleasant state they knew as children falling asleep, their parents droning on beside them, ritually re-telling the familiar narratives. And so it was with the court and with Sol himself: Everybody more or less let go of the courtly surroundings and of the particular identities they took such pains to protect. Dav’s singing reduced them all to children.

“As the antelope aches,” Dav sang, “for the brook’s silver water,
“The soul yearns, Adonai, for you.”

As these lines had come to him – their rhythm first, the words themselves next – he had been surprised by them. In his short experience as a poet, his poetry had arisen from some dim interior of himself, but still its origin was recognizably Dav: the resulting theme had always been one he could identify as something he’d commonly felt – but of course better, sharpened, slightly magnified.

This psalm, however, had come from the double who acted in his name in dreams, but which like any dream-self is not really us, not the waking person who carries out our lives. And although in any of the few poems he had so far written there was some risk, some lowering of his defenses, in this particular song he had made of himself an open target. He felt lithe, quick, and insanely vulnerable, the way he had shedding the ridiculous breastplate and oversized helmet before Goliath.

As he sang this psalm, he felt the supreme pleasure of good poets: the occasional gift of hearing a poem (supposedly composed by oneself, but coming from some other place) as his own audience heard it. As he sang, he felt weepy and pleurably exposed.

Sol’s daughters, adoringly disposed on pillows nearby, also felt sentimental, vulnerable, sexy. Wet-eyed and aroused, they watched him. Their father reclined on his couch, his arm thrown over his eyes, as if to guard himself from that same vulnerability, which he perhaps felt more than any of them.

Sitting up, swinging his legs around, Sol looked about the throne room, as though he had woken disoriented from deep sleep. His bleary gaze resting on Dav, he seemed as if he were viewing the young singer benignly, short-sightedly.

Through the screen of mild intoxication induced by his own singing, Dav watched Sol, in the way that a farm laborer might keep always a little attentive to some constant, hazardous condition—the swinging of scythes around his head by his neighbors. Yet Dav had by this time acquired a fairly fine-tuned sensitivity to his king’s moods, and for the past few hours Sol seemed sunk in one of his melancholic, inactive phases.

Sol idly began searching the space about his throne, perhaps for a length of yarn (knot-tying was his principal cure for mild depression, just as the production of proverbs marked the king’s manic periods). To his left was a low table about which were strewn various hanks of tangled string, before him was a heavy bronze footstool, and to his right a tall grain basket used to store his weapons. He leaned over the left arm of his throne and began picking among the threaded jumble; then he turned forward and fussily shifted his footstool; and finally he turned toward the collection of weaponry.

Sol’s movements had caught the not-so-covert attention of everyone in the throne room. They’d noticed Sol toy with the strings and shift the footstool, and now, with sharp anxiety, they watched him rummage among the spears, bows, clubs, and slings. The last verse of Dav’s song died on his lips, he played a final flourish on the guitar, but no one applauded. Dav was unaware of that—like everyone else he watched Sol silently.

From out of the basket, Sol drew a willowy, wicked-looking javelin and turned forward, smiling, toward the assembly. He rested the shaft midway on two fingertips, looking up alertly as though to draw everyone’s attention to the weapon’s perfect balance. Various people smiled nervously, others (past targets) made no pretence of coolness, and still others backed toward the doors.

Dav stood on an impromptu stage in the middle of the room, naturally separated from everyone else. In fact, it only then became obvious to him that he and Sol were in much the same position: set up on two opposing daises rising slightly above the crowd. He knew Sol would see the physical situation as he did, symbolically.

Sol turned to a nearby guard and said quietly, “Turn out the lights.” He smiled insipidly.

The guard whispered to another guard who whispered to a third, and the three rather miserable-looking men grimly began extinguishing the torchieres on the perimeter of the hall. Motionless in the gloom, Dav listened. His ears, like a dog’s, were twitching to pick up stray noises—a whisper, the rustle of clothing, the plunk of tableware. There weren’t any stray noises.

He imagined himself back on the battlefield of Jezreel with the wind plucked from the canyon and Goliad surveying him piteously and a soundless void encompassing him.

Then in the dark red dusk stretching around him, a minimal hum, a tiny buzz blipped by. And this adumbration of a sound was followed by a more actual one—a collective intake of breath by the courtiers closest to him, his biggest fans. Perhaps they’d seen something. Another, louder hum snaked by overhead, signalling the unmistakable and menacing passage of a missile. Now a third, very close, rising nearly to a whistle, whose inaudible pitch his dog’s ears nonetheless picked up.

A breeze passed lightly through the hall, the leg of stool scraped against the marble floor, yet besides these slight marks of some world beyond him in the clotted dimness, he felt as if he had been quietly sunk beneath the earth. Stillness. Nothing further whistled by his head.

Finally Sol spoke.

“Leave me,” he said quietly. Within the vast space, empty of any noise at all except for the light wind, his voice travelled to the far walls and echoed slightly, piteously.

And as though it were brightest morning, the crowd passed in ordered files from the chamber.

* * *

Sol and Jonathan inspected the new archery range laid out on flat ground a little way from Hebron’s walls. They were walking along the firing butts under a low roof built to shade the archers, and this rough, shadowed gallery was dry and cool and smelt of freshly sawn boards. They gazed at the targets, unsteady in the midday haze, which along with their unsteadiness seemed impossibly distant. Only crack shots, thought Jonathan, could hope to hit one, and since the purpose of the range was to train up legions of arrow-unleashing troops, the whole project seemed an exercise in frustration. Father and son were alone, to the immense relief of the court, who except for the younger, sexier members intended to take naps. Neither were there flocks, even individual animals, wandering nearby (herders knew that stray sheep were enticing targets). As a result, the wind stirring itself into a dust devil in the empty landscape looked itself like a living and slightly threatening creature. There was something pleasant about dust devils, thought Jonathan, maybe because they seemed as though they should be dangerous, or possibly because they moved so errantly and excitingly with every likelihood of coming straight at you.

This wasn’t too bad, this quiet walk with his father, the sort of thing you were supposed to do with your father, and gradually, naturally, candid and unhurried conversation would bubble up out of the comfortable silence, and the son would confide in his father, and the father would respond wisely, nonjudgmentally. The son could unburden his heart, for example about certain yearnings he might have, the love he might bear for another young person. He might be surprised, Jonathan thought: In his youth, Sol may have had similar undefinable feelings, which now however with the wisdom of age had clarified, become identifiable. This emotion was another difficulty in Jonathan’s already difficult life: No wonder there was nothing straightforward about him. Everything within him—his ideas and feelings—had travelled so far, through so many turnings before arriving in his consciousness, that he was no less strange to himself than he was to others.

If Dav had been a girl. . . A girl after all, whether or not you appealed to her, would take it in stride if you touched her lightly on the nape of her neck or if you brushed her bare arm where it emerged from her tunic. She might not like it, she might in fact be repulsed by your touch, but she would assume that what you’d done was only normal.

These, he told himself, were the sorts of things a son—strolling meditatively and closely with his father—would be able to talk about, and he was on the verge of broaching this topic of intimate yearnings long suppressed, when his father finally spoke.

“This would be a good place,” Sol said. “You could do it to him right here.”

Jonathan stared at his father. There were times that the old man's insights were unsettling: Madness must be joined to a kind of sixth sense, he thought. An exciting image of his body and Dav's, slick with sweat and crumbly with sawdust, crossed his mind. The clean athleticism of this picture pleased him. Still, it was hard to know what to reply.

"Have him go down-range and check the target," Sol continued. This seemed superfluous. Once they were by themselves, out of the sun, he could suggest they take off their clothes, and then there might not have to be any pretense about shooting arrows at targets.

"It's flimsy, but you could say you were testing a bow. People will say you're stupid, 'Why was he testing a bow with someone wandering around on the shooting range?' But that doesn't matter. That will pass." Sol smiled and, for the first time in longer than Jonathan could remember, his face relaxed.

"I'm sorry, Father, but I don't understand the business about testing the bow."

"Obviously you'll need an excuse."

"I'm not getting this. You mean I'll need an excuse for where we were all afternoon?"

"Who's 'we'?"

"When we get back, Dav and me . . ."

"No, they'll bring the body back separately. Carrying Dav's dead body through the streets in broad daylight – there's certain to be a demonstration. People might end up killing *you* as well."

Jonathan was appalled: "Why would Dav be dead?"

"It's true you'll have to practice. You've got to hit him straight on, preferably through the liver. On the whole, the liver's a better target than the heart . . . You have to pierce the ribs with the heart."

"I can't believe what you're saying," Jonathan replied. And in fact his father's plan struck him as literally unbelievable. Although he knew that Sol wasn't joking (principally because his father, like most psychotics, had lost his sense of humor), but he was also convinced that some other explanation would soon present itself. Sol could, for example, be composing a parable in rather bad taste.

"Killing someone for the first time isn't easy." Sol's face tried to look sympathetic, but it was unused to this. His mouth slid upward to the left, exposing two ragged teeth and his eyes squinted in a horrible simulacrum of mirth.

Taking a bow from a nearby rack, Sol nocked an arrow and turned to the range: Raising the weapon slightly, he drew back the string and let fly. They could clearly hear, even at this distance, the arrow pierce the wood, making a sound like someone knocking timidly on a heavy door.

That Sol was still able to hit the target solidly disturbed Jonathan, not because the old man kept some of the lethality of the warrior – that threat was ordinary enough – but because it forced the son to take account of the fullness of his father's identity, that much longer portion of his life when he was not mad, when he had won Shemuel's favor by his righteousness, and had won the kingship by the acclamation of men who were, Jonathan suspected, better men than anyone around nowadays.

This particular epiphany is, of course, common, and commonly difficult for people first tapping at the shoddy and unforgiving gatepost of adulthood: Parents, too, have had a life, one that stretches back fully and mysteriously before one's birth. And when the vestiges of that youth are still in evidence, in the sudden, admiring comment of a stranger or a surprising gesture, the realization is likely to be jarring. As he or she will be compelled to do many times throughout ominously dawning adulthood, the child must accept another person as he is, and not as he is in one's own adolescent caricature.

As if sensing these jarring reflections in his son, Sol said: "I've come to believe that any particular death doesn't have much significance."

"But God cherishes every life." Jonathan wasn't sure that he believed this in general, but he felt certain that God cherished the lives of people known to Jonathan, particularly his own.

"Don't bring God into it. Besides, there isn't any solid evidence that He cares one way or the other. His projects take place in a far vaster arena."

"God *chooses* people. He chose Dav."

Still holding the bow in his right hand, Sol turned slowly to his son, and his face was so pale, so implacable, that Jonathan found it nearly unbearable to look at. Sol's face was the face of a king, or even more: There was about it something itself godlike, impassable, without appeal to individual cases.

"It's time for you to stop fucking around and take over some of the responsibilities of leading this horrible country."

Jonathan was terrified: For the first time it occurred to him that someday, very soon perhaps, he would become king of the Israelites.

Sol began to walk away, and then turning, he said: "Kill him."

* * *

Dav found it difficult to sleep in his room, especially during the day, when he had been accustomed to nap on the hillsides among his sheep, which like all sheep had an almost narcotic power to induce sleep in human beings. So he was lying on a straw mat in the shade of one of the palace's innumerable porticos, and as he lay there drowsily thinking of sheep shuffling and munching on one level, he also wondered, on another, why he was surrounded by a retinue.

For retinue it was: Somehow a gang of followers had attached itself to him. And despite his raw political innocence, he was quite sensible that Sol—or any king for that matter—disapproved of his followers having followers of their own. At first, there had been only a few young men his own age, drawn to him by the natural and unconscious clumping about an attractive peer which young men do. Preferably, they would have done their clumping around Jonathan, but Jonathan was in fact one of their number.

Then older men, with a good deal more calculation, had attached themselves to Dav. These were not young courtiers, but soldiers, like Ira (who was one of the earliest), most of whom had seen Dav kill Goliad. Yet what did these seasoned warriors expect of him? Their presence made him painfully self-conscious; he vaguely sensed they harbored expectations of him, but in response all he could do was sing songs, and this seemed somehow an insignificant (if not actually risible) return for their loyalty.

Mainly, he suspected, they were awaiting God's word, His prophecy through His spokesman, and many of his poems were pleas for just that—God's intervention, epiphany, advice, miracles. A sign. However, even dreams of God had ceased. Being here, in the palace, was probably bad for reception; to transmit, God probably needed the pure, dry vacancy of the hillsides and the secrecy of remote ravines, the bleating of sheep and not of people.

His blood felt stagnant, lying in heavy pools within his heart, and the prospect of any event, no matter how trivial, was dismaying because each activity carried with it a crust of dread. He was needy, he needed God, but although he knew God existed—had in fact seen and heard Him—God didn't seem much concerned about these needs. Maybe Dav's bleakness of outlook was itself an expression of God's absence, and his need for reassurance and serenity was simply what happened when God wasn't around (despite the fact that God was *always* supposed to be around).

This futile train of thought eventually put him to sleep, and he was thus dozing when Jonathan arrived back from the archery range and sought him out.

Jonathan knelt beside him, laying his hand gently on Dav's forearm, lovingly studied his face: how large his eyes were, how straight the line of his nose, how stern and beautiful his lips. Dav woke slowly, feeling dizzy and disoriented, and was unsurprised to find Jonathan once again staring at him.

"I wish you'd stop hanging around me when I'm trying to sleep," he said.

"It's when you're most perfect."

"You can't be 'most perfect.' You're either perfect or you're not."

"Then that's what you are."

"What do you want, Jonathan?"

Jonathan recalled the horrible knocking sound his father's arrow made when it struck the wooden target.

"It's time for archery practice."

"Since when?"

"It's on the new schedule. My father drew it up and we have to follow it."

"Until later on today, when he gets bored with it."

"He says we can't have our fighting men sitting around with nothing to do. He says it's inappropriate."

A few of the veterans among Dav's retinue had become interested in their conversation.

"It's what we've always done," Ira said. "That's what warriors do everywhere. If you're putting your life on the line, you've got to have some perks."

The others nodded assent.

"Let's not argue," Jonathan said. "Maybe Dav's right: If we go down to the range and practice for a while, by the end of the day, my father will have forgotten all about schedules."

When they arrived at the range, Dav's followers found that they'd been preceded by Sol's household guard. The guard wasn't doing anything in particular—they weren't firing at targets, they didn't even look as though they had any intention of practicing. There were a lot of them, which seemed in itself intimidating despite the fact that their demeanor wasn't itself threatening, but rather anxious, uncertain. A conviction took shape within Dav, which quickly

translated itself into a verse: "They hone their tongues like swords, and they bend their bows . . ." He looked about at the guardsmen's faces that in the shade of the butts looked sallow, unhealthy, grisly. Each man avoided his gaze.

"Save me from whatever's going on here, God," he prayed. "Get me out of this."

"You go first," Jonathan said, handing him a bow and smiling the way a sick man does, as though the effort nauseates him.

Everything in Dav's vision was askilter, without perspective. Across the mown ground to the targets, two prettily shaped clouds seem to hang only a hand's breadth above, and beyond the targets the hills looped a few yards away. The targets themselves twisted like flames. Out there, out in the sunlight, seemed to be a threshold to some other place, perhaps the underworld. Out there in the light, you'd be dead, but you'd still see a world around you, only the world wouldn't be the one where you breathed the hot, dry air, and things would not happen the way you expected them to happen.

Evil was nearby, much nearer than God, as near as God had been that time with Goliad, who now seemed laughably harmless, a joke about good and bad. The sour, crazy smell from the guardsmen, the way looking down the shooting range was like looking down a deep well, something coming out of Jonathan's head like high-pitched squeals just beyond what he could hear – evil.

And although he did not then put this word to it – "evil" – he fully knew it in the way you always know it, because you're part of it. Just as when by chance you stumble into the sphere of something unfeignedly good, the presence of a saint or more often a random saintly action, and you too become good for that instant, so whether you're party to it or not, Dav knew, whether in fact you're a victim of it, you are part of it. He knew then these essential attributes of good and evil: that will or deserving have very little to do with them. When they happen, as very rarely they do, they trap anybody unfortunate enough to be a bystander. A no longer innocent bystander.

He nocked an arrow, drew, and released. It moved toward the target: he could track its progress easily, so lazily did it sail. When it arrived, striking dead-center, no sound travelled back to them. And the watching crowd of soldiers did not cheer, they didn't even murmur approval. They stood gazing out at the range as though they were dybuds, false and insensate, as though each of them had been himself transfixed by Dav's arrow.

He stepped away from the butt, and Jonathan took his place. Jonathan's arrow slowly described a curve and fell beyond the targets. As he turned to Dav, the switch from glare to shadow made Dav a glowing white outline, like an iron tutelary figurine left too long in the forge.

"I can't see where it hit."

"That's because you overshot."

"No, I think it's next to yours – it's just too bright to see."

"You overshot, Jonathan. Fire again."

"Would you just go out and check it for me? Maybe you could spot it so I could correct."

"Aim lower."

"Is it asking too much for you just to walk out there and check?"

“What about these other people standing around? Send one of them.”

“So now you’re too important to do me a small favor?”

Dav watched him. The ghostly squealing coming from Jonathan’s forehead was growing nearly audible. The men surrounding them seemed to have formed up into distinct groups, the guardsmen near Jonathan, the others behind and beside Dav.

This was test, he knew. Another test. This time, however, he was clearly aware that God had no part in the testing, although on the other hand he wasn’t really certain who *did*. Maybe the force of this group of men, maybe they were waiting for him to prove . . .

What the hell, he thought.

He crossed the barrier between sun and shade, and when he did this, he felt he’d moved into another element. He imagined himself sliding onto a great body of water—certainly not a river like the Jordan—perhaps the Sea of Galilee if the Sea of Galilee had hardened into stillness. As he walked downrange, his feet felt as though the soil was clutching them. In its incalculable stillness, the earth seemed to absorb all movement. Above it, a kind of huge, creaking and translucent whirlpool swirled, carrying the world down into itself. The men back at the butts were silent, or maybe their voices were being carried downwind of him (but there wasn’t any wind).

One arrow was sunk in the center of the middle target, and beyond, in pure geometric arrival, a second was stuck in the ground. Both looked incapable of flight, like weeds rooted in place. As he stared at them, an image flickered by and was gone. The situation felt familiar: He stood in a cone of light, his skin sending back all sorts of alerts, and other people stood around in the shadows, watching him, waiting. What were they waiting for?

Suddenly, the image, the memory, returned and remained: He was back in the throne room, up on the dais, singing while missiles whistled by his ears. Out here alone on the archery range, he discovered precisely the same vulnerability, that horrible pricking of skin. Looking back, he saw Jonathan raise his bow and aim. First the father, now the son, he thought. If they had it in for you, sooner or later they’d get you, unless God intervened, and it looked as though God had pretty much lost interest in him. Probably God had found out what Dav had always known: He was not simply a leaky vessel—full of gaps and flaws—he was also an inadequate one. His capacity was severely limited, with only ordinary possibilities for growth. He saw the arrowhead drawn back to the grip as clearly as if he’d been standing face to face with Jonathan. In a moment it would pierce him. This knowledge did not disturb him.

Because he was young, he was able to face death with equanimity, privately suspecting (like most young people) that horrible things could happen to his body and he would still be all right. He walked slowly, bravely, toward Jonathan across the sunlit range, and when he had come to within a few yards of him, he halted.

“Shoot then,” he said. His voice was steady, neutral. He surprised himself.

The arrow’s tip a few feet from his nose, however, made a small, trembling circle, and he realized that his greatest peril was that Jonathan would nervously let it slip from the bowstring. In its general aspects, this situation was similar to, but not exactly like, the day at Jezreel, standing before Goliath. On the one hand, there too his immediate and personal destruction seemed imminent, yet on the other hand, Goliath had coolly assumed he would kill him:

Jonathan, he knew, would not, except by accident. A short time earlier, he might have depended on God to pay attention, to prevent a pointless and nonsymbolic death. Now he was not at all convinced of this. It didn't feel as though God were concentrating.

Finally, Jonathan let the bow (which in its agile tension seemed to contain more menace than the person drawing it) relax, the arrow drooped, and the weapon lost its animated intimidation, its personal grudge against Dav. It lay in the dust as it was, a collection of sticks and string.

In small groups, the men began discreetly to wander back toward the city. They looked embarrassed, although it would have been difficult to say why this was so: The situation itself had probably seemed shameful to them, and Dav, through no fault of his own, had a part in the shame. This time there was no glory in his cool consideration of his own mortal peril, except whatever self-congratulation he might wish to impart to it. But this of course was simply another of the infinite attributes of evil: You were powerless to emerge with honor, or at least with the appearance of being sturdily enduring. Evil, he found, had certain properties of grace, among them the fact that you didn't earn it. A certain objective, accidental quality clung to the way evil swung round and chose some hapless group of people, only a few of whom might be actually bad. Jonathan definitely couldn't aspire to evil; he wasn't a candidate.

But perhaps I am, thought Dav.

Through tears and snuffling, Jonathan was trying to say something to him. It was hard to listen to him anymore, even to hear him, but Dav made an effort.

"Ruh, ruh, ruh," Jonathan stuttered.

"Stop crying. I can't understand you."

"For . . ." Jonathan sobbed twice, his breath caught, he sniffed, and went on more clearly. "My father will kill you," he said simply. "You must run away."

Dav walked out from the shade of the archery shed, unthinkingly gathering up a bow and a quiver as he went. He walked away from Hebron, without much caring where he was going.

Chapter Six

He travelled through Bethlehem at night, without stopping, without seeing his family. He said this was because he'd become a liability to them, not simply the loser his father had always said he was, but now a real threat. But I wonder whether he'd simply forgotten them. Some people, fortunate people, do that, as hard as it is for the rest of us to understand. When, like Dav, you have luck as a sort of personality trait (more than just a gift or a talent), then the human beings you meet at stages of your triumphant progress through life, these people are already memories. You might not know that at the time, as Dav did not know of his family, but later, looking back on it . . . well, you don't look back on it, if you're one of the fortunate ones.

And night travelling meant travelling beneath the benign, indifferent stars. As he and his strung-out cohort moved down the Judean cordillera after dark, the stars seemed to deepen in his knowledge of them: they were not remote, for all their endlessness; they were not artfully appealing. They were most certainly not God, although he knew that God had everything to do with them.

In fact, the stars had that dreadful, objectively real meaningfulness that things adopt for those who are chosen by God. As he marched before his men (and they were "his" now, even if only because they walked mulishly behind him), with his shepherd's sure blind sight in moving through the dark, he studied the Choice. He knew that God wanted him to be thinking about why he was chosen, as opposed to what it felt like. Possibly he was too tired to concentrate on objectives. If he had, perhaps the stars would have said to him in a stage whisper, "Aspire to us!" But they clearly didn't want to make a statement. The stars were like his father when he brooded over him, casting sour glances at him – their message was clear enough.

Naturally, he wrote poems to God about this state of lowering significance, the way stones and stars and cliffsides and freshets were swollen with the same baleful message, like overstuffed sausages with tight, shiny skins. It was bad enough, the poems said, that people with limitless power were his enemies, but worse still was the enmity of the physical world, which expressed itself in the inexpressible malice of knowing him, of witnessing him.

Of this he had once said to me, only silly and self-regarding minds frightened themselves with the world's meaninglessness: The real, ineradicable terror is that it means, always and with deadly seriousness.

During the day they hid in caves, or inside cavelike thickets of chapparal on the floor of a deep wadi. Although caves afforded much better concealment, Dav preferred the thickets, in the shadowy air filled with the happy odor of evergreens and the oily, pungent scent of arid-land shrubs. The sun of noonday cast bright panels and slits on the sand where they sat or slept. Dav found it easy to sleep during the day. He liked it. He liked waking before sunset, the breeze starting up and cooling the sleep-sweat on his face. And it was pleasant too sleeping on the sand that cushioned and yielded to him.

At dusk they would gather to plan their apparently endless escape. No one had blocked their going from Hebron, no one had stopped them as they hiked through villages and places too tiny to be even that, the inhabitants when they appeared only coming out to line the road and stare at them silently. No more cheers, no more "Sol has killed his thousands, but Dav's killed a hell of a lot more!" Yet these too were witnesses, probably sympathetic ones (unlike the stars and rubbly mountains), but who could tell?

What wonderful grace there was, he often thought, in a world indifferent to the people in it. His followers, of course, existed simply and unaffectedly in this blessed state, and like angels, they were confused by his obvious struggle with words. Even the densest of them could easily see that something stupendous was going on within him. Like the rest of us, when we're confronted with our sisters and brothers singled out for God's ordeal, we either kill the victim or elect him our leader.

The men in Dav's band were more concerned with pursuit, which would be mounted eventually whenever the king had a lucid moment. The trick was to get as far away as they could before that happened, somewhere obscure and wild, where they'd have an advantage over their pursuers, where the hills zigged-zagged like dog's teeth and the wadis tangled like the skeins of a discarded net. Places where the occasional slat-sided lion could be seen slinking down an arete, where there were bears and wild bulls.

It was in the nature of their flight, of course, that they had no destination, since destinations always provided a place to be caught. Soon in fact they would arrive, if they could be said to arrive, in the wilderness, where they would simply continue to move around. That was the aim: just keep moving.

So planning their escape actually meant trying to decide where they could get something to eat, where there might be fresh water, the next place to hide.

To the extent that anyone at Sol's court could feel himself more ill-adapted than anyone else, Dav felt alien. At least the others were accustomed to city life, to the constant assault of non-Israelis more at home than he, their incomprehensible languages, their touchy customs, the nook-and-cranny places they lived and traded. Architecture and statuary never meant much to Dav, even after he'd become king and Jerusalem turned into one enormous civic works project; in this he was a true Jew, unmoved by idols.

But in the desert places, Dav was at home, and this naturally equipped him for guerilla leadership. He needed no special training because his entire childhood had been in a sense a miniature exile to the sheep and their hillsides. And hiding wasn't a novel experience, either: as he approached adolescence, he devoted much of his vastly unoccupied time figuring out ways to avoid his father, taking the herds for extended hikes into the bush.

Yet during these early days of duck and dodge, another layer of his soul began to take substance and color, like a muddy, nondescript glaze that, all at once after days of firing, flares into ruddy bloom in the kiln. He would feel his scalp prickle and feel that something, some feature of the landscape, was trying to get his attention. Despite himself, he would look in the direction from which this silent hail would arise, and he would know that there—in a stunted tamarisk, the short cascade of narrow river, the bulk of a giant boulder molded to some readable shape—some god would be dwelling. Perhaps the object itself was a god, or at any rate some dybbuk, a local spirit.

Yet at the same time, Jahveh was clearly absent. He hadn't departed abruptly, so that there might be some clear sense of exile, of piercing abandonment, a sign. God had slipped away, like a lover who loses interest and isn't at first herself aware of this. Dav tried without success to trace (as you try to pinpoint what it was that first disillusioned your lover) when this process had begun. It had been far along, anyway, that day on the archery range, and now it had been completed. In its place was this crazy proliferation of near-animate bushes, muttering rocks, snakes with distinct personalities.

He felt himself slipping back, not merely to some swampy and evil babyhood of his own, but to the way the Jews used to be, when they'd slapped together statues out of mud and gold, holding nothing back, so that these images throbbed with a kind of sexy and violent spiritualism, the kinds of things that made people want to weep and masturbate and torture strangers.

Even if Dav lacked the transparency of natural leaders through which their personal currents vibrate crisply to those around them (which he had in plenty), his followers would have sensed the decay in his condition. They hadn't fled one madman to join up with another, younger, one.

"You don't look good," Ira said to him one day, as they struggled up the rattling shale of a steep ravine. They paused in their scramble up the scree and, stopping, slid backward.

"I'm tired and hungry. I don't know where we're going. I don't know how to lead men."

"That's not the look I mean." As the heavier man, Ira was panting as they paused. "I knew a man once, a shopkeeper in a small way, pots and pans, dried beans, paring knives, whatever he could get a deal on. But God occasionally spoke to this man.

"He wasn't by way of being what you might call a prophet, mind you. No, God just mentioned things to him while he was running his shop. Like, 'Give this old lady an extra helping of barley,' God'd say, or 'You got those caps at three, you're selling at twelve—that's too much mark-up.' This friend of mine couldn't really understand why God was bothering with him at all. What He was telling him could've been done by a standard-issue conscience.

"But he got used to it, God's little remarks, from time to time. Just having God interested, that was plenty of faith for this man.

"Then he didn't hear from God for a while. Months passed, years.

"Maybe, my friend thought, he hadn't been paying enough attention. Maybe God got fed up because my friend wasn't drawing the right conclusions. Maybe these remarks had more to them than my friend's dim wits could grasp. So he put more and more time in thinking about the things God had said. 'You could give those coat-hooks away'—what did *that* mean? What

was God really saying when he suggested that my friend should stop mixing sawdust with the paprika?

"My friend got to looking just like you, like somebody God's stopped talking to."

"What happened to him?" By now they'd drifted far downhill and were halted by an outcrop.

"He walked out into the wilderness. Nobody ever saw him again."

"If you're comparing your friend to me, I should point out that I'm already *in* the wilderness."

"I think you need some therapy. It doesn't mean you're crazy or anything. People just go through bad times and sometimes it helps to talk to a professional. Especially people who've had dealings with God, which, thank God, most of us haven't."

Dav stared at him.

"You're joking. Where am I going to find a therapist out here?"

"No, not here, but it's only two-days' walk to Ramah."

* * *

The situation in Ramah was abnormal. For one thing, nobody was speaking Hebrew. For another, people didn't get to bed: They stayed up for days, getting more and distraught, hallucinating, passing out where they stood when their bodies had had enough.

Two men stood by opposite sides of the road as Dav and his men trooped nervously through the south gate. The pair glared directly at Dav and Ira, yelling at them in a foreign language. This shouted language had the disconcerting feature (besides the fact that it was loud and hysterical) that you could almost understand many individual words—the words were like esoteric or old-fashioned phrases that you might have heard once and forgotten. Or (maybe more exactly) it was as if you'd suddenly forgotten your own language and someone else was hysterically trying to help you retrieve it.

Passing the nearer one, Dav realized that these two gatekeepers weren't bellowing at him, but were instead looking through them down the road, past the hillsides, past even the horizon, and deep into whatever was beyond the sky. There were sacks that looked like permanent facial features slung under the men's eyes, and their skin was veal-colored.

There was a name incised in the soft stone of the town's largest building, "Institute for Prophecy," and in smaller lettering near the door, "Inquire within."

The ground floor was one large airless room, brightly illuminated by many small lamps, and although the number of people in the room wasn't great, Dav felt squeezed by other bodies. It's the contrast, he thought, with the wilderness: He hadn't been indoors in a while. The men in the room were all moving erratically and violently within constricted orbits, like sardines flipping and circling in a receding tidal pool. An ancient elder, his once dark eyes turned the color of egg whites by blindness and his beard missing big tufts as though someone had plucked them, forcefully chanted at the wall an hand's-breadth from his crumbling nose. Like the gibbering of the south gate babblers, the sounds he made fell just short of being recognizable, with the same maddening result that his hearer felt that his own comprehension was failing.

Here and there silent men alertly stared around at each other person in the room, one by one. Dav had a strong impression, nearly amounting to a conviction, that these nonspeakers were involved in a kind of inspection—for whom they were doing this inspection, and to what end, it was impossible to say.

Strangest of all (and Dav could not in any case be sure of this), some individuals appeared to be floating, not for long and not very high—but first their garments loosened as though puffed by a breeze and then their sandals fell loose from the soles of their feet and then thin wedges of light seemed to wink from beneath them. Other objects too drifted from their ordinary underpinnings: a tiny lamp tottered out of its wall socket and made a timid progress across the room, like a newborn puppy.

It was clearly pointless to ask anyone anything. On the far side of the room, a ladder was propped up through a hole in the ceiling. Dav crossed the room, climbed the ladder, and found himself in a much narrower, darker space. A little ahead of him a cracked door shed buttery light through its fissures. Dav knocked. Within, all was silent. Here in the gutlike upper hallway, the noise from the men below was strangely diminished: the floors, he thought, must be unusually thick. With his fingertips he pushed the edge of the door and carefully stuck his head through the opening, partly through courtesy, partly through some form of caution for which he couldn't account.

The Chief Prophet, A'iml'q, crouched alone in the center of the room, holding a strand of black beads close to his eyes. He was studying each bead by moving his head above and around the strand, as though it were a snake on a limb.

"It's you," A'iml'q sighed, without stopping his investigation of the beads. "Conditions aren't good. Things seem to have gotten out of hand."

"I'd say so. Who are all these people?"

"Prophets. You can see from the sign outside, over the door." A'iml'q was now closely inspecting a single bead, bringing it close and then moving it away, as though to focus it. Dav recalled that before he'd become a prophet A'iml'q had been a tradesman, in fact a jeweler, and this probably accounted for the attention he was giving to the beads. Maybe they were valuable or unusual. In Dav's experience, once you'd worked at something for several years, you never entirely lost interest in the technical details of your profession.

"If you could only do something . . ." added A'iml'q. "Since you're the cause, you must be the answer as well. That's reasonable." He looked up at the ceiling, which Dav now realized was much lower than he'd first assumed. Its gritty surface actually rubbed his scalp. Maybe now *he* was levitating. A'iml'q continued to speak to the ceiling in an unbecoming, accusatory whine: "Adonai, Adonai, where . . . is . . . this . . . going? As for me, I'm not up to it, I can't make out what anybody's talking about, I don't have the necessary background." Resuming a more normal tone, he glanced once again at Dav. "So maybe you can translate? What about it? Anything make sense?"

"Not only doesn't anything make sense, it's very unsettling. I'm very troubled."

"Everybody's troubled."

“Rabbi, this is serious. I’m losing my faith. Maybe that’s not the right way to put it—actually, I think I’m becoming a pagan.” Dav hesitated. “This is to say nothing I’m running for my life.”

“Ah, well, as for the last part: God will provide. Your future’s the only certain element about this situation.”

“I wish I could be so confident. At any moment, Sol’s crack antiterrorist squad might ambush me.” Even as he said this, Dav felt uncomfortably that he was overdramatizing and that in fact A’iml’q was right: He was regaining the conviction that God had chosen him, that nothing fatal was going to happen to him.

A’iml’q finally let the beads drop to the floor. He sighed. “They’re already here. Listen.”

The frightening noise of cymbals, shofars, brass trumpets was loud in the streets outside the building. How was it that he hadn’t heard them earlier? He clambered down the ladder, and looked around the now-empty lower room for a means of escape, some small entrance that had been hidden by the throng. But the only way out was the door by which he’d come in.

He recognized that the staleness clotted about his recent life had sloughed off, like dead skin from a wound. The objects around him had snapped back inside themselves and were not merely mute but stupid in the singularity of their meaning: a pot was only a pot, a basket a basket.

The racket outside was deafening, the sound of riot rather than battle. A few moments earlier Dav possessed the fearlessness of exhaustion and indifference, but now he’d regained . . . He wasn’t quite sure what he’d regained. Maybe his own potent significance against the bland backdrop of everything else, and perhaps this also meant that God was about to reappear on stage. He walked through the door with the sense that he was making his entrance as chief celebrant, or principal sacrifice, in some long-anticipated rite.

The road made an abrupt uphill swerve to the left just past the door, while in front of him the street formed an arcade where many men were in violent, although not apparently hostile, action. The prophets-in-training were continuing to behave in the same anxiety-provoking manner, with the exception that they seemed somehow to have increased their numbers. Each one still formed about himself the same husk of strangeness and isolation, babbling, levitating, moving things around in the gutter through telepathy. Sol’s guard stood about in unsoldierly clumps, scratching and listening slackjawed to the commotion made by the prophets. Sol stood alone in the middle of the street.

No one paid any attention to Dav. His own followers had pressed themselves against the buildings lining the arcade, as though they’d backed off as far as they could go from a scene that was clearly scaring them out of their wits. Ira and Dav glanced at each other questioningly the way people do who are witnesses to a horrible and inexplicable accident.

The men in the street—the soldiers and A’iml’q’s prophets—looked as though they’d been posed by a lunatic who had directed each one to perform a series of repetitive, obscurely significant motions while standing in place. An odor like burning resin and pig shit steamed off them, and, to his surprise, Dav found that this smell, coupled with the soldier’s indifference to him, nearly incapacitated him with fear.

Several of the soldiers, eyes locked on the babblers, slowly began flapping their lower jaws while their faces above their mouths remained rigid, locked in the final rictus of someone who had died suddenly and unpleasantly. In chorus, they made a tiny sucking sound, which swelled to a hiss punctuated by chattering teeth, and then finally crescendoed in shouted vowels, choking consonants, spit-out diphthongs. The soldiers were prophesying.

Sol was not immune. He brayed and ululated some ancient and brutal language composed of threats, curses, and paranoia. Exactly in fact, Dav thought, the kind of language Sol would make up. While keeping his legs close together and rigid, the king bent from the waist and sprang upright, as though his spine were a bowstring; he did this over and over, while bellowing his donkey-language.

Speaking almost casually, Ira said: "Let's kill them while we have the chance."

On one level, Dav knew that Ira's suggestion was simply common sense, politically inevitable, strategically necessary – and yet the image of Sol's murder filled him with horror. He could easily envision how it would be: He would hack through the turgid neck and bulging veins, mad bulbs of sound filling it and pissing out through Sol's mouth, like some horrible excretory organ. And the head would continue to babble lying parted from its shoulders on the stones. You couldn't kill someone in a state like that: Something horrible would happen to them, something horrible would happen to *you*.

The sight of the gibbering king and his soldiers seemed to have a sobering effect on the prophets, who subsided into muttering accompanied by slight bouncing on the balls of their feet. Dav shouldered his way through the crowd to Sol.

"Oh, Sum of All Our Desires, forgive me." He couldn't think what to say next. The king was looking directly in his face but what he was seeing wasn't the supplicant boy.

"Yaguna!" Sol said emphatically. "Wallowwallow yell tree!"

Dav thought nostalgically of the yarn-knotting. Even the occasional potshots were less disconcerting than this.

"It sure as hell comes as no surprise he's like this," Ira said. "But I can't figure out why the rest of them have gone nuts. . . Look at those two."

Amid the scarred, heavily armed men immediately to Sol's rear, Elvin and Jesse, Dav's brothers, danced in each other's arms. They twirled together lazily, making a tiny circle, skillfully twitching their upper bodies in time to some common and evidently gentle rhythm. With no very high expectations, Dav called to them. But since they weren't responding to the enormous racket going on around them, it was unlikely Dav's small, distant cry would reach them.

"Those are my brothers," Dav said to Ira. Ira watched Elvin bend Jesse in a particularly graceful dip.

"Looks like they've had lessons," Ira replied.

Like a viscous, salt-heavy wave on the Sea of Galilee, Sol and his men ebbed sloppily back the way they'd come, having broken on the prophets' lunacy. Then the prophets, as though chastened, quietly re-entered their institute. Dav's followers crossed into the shadows of the arcade and lay down, preparing for a nap, while Dav and Ira remained standing in the middle of the road.

After a while, Ira said: "That's not the last we'll see of them."
"That's it," Dav said, "I've had it up to here with Israel."

Chapter Seven

Their hideout—a cavern’s mouth larger than the largest hall at Karnak—had had other tenants, possibly hundreds of them, certainly some very strange, very old ones. Along the multiple passages that led like tributaries to the enormous space, there were painted images of animals, like hippopotamuses, now scarce or unknown in Ziph, and sometimes of men, of hunters. They held their torches up to the dry, golden walls and in the pulsing light the figures seemed to flee, to leap, to charge. The colors, mostly russet and black and umber, were still so bright that Dav’s men were of the opinion that the painters were deathless wanderers who might decide to come back and make the drawings come to life. It was the general feeling that these weren’t just art: they clearly held supernatural potency, if you knew how to unlock it.

The cavern mouth was at the deadend of a steep draw and yawned several cubits above the canyon floor, high enough that you had to ascend by rope but still far enough down that most of the day went by in shadow. Despite that, a peculiarly warm breeze came up out of the tributary cracks, possibly the breath of a titan sleeping eternally below the earth.

The canyon, the cavern, the paintings—the whole place was weird. Only Dav was immune to the eeriness; the events at Ramah had apparently broken the spell, and the visible world looked once again to him like the visible world, no indwelling ghosts, certainly no objects yearning to speak to him. But God was also absent. Perhaps this was just as well, thought Dav, even though it meant that verses no longer bunched up spontaneously in his mouth. Well, he had enough to think of.

Winter had arrived. Snow powdered the ledges like dusted flour on breadcrust, and the pools had frozen in the rivulet that flowed among the bladelikey rocks below. With the cold, it seemed, people had begun to show up—not merely young men with young men’s natural interest in training to be outlaws, but the aged, women with young children, orphans. They had found him unerringly, while Sol’s scouts had scoured all of Ziph in frustration. God had pointed them the way, they said. Dav would be their protector. Dav didn’t doubt they were right: This had all the earmarks of something God *would* do, whispering in the collective ear of the poor and despairing, “Go to Dav, go to Dav—he’s hiding in a big cave in the middle of the nowhere.” God had been known before to collect large crowds of disinherited Jews, moving them long distances around the countryside, forgetting to feed them, and then remembering

that they were only mortal and having to manufacture some impromptu miracle simply to keep them going. Bobwhites and biscuits falling out of the sky.

Until recently, he had become familiar with two lifestyles: (1) rich and (2) not rich, but anyway modest and certainly well-fed. Now he'd experienced a third: destitution. Which wasn't like he'd imagined. He thought being impoverished meant you simply had a lot less of things like food and clothing. But the poverty he now saw about him strewn around the cavern floor, on ledges, crammed into crevices, this poverty featured a kind of awful abundance. If you were homeless, he now realized, you had to carry everything you owned everywhere you went, and because you were poor, you picked up whatever was left lying around and nobody else wanted. People didn't give up the need for possessions just because they couldn't have the possessions they wanted. They still had that need, like a child who fills jars with yard debris because something in him abhors the jars' emptiness.

Things other people didn't want, things in fact that even poor people had no immediate use for—ragged clothing, pots with no bottoms, bound sheaves of splintered building materials—all of it gradually spread itself out on the cave floor, like seafloor detritus cast up by the tides.

He envied Moishe. After even five years of roaming around the desert, the wandering tribes must have been divested of nearly everything except their wind-scoured robes. Rope-thin, wily people, living by their wits, nearly airborne like the blown sand: that's how he thought of them.

Yet despite himself perhaps, he was falling in love with them all, several hundred people, all at once, without discrimination: the octogenarian with a face rubbed perfectly round and flat by leprosy, like a platter; the thirty-year-old widow with six children, whose gaze never stopped closer than the horizon, except when Dav passed by; the small children who seemed to scream in watches, six or seven falling asleep and six or seven starting in, and the older children who never made a sound. It didn't matter. They weren't his responsibility, they weren't his sheep, they weren't even his family. They were like lovers whose mole or neurosis is fascinating, something to cherish.

Perhaps the utter destitution of this tattered, disorganized group, their unquestioning dependence on him, made it easier for Dav to steal from people not much better off. Besides, his victims weren't officially recognized Jews. Like our neighbors we lived by an easy rule: if you weren't a member of our tribe then you were probably our enemy. Further simplifying the system was the existence of selected traditional enemies, hostiles, people you didn't need to think twice about killing.

Coupled with Sol's off-again-on-again pursuit of him, this situation bred in him a complex assortment of unfamiliar feelings. First there was the piquancy of the game, of scouting and strategizing and surrounding and pouncing. Then there was the blunt, chiaroscuro quality of righteousness, which actually from time to time brought tears to his eyes as he considered how blameless he was and how thoroughgoingly vicious his enemies were. And as usual (although he deftly pretended he didn't feel this) there was the luscious and provocative feeling you got from stealing and pushing people around, especially people who deserved this sort of behavior. There were mitigating circumstances of course: these other people were usually

under the protection of bullies, psychopaths, and sadists, to fall into whose hands would be unimaginably painful.

The foray against Gath was in every way like a dozen other previous sorties, which was to say that they came up to it as they were roaming hungrily around the countryside and decided that its natural defenses weren't especially forbidding. All too accustomed to these random search-and-destroy missions by just about anyone who could muster a dozen armed men, the city fathers of these places did everything they could to make them inaccessible, if possible by situating the town on a sheer-sided plateau encircled by a deep river with rapids bordered by trackless swamp.

Gath, however, had taken the opposite tack: It was built on a plain as level as a Nile puddle in the dry season so you couldn't easily sneak up on it. And it was large enough that anyone would naturally assume its headman to be formidably equipped not only to hold off invaders but to deal gruesomely with them afterwards.

But they were hungry, their noncombatant followers were even hungrier, and somewhere in the pompous bulk of Gath there was definitely a lot of food. The other side benefits—larceny, rape, and arson—didn't come into it: Starvation made them pure and single-minded.

Although Gath was surrounded by hundreds of vegetable plots, through which in warm weather they could have crept unseen, it was now dead winter, and they were forced to use whatever lowlying garden trash they could find. Attaching to themselves headdresses made of old squash vines, they lay at dusk in the residue of a turnip field south of town. The remote western horizon was still banded in poppy-colored streaks, but overhead the night heavens (where God is, thought Dav) were low, clotted, the color of dingy fleece in very early spring. Light snow began to fall and in a short time they and the ragged twists of vines were indistinguishable. Men and turnips alike lay under a pink, floury coat.

He felt surprisingly warm lying there, and he was sleepy. He could hear the tiny scratching of the snow as it fell on his cloak and onto the ground around his face, mixing itself with the rough soil, and where he breathed on it, melting into the ground. His eyes closed and he dreamt the smallest possible dream, even while he clearly heard the scratchy snowfall and the wind and felt his toes pinch with the cold. God was all around the edges of the dream, like the circle of low, smoldering fire peasants used to clear a field, and Dav was dying. He would be dead before the sluggish fire reached him. This assurance God had guaranteed him, it was a sure thing, and along with this God had afforded him the knowledge that this brief sleep was nothing more or less than his life itself.

As though the dream were a creature, it made a sound peculiar to it as a species, as an individual, this was expressed as a line—perhaps the opening verse of a poem but undoubtedly the poem's key phrase, the tempo and the words at the center of every psalm that unlocked it:

"Stars roll, meteors fall, the remote moon rises,

"Our God, my God, these glories arm . . ."

He opened his eyes. The men around him had begun to rustle and shift, to prepare themselves for the assault on Gath, at which he glanced now, where the watch-lanterns bobbed all along the town walls, stretching the length of several fields against the horizon. It was

suddenly transparent to him that attacking this place was ludicrous, like small children tackling a great, hairy, lumbering uncle. Well, he thought, that didn't matter: He felt content. If he died, he wouldn't have to try anymore.

And he would have these last lines, which in their finish pleased him. How satisfying it was, how wonderfully just, when the words were there from the start – complete, immaculate, candid.

He stood up and began to walk forward. His band watched him wonderingly, but then began also to rise to their feet, assuming that God had vouchsafed their leader a presentiment, a surety that Gath was theirs. He wore an expression they were coming to know; the smooth, shell-shaped lines of his cheeks and the immaculate, narrow forehead looked polished, like the carefully rubbed finish on the face of a child prince's toy soldier. What was he seeing as he walked forward toward the lights on the town walls? Probably angels, they thought. Probably fierce war-angels hovering over the battlements, prepared to grind the Gathians to pulp. This was a lot safer than hand-to-hand combat.

And Dav might have been seeing angels. He couldn't exactly distinguish one thing from another, so he couldn't tell. The only thing of which he was absolutely certain was the poem flowing in a thin ribbon from him and running like an unrolled carpet before him over the snowy turnips. All around him various impressions blipped and ticked and occasionally penetrated his bliss, augmenting it. Directly behind the town, the daylight exhaled its last, violet-colored breath: he could feel its warmth color his cheek, and he felt the slightly greater heat of the watchmen's torches on his eyes. The snow glowed like ashes covering a broad bed of embers in a long-stoked furnace.

We set our sights too low, he thought as he neared the bruised bulk of the town gates. All sorts of things in the world vied for his sexual attention, and some of these items – the gash of sunset, the scarred gates – asked to be entered, while others – the rubbly earth from which he'd just risen or the frosted wind – these appealed for entry. He felt the tricky heat of sexual release steal through him and grow irresistible and finally overtake him, not merely between his legs but as though several separate orgasms had started up in his face, his throat, his toes, his wrists.

Had he reflected on this sensation (but he had lost all capacity for reflection far behind), he might have been struck by how sustained it was. He was still under its influence as he hammered on the gates of Gath, with his men grouped closely behind him, on the assumption that whatever God was doing to him would slop over onto them. Even so, they were growing less confident: Would the soldiers of Gath, pagans that they were, notice that their leader was chosen of Jahveh? Did they even know who Jahveh was? Maybe if they didn't know what they were up against, Dav's magic invincibility wouldn't work.

Dav searched about under his cloak and produced a stick of charcoal, with which he began to write on a patch of the gate where many hands had smoothed the rough wood in pushing open the doors.

“My God, our God, your glories arm,

“Stars roll, meteors fall, the remote moon rises,

“What are we and our devices?”

"We are like angels, infants, speaking parts

"Of your division . . ."

He stepped back and read what he had written, scratching out "arm" in the first line and writing "swarm" above it. The rest would come, he needed only to wait for it, so he stood before the gates thinking. It felt as though a lover were tracing her name down the skin of his back, and occasionally he shuddered with pleasure. Above him, the astonished Gathian watchmen leaned far out over the walls and stared at the idiot scribbling graffiti on their city gates, possibly a capital offense. Their sargeant sent a man to summon Aqij, Gath's king: He had to see this.

Ira looked up at the watchmen nervously, cleared his throat, and said to Dav, "I assume those are magic words you're writing there on the gate."

Dav smiled at him. "Magic words? Possibly . . ."

"What I mean is words that'll smash the gates."

"Why would they smash the gates?"

Ira was growing exasperated. "Because that's what God told you to do."

"No, I haven't . . ." Dav was going to confide that recently he hadn't heard much from God, but even in his present dissociated, fugue-like condition he sensed that this revelation might be a little disheartening to his men. They needed encouragement, he thought, so instead he said: "Just look around you. We're lords of creation." The smile which had not left his face since his swift dream now began pleasantly to ache. But since he felt otherwise delightfully numb, this seemed to him a minor consideration.

"We're not lords of shit," somebody muttered.

"We're in a lot of fucking trouble," someone else said, more loudly.

Aqij had by now mounted the city walls and was watching Dav's band apparently arguing in front of his gate.

"What do you men want?" Aqij asked in a level tone. He secretly prided himself on his vocal projection, which he felt was an enormous attribute in a leader. Shouting and bellowing made people think you were unsure of yourself. Besides, Aqij was himself widely travelled, a veteran mercenary, not like some of his brother kings (and here he was thinking mostly of Sol), who were easily flustered by untoward events.

"Are you the king of this city?" Dav asked.

"I am Aqij, king of Gath," Aqij replied, with natural dignity.

Dav chanted: "My God, our God, your glories swarm, Stars roll, meteors fall, the remote moon rises, What are we and our devices? We are like angels, infants, speaking parts."

Everyone was silent for a while after this: The Gathians tried to make up their minds whether this was some sort of challenge, and Dav's followers glanced around the landscape, embarrassed and looking for places to hide. Aqij studied Dav thoughtfully.

"Somebody go ahead and open the gates," he said finally. "Whatever these guys want, it doesn't seem like much of a threat."

And in fact as Dav and Ira and the others straggled through the narrow crack between the ancient and massive doors, they looked like a troop of wandering, harmless, lunatic beggars. Behind the gateway was a broad plaza which now filled with large, well-armed men,

well fed with turnips. A passerby stumbling on this tableau might well have mistaken what was happening for one of the weekly charity doles for which Aqij was admired.

And he was admired for more than his relief work. His looks for example: he was one of those fortunate men who got better-looking with age. The heavy-muscled frame which in his youth maidens thought too gross, not fashionably androgynous, stood the test of time in fine condition: he simply looked more powerful while his sylph-like contemporaries sprouted potbellies. A short, square beard on his broad, square face, rather than make him look pettishly aged like his other beard-growing peers, was an emblem of ever-increasing fertility. And although his strongman physique superficially belied interior complexity, Aqij harbored large reserves of good-humored equanimity, intelligent modesty, and even rough-cut philosophy as well.

Confronted then with this disturbed boy and his tatterdemalion followers, he was thoughtful. It seemed to him not only that the number of wandering Israeli lunatics was increasing but their symptom profile was changing, too: Something about their lunacy attracted others, it was more public, and the madness had about it a pattern, which he could not quite grasp (much in the same way that the gibbering of the prophets seemed always on the edge of legibility). He had a theory: A people's king at once reflected the character of the people and, in turn, imbued that character with features of his own personality. Gathians, for example, were sturdy, clear-eyed, matter-of-fact; Israelis, on the other hand, were becoming steadily unhinged, like their king.

His neighbors would be a lot better off, Aqij thought, if they'd ease up a little on theology. For years they'd been arguing about whether there was one god or a lot of gods—although they'd apparently come to a querulous resolution on that topic, voting in favor of somebody called "Jaw Way." What did it mean, he wondered, this collective psychosis where people were in agony when god ignored them, and in even greater agony when he didn't.

They were laughable really, these obviously rugged (but starving) men led by a mad child, but Aqij was innately too forbearing to laugh at them, even though they seemed to have been in the process of attacking his city. Still, it was hard to know what to do: The most appropriate thing would probably be to feed and then shoo them away.

As Aqij thus reflected, Dav had been in the meantime mentally working on his poem.

"The sheep and the oxen, the bestial fields," he said out loud. "Flocks shift downwind, fish swim the rough paths of the sea."

"Very likely," replied Aqij. Dav saw the older man for the first time. Aqij's grinning, handsome, hardy face relaxed him: He realized how keyed up he'd been. And how hungry and cold. Sensation began to return.

"'Bestial fields' . . ." continued Aqij, "that doesn't seem apt. It makes the fields sound uncouth or vicious—it doesn't seem like that's what you're looking for."

"No. No, of course not. Not 'bestial' fields—'beasts in the fields.'" Dav smiled shyly. "The words . . . sometimes they carry you on, in a rush. Like a flood."

"Ah, well, poets. Whatever goes on in your head's a mystery to me. Poetry's nothing short of a miracle."

The Gathian Legion looked at one another, puzzled, while Dav's men, more used to these digressions, felt restless and let-down. Aqij sensed that, if he allowed it, Dav would go on talking about poetry and god all night, oblivious to the cold and the discomfort of the large body of bored men surrounding them. He'd experienced this relationship before, with younger men: The kid was looking for a father, an ideal father.

So to cut short any further bonding, Aqij abruptly said: "Talking about poetry is all well and good, but my men need to go to bed, and I'd like to know your intentions before I send them there."

"We're raiding you," Dav mumbled. Reality was settling back in, unpleasantly as usual.

"Sorry, couldn't hear you. You want to repeat that?"

"We were going to . . . That is, our intention was . . ."

"We're beggars," interrupted Ira. "We're poor men seeking alms from the king of Gath, whose reputation for social welfare precedes him."

"Oh, in that case," said Aqij. "You've come on the wrong day. Hand-outs are on Thursdays." He paused and studied Dav, whose entire body, his nose and fingers, transparently bespoke defeat, and worse, teenage abashment. "But since you're here, I'll get somebody to open the granary."

Aqij shrugged off the thick woolen cape he was wearing and draped it on Dav's shoulder's while Dav stood quietly staring past Aqij into the vacancy of the constellations floating over the walls of Gath. It was as though the gesture had been a feature in a ritual they'd pre-arranged. In something approaching tenderness (but not tenderness, because of Aqij's reluctance to be tagged by Dav's ill fortune), the older man laid his hand gently on Dav's bicep and squeezed it firmly.

"I wish I could help you son," he said in a voice only a little above the rasp of the north wind. Dav felt like crying, although in fact the wind's bite was already making his eyes water.

The townspeople of Gath, who had turned out in hope of entertainment on this otherwise boring wintry night, returned to their homes, and Aqij's men went about their business, until only Dav's band and two stewards handing out corn were left in the cold, stony square. When the distribution was complete, Dav, Ira, and the others filed out through the gates (which had remained open, impatient, waiting for their departure), and they walked through the frosted turnip fields in the direction of home.

* * *

Earlier that same day, Sol had returned to Ramah. Universal depression had settled over A'iml'q and his students since the king's earlier visit, with the result that no one felt much like prophesying, to say nothing of levitating themselves or the furniture. When Sol ordered everyone out onto the street before the Institute, they quickly, obediently complied. Two young prophets supported A'iml'q, who slumped blinking in the daylight.

"Well, at last you're decently dazzled by your king's presence," Sol said, misreading the situation. He was composing a satisfying inward image of himself, that of a just and clear-thinking man unjustly injured, yet wanting to understand, to remain objective in the face of blatant prejudice against him. Meanwhile, A'iml'q thought Sol looked familiar but he couldn't quite place him.

"You *know* that Dav is a terrorist, you *know* I've been chasing him from one end of this goddamned country to the other, and you go ahead and shelter him anyway." He paused for a moment to register the effect of this morally inarguable indictment. "You fed him. You gave him weapons." An adviser whispered to him. "You gave him magic talismans." He turned to the adviser: "Talismans or talismen?" The adviser shrugged.

Returned to the exigencies of life in a country ruled by Sol, the prophets had enough sense to be frightened out of their wits. One screwed up his courage enough to demur:

"We didn't give him any talis . . . any magic amulets, Meridian of Our Hopes."

"And we didn't feed him neither," added another, emboldened by the mild correction of the first.

"Denial is not healthy," Sol said grimly. "You can't expect to help yourselves if don't help your king." He raised his voice, stamping each word into the heavy air: "This, O Israel, is your affliction, your burden and the curse of your children: *You Are In A State of Denial.*"

A'iml'q's milky awareness of the situation seemed to solidify, at least to the extent that he appeared to recognize his king, at whom he stared solemnly.

"Oh, Vastness of Our Hesitation . . ." he began. And halted. Everyone waited—Sol for an explanation, Sol's entourage to see if the priest had understood better than they what "denial" meant, and the gathered clergy in hopes that A'iml'q could avert the punishment Sol clearly had in mind. "Who would have thought? The whole world knows Dav is your mighty right hand, your chief executive, your son in law."

"Who's he married to? Is he married to *Jonathan*? This is the first I've heard of it."

A'iml'q was now picking up momentum, however, and disregarded this: "When Dav came to us, we welcomed him as your representative. Who could blame us?"

"First comes disbelief, then denial, then depression sets in. Only after all these does the righteous man see his offense."

"I don't think anybody fed him. I certainly didn't feed him. I didn't order anyone else to feed him. I won't deny that somebody may have found him a sandwich, how would I know? Besides, the kitchen's been closed for a while. We lost our cook."

"You think just because I'm king I don't have feelings? Everyone else, people feel sorry for. Nobody *ever* feels sorry for me. Ever."

A'iml'q suddenly remembered something: "And you were here! Don't you recall? We were all in the street together . . . just like we are now." The memory was faint, blotted and runny like a dancing girl's make-up, but A'iml'q could still see the soldiers and the priests and the king and Dav. What had they been doing?

"That episode is like burnt meat in my mouth. It's an abomination and I'm surprised you have the gall to bring it up."

Nothing good, the crowd now knew, was going to come of this.

"I'm sorry," Sol continued, his voice falling half an octave into a kind of fluty, sepulchral remorse, "I'm sorry I'm forced to do this. You've disgraced yourselves as priests, you've made yourselves filthy in the eye of God. It's got to be expunged."

A'iml'q gazed at Sol incomprehendingly. One of the Institute's senior fellows, however—experiencing piercing anxiety and a corollary need to get whatever was going to happen over with—asked, “*What's got to be expunged?*”

A benevolent, wistful gaze glowing softly in his eyes, Sol looked at each of the priests standing in the street, lingering on each one. With the exception of A'iml'q, whose befuddlement had returned, the priests cowered under this benignant examination.

Two soldiers stood out from the rest: They were no less scarred or weathered, they had no more than the usual number of missing fingers, ears, noses, and they weren't uniformed any differently than other troops. Their difference lay partly in the near identity of their looks and partly in their bland, almost otherworldly expressions. They were short but blunt, broad, powerful, with beards so thick that their mustaches sprouted on lips shaved that morning.

To these, Sol turned, shyly, blushing, saying: “Expunge them from my sight.”

The velocity with which they dispatched the priests nearest them was so great that spectators at first felt as if the grim pair were performing a well-rehearsed grand guignol, some magic trick to frighten the rubes. Nearly as soon as “sight” had sighed through Sol's teeth, his executioners had each whipped a head from a body. The severed heads trickily rose up a foot or so above their former necks and hung for a brief moment, looking surprised. The ensuing shambles was startlingly quiet: there was the swish of two blades, the caught breath of a priest as he came to the instant realization that the next exhalation would be his last, and finally the mild “oh” of the last rank of priests awaiting their turn, not long in coming.

Less expert brutality followed, on the part of Sol's other legionaries, who waded into the dead and dying men (now no longer holy men but simply human beings suffering the always losing struggle between animate and inanimate matter). No one (certainly not Sol) had intended to mutilate bodies already degraded by the ordinary obscenity of violent death, but that was what came about: genitalia were removed and reattached, ears were clipped for souvenirs, deep cuts formed ghastly trceries on the priests' naked chests and bellies.

And as usual when people indulge in this sort of reptilian forgetfulness, there came at last horror-stricken reawakening as the soldiers stopped what they'd been doing and inspected the gore slopping about their sandals, sliming their shins. Only the original pair of experts were apparently unmoved: They wiped and sheathed their scimitars (the advanced-alloy blades susurrating home not at all like the usual clatter of bronze) and stood looking vacantly about them. One yawned discreetly, and the other followed his example.

The few chance Ramans who'd witnessed the onslaught slipped unsteadily away. At first reasonably terrified that they were in the path of this miniature holocaust, they were now simply dazed, having come to the instinctive realization that abrupt and absolute mayhem often abruptly runs out of bloody steam.

Now generally indistinguishable, A'iml'q and his fellows lay in pieces before the Institute, while their murderers, following their long-departed leader, made their way out of town. In their aimless, gory clumps, they looked very little like an army, and not like anybody's chosen people.

* * *

The demographics had changed by the time Dav and the others returned to the cave. Gone were the ancient-looking women whose children looked only like the latest in a series stretching back for decades. The small children were gone, the girls, the old men who had inexplicably lost their entire families, or perhaps had never had them. Only the few whose mental or physical collapse was imminent remained.

"I guess they decided being your dependents wasn't such a good bet after all," said Ira. "They probably heard about Gath."

Something within Dav—his heart, his pride, his scrotum—shrank: He'd rather no one mentioned Gath, his humiliation there, but he obscurely believed that letting people talk about it would air the wound, maybe causing it to heal sooner. Besides, he hadn't lent any weight to the rumors that he'd obliterated half the Philistine army or wrestled bears, so why should he put any stock in what people said about Gath?

"On the whole, though," Ira added, "I think we've come out ahead."

Young men had started to drift into the camp, sometimes solitaires, more often a pair or triplet of friends. They were grim-eyed, indeterminably aged somewhere between fourteen and thirty, fleshless, seedy, sour-smelling. Their weapons were what you'd pick up passing by a midden heap: chunks of wood, hard-fired potsherds for greasy leather slings, sharpened palings. Compared to the beefcake cohorts of Sol's legions, with their state of the art weapons technology, they were ridiculous.

"This is more like it," Ira said, "this is material I can work with."

Dav didn't share Ira's optimism. He dimly perceived in these men the same insubstantiality he felt in himself. It was as if some important part of him had been plucked too early, permanently unripened like corn blown down mid-season and left to lie green and hard through harvesttime and beyond.

There were many aspects of his life, he now thought, which were so desperately wrong that they were necessarily irreparable: things he'd done, things he'd failed to do, but mostly they way he *just was*. This fucking exaltation, for instance. Every single time an episode like the one before the walls of Gath happened, a horrible downward slide followed, much longer and much more intense than the tidbit of joy preceding it, as though he had to pay God back for the few seconds of pleasure he hadn't even asked for: Like a quick back-alley screw with a girl who turns out to be a two-shekel whore.

He had two dubious consolations: one was that the poetry seemed to be coming more frequently, and the other that he was getting meaner. As a kind of symptom of this sustained, sour, bewildered despair, poems and parts of poems came easily to his mouth, like refluxes of bile. But he took grim satisfaction in these lines because they seemed harder-won than the earlier stuff, more his own, less God's. He was dimly aware that the lines he now wrote were addressed to himself in a sort of commination. In this, he was as usual able to break himself in two, where another Dav, solitary and always inactive, observed the Dav who acted, always badly:

"The fool who believes in God,

"The one who doesn't,

"They're each beyond the reach of heaven."

Lines like these accurately reflected that other feature, his growing harshness, the level grimness with which he now began to view the world and (in part unknowingly) to act in it.

He was sitting on a high ledge, hammering lines flat in his head like a smith working a blade, staring hard-eyed at the landscape, when the surviving priests from Ramah limped into camp. They were finishing their short, nasty tale by the time Dav had climbed down from his perch, and he asked that they begin again.

"You're sure Sol ordered this. Nobody did anything on his own?"

"He was right there," said Av, one of A'iml'q's sons. He glanced at Dav resentfully. "He said it was because of you. He said we fed you when you were hiding out and we had to be *expunged*."

"Sol slaughtered these people because of me?" Why in the hell did you ever bring me to his attention?, Dav silently asked Jahveh. Now these people are dead because of me. They were supposed to be *your* priests, *your* annointed.

"This has got to stop," Ira said. "The son of a bitch is completely out of control."

"Sooner or later, he's gonna wipe out everybody between here and Hebron," said one of the veterans of Gath.

"Nobody ever asked him to be a big man," Av said, nodding toward Dav. He won't look at me, Dav thought. That's because he hates me so much. Before only Sol had hated him, now other people were joining in. Celebrity. "King Sol's got search and destroy missions going out every day. Sooner or later, he'll catch you guys."

Feeling utterly lost, Dav saw only one option: Turning himself in seemed easy. It crossed his mind that only a few weeks ago he'd have felt teary and elevated to make that kind of sacrifice. Right now, though, he didn't care. It was the practical thing to do, that was all.

"I'll go to him," he said. "Surrender myself."

"No you fucking won't," Ira said. "We've got two possibilities for king—you or him . . . although it escapes me why Israelis always get landed with these piss-poor choices."

"Yeah, we've stuck with him this long," said another veteran (they seemed now to be holding counsel as if he weren't there). "Anyway, we'll go down when he goes down."

"I don't think I can lead you anymore," Dav interrupted. He laughed, humorlessly. "What it comes down to is I've never led you. It's a joke."

Ira gazed at him steadily, and in his look there was a depth of serious purpose Dav could only begin to guess at. He was still too young to know the passion of will, the erasure of immediate needs and contempt for every satisfaction applying to oneself. The lowering down of purpose like a heavy iron lance, a weapon useless in the hands of a youth but doubly dangerous in the scarred, time-hardened arms of an older man.

"Here's the way it is, kid," he said finally. "It's him or us."

Chapter Eight

Jonathan thought his father was lately becoming a more tragic figure, which in a way was a relief. Not that heretofore he'd been comic, or if comedy was involved, it had been a subtle, nightshaded kind in which Jews up until that time hadn't specialized. No one dared laugh at the king, not even privately. Jonathan himself was an exception: maybe he wasn't really a Jew, and anyway, his laughter was rueful, extracted despite himself from some sink of the heart.

Sol sat hunched forward, alone in his tent, a bent, massive figure made of shadowy indigo blocks streaked with dull saffron light cast from the tent's opening. His face was buried in his hands, and the resulting effect was that you couldn't actually tell the king was a person. He might have been a partly carved idol, discarded when the builders realized that the sculpture was turning out badly: too brooding, grotesque, inept.

Had Sol lost interest in Dav? Not likely, thought Jonathan. His father was almost certainly plunging into a kind of morbid reverie with Dav as the centerpiece of his fantasies. Jonathan inwardly flinched when he imagined the form those fantasies took—a revolting melange of paternal solicitude, desire, and sadism.

Meanwhile, the Legion hung about awaiting the king's orders, despite the fact that they were supposed to be pursuing Dav, at least harassing him from a near distance, killing him if they got closer. But the officers were nervous: what they were chasing wasn't a handful of bandits anymore. Rumors said Dav had accumulated a small army. And anyway didn't everybody say that Dav had slaughtered thousands of men, all by himself? Not to mention all the carnage he'd wrought on the nation's big game.

In a country like ours, two fairly sizable bodies of men—Sol's legion and Dav's guerilla force—marching around the countryside had a pretty good chance of running into each other. You couldn't go very far without running into one of our borders, and then you had to retrace your steps. As Dav was forced to transfer his base almost daily, Sol—even without pursuing him, even as he was now, standing still—unavoidably passed close to him. But it is in the nature of regular armies to blunder across the landscape, while it's equally natural for irregulars to slip apprehensively over the same ground, hugging hillsides and creeping along riverbottoms.

Cautiously probing ahead of their main body one evening, Dav and Ira crawled to the edge of a ridge and saw below them Sol's army. Sol's own tent was clearly marked at the center

of dozens of squad campfires and ammunition carts and other, smaller tents. Above it a pennant waved. On the pennant was written, "The Tents of Israel Are Invincible," a metonymy of which Sol was particularly fond.

"The tents," Ira whispered. "I don't understand." He envisioned the Israeli army using the tents to cast them over its enemies, blinding or at least momentarily confusing them.

"The tents are supposed to stand for us, the Jews, for all the tribes. The people are invincible, not the tents."

"Then why does it say the tents are invincible?"

"It's like poetry," Dav said. But he was thinking of something else. "If you're having a feud with a guy – over, say, some misunderstanding. . ."

"Such as?"

"I don't know. Maybe he thinks you're fooling around with his wife."

"Are you?"

"No. That's a bad example. Just say he thinks you're out to kill him, so he's going to kill you first. And say he's got a big family, lots of brothers and uncles, and you're dodging around, hiding out. . ."

"Like we are."

"Like we are." Dav paused. "So how would you convince him you've got peaceful intentions?"

"He won't listen to you?"

"He'll kill you on sight."

"This sounds familiar."

"If you were in a *position* to kill him and then you didn't . . ." Dav turned his head to look at Ira promptly.

"You'd be fucking stupid."

"No, say he later found out you could've killed him, you had the perfect opportunity, but you didn't. Then he'd know you meant him no harm."

"I know where this is going," Ira pointed to the pennant, which now drooped in the waning evening breeze. "Look where he is. In this case, the tents of Israel *are* invincible. It'd be impossible to get to him."

But Dav wasn't listening. "This could be the solution to all our problems," he whispered brightly.

Sometime after midnight Dav lay flattened between two tents. Before he set out, he'd traced his path in a tortuous line away, around, and between the campfires that dotted the plain below him, and now he was crawling among them according to a mental map he struggled to keep clear in his mind. From time to time, he glanced up at the stars for direction. Fortunately, once he'd made his way by the pickets, not many people were around and most of them were either stumbling to a latrine or drunk.

The deeper he crept into the camp, the more invisible he felt, and the more certain he became that no guard would ever notice him. Slithering from shadow to shadow, absorbed in fitting his body to their irregular shapes, he was mildly startled at last when he heard Sol's pennant lazily flapping above him. He lifted the edge of the tent, rolled under, and remained

absolutely still: His eyes adjusted to the darkness. His skin was cool, his breathing languid, he felt entirely relaxed.

In fact, he was aware that his bowels were comfortably full, that he needed to empty them, that his need to do so had the force of desire, of childish, secret perversity. Slowly he raised himself onto his heels and moved his garments aside and let fall the rich, stinking load through his already opened sphincter. He wiped himself with the edge of the tent. Then, on his hands and knees, he crept close to the king. Sol was grimacing; a deep cleft ran from temple to temple making him look like a golem, a monster without eyes or brow.

The sleeping king had been wearing some sort of nightcap, which had fallen to the ground beside his cot. Dav picked it up and stuck it in his belt next to the hilt of his dagger. He drew the small knife and knelt staring at Sol's grotesque figure, preternaturally clear to him even in the tent's darkness. Dav pressed the dagger's point gently against Sol's forehead. For what seemed like a long time, he remained in this position, with no plan, without a real sense of where he was. When his arm began to ache and his legs began to tingle, he revived from what he felt to be a kind of enchantment. He was transfixed in a dream, at the edge of wakefulness, trying to shake himself into action. At the same time, he was fascinated with the sleeping king, whose kingship now seemed so fragile, so arbitrary. As one does in a dream, he struggled to remember this slippery truth, that power doesn't inhere in the man: you've got to keep manufacturing it.

* * *

Jonathan was uneasy: If the underfed, shady-looking youth standing before him was lying, Sol's rage might involve another bloodbath, like the one at Ramah; if the kid was telling the truth, then his father's depression would get even worse. If that was possible. How depressed could you actually get? Probably enough to kill you, at any event.

He was holding Sol's nightcap, which felt inexplicably soiled, like somebody had used it for toilet purposes. The nightcap had at one time been top-of-the-line linen, a wisp of paddle-shaped green cloth that now was streaked with the old man's paranoid sweats and the exuded oil of his perpetually dirty hair. Well, it's definitely his, Jonathan thought ruefully, you couldn't fake it. He smiled to himself. Sol's guards, watching the king's son, noticed the boy had a tic – all the time grinning at nothing. It stood to reason: he was going nuts, like his old man.

Inside Sol's tent, Jonathan was blinded by the shift from daylight to shadow. Sitting still, Sol was nearly invisible, so Jonathan thrust the nightcap generally into the darkness. The old man read his son's gesture as an accusation, as though the cap were criminal evidence.

"Is that my nightcap?" he asked reasonably.

"Is it?" Jonathan looked at the cap in his hand, as though he were only now noticing it.

"I think it is," Sol said. "What are you doing with it?"

"Last night somebody removed it."

Sol tried to remember whether the laundrywoman had made a pick-up the previous evening. "Is it clean?"

"What? I don't think so. Not particularly. Why?"

"Then why did they take it away?"

"Who?"

"The cleaners."

"The cleaners didn't take it away. Someone stole into your tent last night and took it from your head."

"When are you going to understand how inappropriate this joking is? God is not joking. I am not joking. The Philistines aren't joking. And Dav definitely isn't joking. Only you are joking."

Jonathan stared at his father. He suddenly felt like crying. In fact, his eyes watered and there was a pleasant sluggishness in the region of his throat. He felt for his father an upwelling of pity mixed with incurable sadness. As for himself, he felt as though he'd at last given up: All that remained was the wish that he and his father perish together, for their shared immolation.

"Dav crept into your tent last night after everyone had gone to bed, and he snatched your nightcap from your bed, and he had a messenger bring it back to show you today."

Sol was taken aback: "But that doesn't make sense. Why would he steal my stupid cap when he could have killed me?"

* * *

For some reason Dav couldn't fathom, the messenger wouldn't look him directly in the eye. He also mumbled. The message was important and, being from Sol, was likely to be inscrutable to begin with. The man was from his own band, so why was he behaving like a spy?

"The king said 'You are my . . .' I forget the word. Maybe it was . . ." The sentence drifted off, the messenger watched Dav askance, and then he continued: "I guess it was 'air.'"

"I am his 'air'?"

"Like the air he breathes," somebody suggested helpfully.

"What else did he say?"

"He said he'd wronged you. He said to return to his bosom." Several people snickered.

Dav turned to Ira. "So it looks like we convinced him."

"He's paranoid," Ira said. "There's nothing you can do to permanently convince him of your good intentions. For right now he's pacified. But it won't last."

No one said anything for a while. Dav drew circles in the dust with the toe of his sandal, Ira stared stolidly into the distance, his arms crossed. To everyone's surprise, it was the messenger who broke the silence.

"He said he'd give you a . . ." He faded, searching for the word. "Something like when a lot of people watch jugglers in the marketplace." He looked around him hopefully.

"A gift?" Ira prompted.

"No, not a gift. Like Dav comes to him and they talk."

"He means an 'audience,'" Dav said.

Walking slowly downhill into Sol's encampment, Dav thought about how this was another no-win situation. His own men urged him to have nothing to do with Sol: kings didn't have to keep their word, and this went double for kings who were also lunatics. But Sol had been, after his own fashion, kind to him, had shown him favor, as the expression went. Anyway, wasn't it cowardice to skulk away? If he did that, he could imagine what Sol would think: maybe the king's feelings would be hurt, or he'd be disappointed in Dav, and everyone at court, including Jonathan and his sisters, would feel let down. They'd wait for him, and he

wouldn't show up, and finally people would think that he wasn't all he was cracked up to be. There'd be some indistinct but real revulsion toward his sneaking away, and then they'd dismiss him from their minds.

That, he realized, was what he was really worried about: People would forget about him. He wouldn't be Dav the Conqueror, Dav the Slayer of Goliad, Dav the Hope of His Generation.

Sol was standing before his tent, prepared to greet him, and in the time it took Dav to cross the twenty paces of raked gravel and embrace the old king, he knew there wasn't much to fear any longer. This part is over, he thought. God's getting ready to start the next act. Weeping, mute, his palsied arms stretched toward Dav, Sol stumbled toward the younger man and embraced him.

Buried in the billowing, dusty folds of the king's jeballah, Dav scented obsolescence. It smelled like the midden heaps they'd come across in the middle of the wilderness, garbage dumps for villages that were so ancient it seemed the tumbled lines of stone had been always formed that way, that they'd never been the base of houses—villages built for the empty sunlight to live in. Sol smelled like a vacuum.

As it turned out, the reunion was anticlimactic. Sol's embrace did not break off at the end of that subtle but certain space of time men allot themselves for holding each other. And as it continued, as the tall old man grew to seem like a child he was comforting, Dav found himself returning the embrace. He felt Sol rattling softly against him, like the tall branches of a dead lilac, dryly weeping. The king trembled, shaking like the old man he'd become. Finally, he shook so much that he sank to the ground. From that vantage he looked up to Dav, and like a son choked up but bidding his father farewell, he fluttered his fingers, waving goodbye.

Chapter Nine

Lambs dropped, flawless in their sheer, gleaming bubbles, already bolting and kicking, stumbling to their feet, their mothers alarmed or indifferent. Flecks of snow vanished as you looked at them, slips of ice subsided back into their pools. Dav's troops resting on the wet upland meadows lay back when the wind blew, letting its chill pass over them, and stood when it stopped, letting the sun ooze into them, their winter-sore bodies craving any kind of heat, to be toasted, scorched on the edges. Above everything the spring sky rose and rose upward, uninterrupted by clouds, nearly seamless except for the sapphire of its meridian and the softer powdery blue of the horizon's circuit.

A portion of those neonate lambs, this being Israel, had their throats cut on rural altars scattered across the landscape: crossing a soggy meadow, you might happen on recent sacrificial remains, the wet sod darkened by blood and offal. These early spring days announced, as they always had among us and our neighbors, the hunting season on other human beings, the opening of warm weather conflict. Armed groups roamed around the countryside, attacking just about anybody who, like the lambs, seemed like a victim, even though the aggressors could themselves become victims with disconcerting rapidity.

Standing on a boulder twice the height of a man in the center of an upland pasture, Dav and Ira watched their band travel by on the road below. Scattered among the older men were knots of seven or eight boys. But they weren't *boys*, thought Dav. They weren't anything. What they were, he suddenly realized, was dangerous. They had about them a shadowed, abraded look. A sort of uniform had been accepted among them: long black skirts slit from ankle to thigh, a sack-like, scoop-necked tunic, their long, greasy hair tautly clubbed with rawhide, and black bands tied around forehead, biceps, wrists. Dav wondered if the bands had any significance. They looked funereal.

These were after all only the accoutrement of machismo, which anybody could affect (after their passing, village boys copied them precisely). What wasn't reproducible was what was in their faces, their eyes. A thin, sinister cloud of peril built up around them.

The priestly survivors from the debacle at Ramah weren't helping matters. They were now actively proselytizing. Tailoring their ideology to their hearers, they harped on the more bloody-minded and imperialistic facets of our national story, particularly the several God-sanctioned instances of aggression against heathens and/or apostate Jews. This was a new role

for our priesthood, who had a few years before, at the outset of Sol's rise to power, suffered the humiliation of having the national mobile tabernacle stolen from them by the Philistines. Fortunately, when the Philistines realized the consequences of owning something to which our God paid constant, mysterious attention (in the form of painful and incurable epidemics, startling and unpleasant miracles going off constantly in the vicinity of the tabernacle itself), they attached a couple of oxen to it and sent it off driverless in our direction.

The effect of the priests' mortification had been a drastic change in their self-image: previously, they'd gone into battle – occasionally they'd even wielded arms – but they'd always acted essentially as chaplains to the army. But during this time, as Dav's force sprouted into what was to become the National Army of Israel, so the priests become its commissars.

They were undoubtedly on the offensive – generally, against all comers – and had thus naturally evolved from a small number of tired, starving, and anxiety-wracked fugitives into a recognized political mass, carrying just sufficient weight to force local politicians to add them to the eternally unstable regional balance of power. The chill and random violence of the new young warriors and the calculated aggression of the priests had certainly played a part in building their reputation, but more than any of this, they sensed Dav's own change of heart.

It had come about, to begin with, because Dav was sick of other people.

The wilderness that surrounded and protected them was no-man's-land, unwanted by even land-thirsty Jews or Philistines. Its parallel ridges folded endlessly until they petered out in the Negev. Standing on one of the long, low mineral dunes – staring out at hundreds of other dunes just like it – you thought, 'People aren't supposed to be here. *Life* isn't supposed to be here.' But because of this horrible destitution, people who did find themselves there (such as his own band) tended to bunch up together.

He craved the private, expansive serenity of the shepherd: Perhaps this was his oldest, deepest need, one that was of course indissolubly lashed to his yearning not so much for God's approval, as for His attention. At night, at least, he could be free of the mute importunity of other bodies.

At night, he spread his bedroll on a rocky crest and listened to the occasional chuckling of jackals in the ravines below. Just as he did as a kid standing guard over his flocks, he watched old stars falling out of the heavens and new ones puffing up. He wanted to go back there, to his childhood. It occurred to him that missing your childhood meant that you were no longer a child, and yet when had that ended? Everything else that happened to him since that baleful combat with Goliad seemed much more distant than all that time, unmarked as days or weeks or years, that he'd watched his father's sheep.

This gentle shower of thoughts (or a similar one) pattered nightly within his head. This was a pastoral habit, a skill really: the ability to rest while letting your mind remain lit, like a lamp damped down to its lowest flame at bedtime. This half-vigilance, begun out of necessity, had grown into being a quietly anticipated delight. Even though it was entangled with various worries, the dreamy procession of images somehow muffled his anxieties, limiting and cooling them.

The stone on which he nightly laid out his bedroll very slowly oozed out each day's heat. This contributed to Dav's sense of glad shuffling off when he finally settled in for the

night, the stone seeping heat into his back and thighs, and his body seemed to reply to the rock, flowing down into it. Now that every inanimate object no longer signalled some painfully indecipherable meaning, Dav was beginning to think that, after all, things were friendlier than people. The rock didn't stipulate under what circumstances it would warm him, or how much warmth it would provide. It simply performed according to its simple, rocky morality. In an ideal world, he thought, this innocent and faithful reciprocity of thing to thing would be the model for how humans behaved. Possibly that's what Moishe had in mind when he rushed from the peak at Sinai, heartened and clear-eyed from his interview with Jahveh, ready to explain how simple it all was: See? Ten short and simple rules for life. Carved right here on this convenient, easy-to-read tablet.

But that hadn't worked out, the inarguable, lapidary instructions. *Everything* (Jews being Jews) was open to argument, or at least involved elaborate modifications. Maybe it wasn't anybody's fault, really: The difficulty, Dav thought (soaking up heat and slipping off to sleep) lay in what people actually did, in how shadowy and slippery our actions were.

"But I don't have any choice in the matter," the rock said in a cracked, rasping voice. "Therein lies the difference."

"It sounds like paradise – not having to choose," Dav replied sleepily.

"Exactly. In Paradise, you never have to make up your mind. That's what Paradise means. No cause and effect, no then and now, no what's-going-to-happen-on-Monday. Eternal joy."

Dav felt as though he were drifting a finger's breadth above the stone plate where he'd spread his bedroll. And although a kind of pleasantly throbbing drowsiness remained, he was paradoxically growing more alert. You're back, he thought.

"Why haven't you answered me?"

"Answer what? Your poems? I sometimes seem to be not much more than a rhetorical figure. Besides, you'd have an endless message from me running through your mind, answering your questions. That's not healthy."

"You do it for other people," Dav replied petulantly. "You do it for seers and selected prophets."

"I give them hints, they fill in the gaps, they decide they have my undivided attention."

"Leading all these men, for which I haven't any experience, being hunted by a king who you (I have to assume) had a hand in naming, not having a normal life for a guy my age." He paused. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"Look, pain is health."

"Pain is *health*? That sounds like a rationalization."

"Hmmm. Well, I was just trying it out. Some things can be true without exactly having application to specific situations. Think about it this way . . ."

The heat flow from the rock suddenly reversed, drawing him back into the stone. Panicked, he tried to sit up, to get to his feet and run away, but paralysis had set in – not the cozy somnolence he'd been feeling a few moments ago, but frozen, senseless petrification. He came to rest in pebbly darkness with the taste of slate hard on his tongue.

A handful of words marched to the front of his brain, arranged themselves in large letters, and announced, 'YOU'RE BEING BURIED ALIVE.' But if this were true, he didn't want to know it: He did not want to hear from the reasonable parts of his mind, which patiently and droningly described the all-too-apparent reality, such as for example that he'd probably stopped breathing. He writhed and strained, as though against a cocoon of rope, and while he did this, he experienced a kind of terror-filled relief. At least he wasn't thinking.

Within him his heart and liver throbbed once, stopped, and then dissolved. A cool, grainy mass puddled outward from the center of his chest and melted bones, nerves, muscles. His body subsided into the rock. It became rock, although turning into stone was not as he would have imagined it: The mineral cold was neither painful nor alien, and the earth's absolute immobility (once he ceased to struggle against it) bore him up, as though he were bobbing on the salt-saturated Sea of Galilee. He began to see his other life—the life of motion and choice—as a strained and futile waste, compared to this steadily imperturbable and heatless . . . waiting. That, he realized, *was* what the earth was doing: Waiting.

The charcoal-colored napkin of stone draped over his eyes slipped away, and various items of ordinary life began to show up: a house, a yard, small livestock—an inventory which, because it belonged to the frustrations of nonmineral life, seemed insignificant to him. The earth was turning to meet the sun: it was morning. And a young woman stood in the yard, watching him, smiling to herself. A gate appeared, and he stood barefooted in the road before it, and the dew-damped dust cooled his toes. An upper limb of the sun glanced over the roof of the house, and this served, apparently, as a signal for them each to advance toward the other.

The distance between them closed very, very slowly. Usually time careered wildly downhill like a greased chariot, but now it stretched and stretched, like a child playing with its mother's bread dough, seeing how far he could stretch it across the kitchen. In this new, roomy kind of time, Dav luxuriated in looking at the woman, in smelling her scents, in listening to her rustling, as she glided nearer.

The odor of burning cedar clung to her hair, the smell of oranges lying on sunwarmed brick wavered round her neck and hands. The linen of her dress crackled, and where the cloth spread over her womb, her apron swelled very slightly. Perhaps she was pregnant, or perhaps she wanted to be pregnant, perhaps they were together conspiring in her soon-to-be pregnancy. All around them, the ground yearned toward the sky, seed tipped longingly toward the earth, genital liquid discreetly seeped from ewes and rams and bulls and heifers.

Meanwhile, his penis had stiffened to a tapering mineral shaft, which (he realized with no apparent embarrassment) was now fully exposed. It glittered, like quartz.

As this steamy scene was apparently reaching its climax (so to speak), it was suddenly snatched away. The backdrop now was exact midday, sunbeams frying his neck, the sun so thick that it sank through his hair, like hot oil, and Goliad, once again, approached across a plain that looked like a trash heap for the insane. Dav knew that this time there wouldn't be any tricks, no secret weapons were going to save him. Speed and agility were pointless. On the other hand, he'd bulked up since the first bout: the muscles of his shoulders and back were like bands of schist, his sinews striations of granite within them, his bones like limestone. Even his head was bigger, broad, splashed across with blood the color of raisins, his giant teeth bared

like a bronze fender. The joy of this coming violence was in knowing that in destroying or being destroyed, the desires of the earth itself were being met.

To be without compunction, free from moral slavery, from the shackles that stopped you from murder: This was the release lava felt as it shot from volcanoes, the joyous immolation of earthquakes. In his hand was a club cut from the limb of a petrified oak. He and Goliad traded horrible blows, yet even so, these had no effect. Neither man bled or flinched as their warclubs crunched into ribs, wrists, noses. Their impotence enraged them.

“God of Battles,” Dav prayed, “tip the balance.”

Dav swung his club in an arc over his shoulder and descended with terrible force on Goliad’s skull. The bony pate collapsed like a baby’s, the sides of his head fell inward, hair and skin mixed in a stew of brains. The nose, disappearing in a mushroom of cartilage, spouted blood, teeth spat from his mouth

The cold desert scoured Dav’s face, but the wind was as a temperate and velvety breeze, like the Jordan Valley’s updraft when you stood on a cliff at the end of the day. He looked around him at the folded ridges, like bunched cloth tossed out under the pliable stars. The entire visible world seemed to him agile, soft. He could hear the rivulet bubbling in the wadi well below him, and the sound seemed to him like the sound of a pulse, the blood of Israel coursing in the old, dry places, the borderlands where God had his theatre.

* * *

The young bandit who stood coolly before Aqij in Gath’s forecourt looked nothing like the beggar boy of a few months back. The boy’s eyes were unwavering, as though he were an archer targeting some very distant mark that required the steadiest arm, the most unflinching concentration. And yet, like that master Bowman, Dav had gained radiant ease as well, the sort of nonchalance some men never come by, the kind you need for unerring, long-range fire. He’d gained an adamant center of gravity, a man to be reckoned with, someone you couldn’t easily move.

Well, it happened, thought Aqij: young men could change very quickly. One day they were a soupy mix of egotism and shame—resolved on nothing—and then suddenly they hardened to some obscure purpose. Usually, the purpose came from a god, and in this case, since the god in question was the Jews’ dangerous and phantomlike Jahveh, Dav’s course was impossible to guess.

Although Dav’s intervening transformation from urchin to sheikh did not unsettle Aqij, the young leader’s new retinue was more disconcerting. The handful of roughened, middle-aged regulars who had earlier accompanied him had now been augmented by several squads of sour, wolfish young men, Dav’s own age or even younger. A soldier himself, Aqij was used to troops who were bluff, simple, and hardened, but not particularly cruel as a body, unless as a tactical necessity. He had the curious feeling that the boys whom Dav had somehow drawn to himself were exotics; they didn’t look like the local boys, although they were obviously Jews. Where did they come from? If they’d ever had parents, they’d probably murdered them, and then burned down their villages behind them.

“I’m giving you Q’lah,” Dav said quietly.

“Is it yours to give away?” asked Aqij.

"We took it three days ago, and now I'm handing it over to you."

Aqij turned to an adviser: "Are they Jews or Philistines in Q'lah?"

"A little of everything, lord," replied the adviser. "Us, the Jews, some Amalekites. They're like every border town—they change nationality depending on whose army is around."

"Then there can't be much valuable left in it. Why would I want it?"

"It's strategically important," Dav said.

"Strategically important." Aqij wondered if this were sarcasm, but Dav gazed at him earnestly. Evidently not. "Well, it doesn't matter. I haven't got enough men to garrison it."

"I've thought of that," Dav said.

Yes, I'll bet you have, thought Aqij.

Chapter Ten

Sol listened to the situation report. For a while now, he'd had difficulty distinguishing between Israel, as a geographical entity, and his own body, which was now being relentlessly attacked, as though by village curs who were growing stronger. Their attacks now came from several quarters. The mongrel Dav had his teeth clamped on Sol's right leg, pressing some main nerve in his shinbone, and every time the king reached down to beat him off, other dogs saw their chance and rushed him. He turned to face them, covering his belly and especially his throat—the pack watched for an opening to his throat—and then it would begin all over again: Dav scrambling in, grinding on the bones of his leg. The pain itself he could bear, but not the way the dogs worried him, never let him rest, not even to check his wounds. He suspected he was bleeding heavily.

Yet he had achieved a kind of serenity in the solid confirmation of all his suspicions, his worst fears. It was better to know that your fears are justified, Sol thought, than to cast about in an emotional fog, sensing the threats concealed in the miasma. At times he grew almost literally blind: a milky veil descended over his sight, opaque, colorless patches appeared on the periphery of his vision. It was a cultural tradition among some of his neighbors to blind captured enemy kings. Well, at least that wasn't going to happen: If his enemies ever came close to conquering his army, they'd never take him alive.

Dav's treachery did not surprise him at all. The boy had always been a traitor, although only Sol had had enough perspicacity to grasp this. He hoped the Tribes of Israel were savoring the irony that their champion, the idol of the Jews, was a quisling, a sell-out to their hereditary foes, but this was wishful thinking: His people were fickle idiots. He tried to smile. Everyone was watching him.

He stood on the edge of the mesa formed by Mount Giboa, his toes curled over the lip of the plateau. From time to time, the dirt crumbled down the steep, reddish cliffside below him. Jonathan wondered if his father were going to jump off the mountain—the old man was now probably suicidal. On the other hand, looking on the bright side, maybe the king was watching the Revolutionary Army of Philistia, still only visible as three distinct tendrils creeping across the plains toward Giboa. Maybe Sol, who had spent most of his life fighting the Philistines, and to whom the specifics of warfare were instinctive, was working out tactics.

His senior officers stood in a group apart from both the king and his son, but they too were following the progress of the Philistines toward their defenses. They had little to say to one another: After all, the military situation was so simple that it didn't really call for comment. There were many more Philistines than Jews, but the Royal Army of Israel was on top of a fairly steep-sided hill. The enemy had to climb the hill, taking heavy casualties. Eventually the attrition would be so bad that the attackers would have to go home, or they'd achieve overwhelming momentum over the bodies of their dead, and that would be the end of Sol and his army.

The three columns, which at first looked like threads of dark brown lichen clinging to the yellow prairies below, had thickened. Now they looked like fat talons clawing forward to the base of the mountain. As the distance between them and the defenders shrank, the speed at which they moved grew.

In fact, Jonathan noticed, they were actually running. Had they jogged all the way to Mount Giboa? Why? Were they so eager to kill Jews? They had to be in peak physical condition. Yet Sol seemed calm, even contented, as the enormous columns of the opposing army groped toward his own. He turned to his son, and Jonathan saw in his father's eyes what he had not seen for many months: Confidence, self-control, eagerness. All at once, it did not matter to him that he was certainly going to die. He didn't care as long as his father were close to him, as he had been when Jonathan was a child. He inched as close to his father as he dared—there seemed still be some danger that Sol would topple over the cliff-edge. The old man glanced at him and smiled.

As a boy, Jonathan had loved his father in a kind of constant swoon of admiration, fascination, pain. He had been given a large collection of tiny clay soldiers, and he and his father would spread these out on the raked sand of an inner courtyard, disposing them in ranks for review, laying out attacks and ambushes, planning retreats. At these times, as the sun poured down into the enclosed space, Jonathan felt as though he'd been engulfed by his father's body, by the cinammony odor exuding from Sol's skin, which left as well a very slight taste, and by a sort of muscular empathy wherein he felt as Sol felt the prick of a tiny archer's arrow against his thumb. But most wonderful of all was his father's voice: It was all Jonathan could do to pay attention to facts about troop dispositions and tactics as the sweet baritone hum of Sol's words crept through his nerves, tingling and soothing them.

At this moment, then, as his father smiled, he again felt at one with him, drawn into a solid point of rest created by Sol's infinite strength, and in this place of serene solidarity, Jonathan wondered that he'd ever thought the old man was insane.

The Philistine troops continued to swarm onto the plain below. The men at point in the columns were no longer faceless, at least where the weird-looking nosepieces and cheekplates did not disguise their features. These weren't after all animated clay figurines but officers, their hair elaborately braided and tied with ribbons, noncoms, whose short and jaggy beards bristled on their heavy jaws, archers, looking (as archers usually looked) wiry and nervous. Jonathan realized that he had irrationally assumed the men massed on the plain would simply maneuver aimlessly in the distance all afternoon and then go home, never drawing near to Mount Giboa. Now that these had turned into individuals, he felt as though he were in that peripety of

nightmare when the nebulous threat you've been trying to ignore abruptly takes form at the foot of your bed.

"They've got the whole Revolutionary Army of Philistia down there," Sol said almost cheerily. "We'll be fighting off the largest enemy force in Israeli history. This battle will go in the record books."

Jonathan, vainly trying to match his father's equanimity, said casually: "So what are our chances?"

Sol smiled tolerantly. "I'd say the ratio is about five to one."

"Them to us. . ."

"Five enemy to one Jew. In theory, defeat's inevitable."

Jonathan looked up at the sky, where there weren't any men intent on assaulting one another, or at least none that he could see. A single boat-shaped cloud was stalled directly overhead. It was long, low to the water, but dramatically upswept on each end, and pearly wisps that could have been oars rose from its cloudy gunwales—a fast Phoenician trading galley. Very slowly it began to move, as though it were casting free of a stone wharf against an inshore wind. A crew of angels steered it. It was hard not to think, like children or non-Jews, of God living up there in the sky, installed in a cloud, or maybe a thunderhead, infinitely attenuated among the stars. Yet that wasn't where God was, evidently. Loving someone who was always absent, Jonathan thought, was excruciating. Dav, like God, could be hidden anywhere in the broken hill-lines, the jumbled wadis, the scraped and wounded plains of Israel.

Sol had sent messengers to Dav, saying that family quarrels were one thing, but when the nation was in mortal danger, it was time for its sons to rally round. Jonathan wasn't sure how they'd gotten into this situation—with the entire male population of Philistia massing on the Plains of Giboia. It suddenly occurred to him that his father had somehow engineered the invasion of his own country (as unlikely as that seemed) simply to lure Dav back. Possibly Sol's lunatic grandiosity had reverted to the old heroic grandeur, for which he'd once been famous. Dav's last-minute arrival, his victorious intervention, seemed now inevitable the more Jonathan thought about it.

The boat-cloud was now tacking fast toward the horizon, losing wisps of hull as it sped away. Jonathan knew what prophets must feel—as though you could quite clearly hear an overwhelming rhythm engulfing not only your life but everyone's: It was like listening to extraordinary music, whose utter captivation was partly that you knew what course the music would take, its shifts in mood and especially its climax. Now they were at the turning-point, the pinnacle, maybe the reversal, of everything that had gone before. In some remote part of his soul, Jonathan was astonished by the solace this knowledge lent him.

"What Jahveh wills," said Sol. "The normal combat ratios don't make any difference in this particular situation. If we're doomed, we're doomed because God wants it that way. If Dav is scheduled to show up and tip the battle in our favor, then he'll show up." He turned from gazing at the Philistines, whose host now forked around the base of the mountain, and turned to his son. They regarded each other peacefully for a while. "You know it has to be this way?"

"Of course."

"That I'm happy now?"

"Yes, I know that."

"Now that it's finished, I keep trying to explain it to myself . . . I don't really think any of this has been God's fault." He paused. "I wonder why he talks to some people and not to others." He was thinking of Dav, Jonathan knew. "I have been the first king of Israel, I joined the tribes into a nation—nobody had ever conceived of Jews becoming a political unit, a force to be reckoned with in the Middle East. Yet it's funny that I don't remember *becoming* king. Probably there was too much to do, I didn't have any time for reflection." He looked up at the sky, then down to the plain, as though measuring the distance. "Actually, I do recall one thing: I thought 'Now I'm king, Jahveh will start speaking to me on a regular basis.' Of course, he didn't. I wasn't a prophet or seer or a judge. And Shemuel claims I broke too many laws."

"What laws?"

"Who knows, we have so many. I used to think that I wasn't offering up the right animals for sacrifice, but now it turns out that Jahveh isn't interested in butchered livestock. I understand that. That makes sense: What use would an omnipotent God have for all that roasted flesh? I suppose rituals like that—hecatombs and doves and reciting the thousand names of God—they're holdovers, artifacts of when we were primitive herdsmen. The trouble is that *I'm* still partly a primitive herdsman." He gazed at his son uncritically. "You're not, though. You're some new kind of Jew. Not that I hold it against you."

"It's not me, Dad. Dav is the new-model Jew, even though he doesn't know it yet."

They lapsed into silence. The general staff, which had until now stood respectfully to one side thinking that the king and his son were strategizing, began to cough politely. Sol glanced at them and beckoned. Abner, his military favorite, drew near.

"O Hilt of Our Redemption," he said, "the Philistines are starting their assault. We were wondering if you'd settled on a plan."

Sol laughed. The generals smiled uneasily, expecting the king's usual bout of hysterical cackling, but curiously, his easy, rumbling laughter calmed them. The old Sol re-emerged—their father, whose resourcefulness was unimaginable. The threats from which other men childishly shrank, Sol foresaw and mastered. In fact, from his serene vantage point, the king laughed at these pointless fears.

The ranks of archers and infantry in the neighborhood of the king and his staff watched their leaders laughing.

"This isn't a good sign," said one.

"Of course it is," said another, smiling. "Look how confident they are."

Finally, Abner said: "We are at your bidding, sire. What do we do first?"

"We're on top of a mountain with hundreds of boulders." Everyone looked at Sol blankly. "Wait till they get closer and then push the rocks downhill." They brightened.

"Start gathering boulders," Abner ordered.

The Philistines began their ascent of Mount Gibo. They trotted off the plain, banked up the skirts of the mountain, and then almost immediately slowed down. Men stumbled and clung and plodded, picking their way around outcrops and through rubble, gradually siphoning onto four or five narrow paths. Jonathan watched them struggle. An uphill assault was new to his military experience and he'd imagined a wild horde pounding up the

mountainside at a dead run. Instead, he watched hundreds of individuals pick their solitary, exhausted way up a painful grade, probably now oblivious (or, anyway, indifferent) to the defenders at the top of the mountain.

The Jews rolled large rocks directly down the few assailable uphill routes. Although they were psychologically fearsome, boulders weren't very effective, Jonathan noticed: Even in their painfully absorbed toiling (their aching thighs, the pinch of their lungs), the Philistines had plenty of time to step out of the way of giant, rumbling rocks. No, it was the smaller stones that hurt them, ones that bounced viciously, that ricocheted off the hillside, that bowled murderously down the trail. It was surprising how much impetus a smallish chunk of schist could pick up over, say, a hundred downhill yards. Jonathan watched a rock the size of a man's head, leap like a small, homicidal mountain goat down the slope, slam into an officer's face, and then zig-zag merrily on, searching for further stony mayhem. The officer fell and did not move.

The boulder tactic checked the frontal advance. Sol's headquarters' staff was jubilant, but the old king smiled impassively.

* * *

The backside of Mount Giboa was at first deserted, but milky puffs of dust drifted upward from the hilltop. After a while, larger dustclouds rolled around its sides. Dav and Ira slowly tracked the skyline for movement.

"Could be just a duststorm," said Ira. "I don't think anybody's up there."

Dav said nothing. His mad, murderous king had sent for him to aid in defending his, their, country. The summons had been terse, and its lack of bathos, of any rhetorical excess, had in fact frightened him. It was a serious message. "Our enemies seek a final solution. Every man needed."

The general location of the coming battle wasn't hard to predict: The Philistines had always mounted their big invasions up the Valley of Jezreel, and the chances of their pulling off some tricky blitzkrieg elsewhere were nil. If they did that, neighbor kings would assume that the Revolutionary Army of Philistia was intimidated by the tinpot Kingdom of the Jews. No, the customary frontal assault up the traditional invasion route was the only honorable course.

Soon now, Dav thought, he'd run into the battle. Maybe this *was* the battle, whatever was creating the now-enormous billows of dust pouring like sacrificial smoke to heaven, where a horned cloud like the head of a bull ate it.

"They're there all right," a keen-eyed boy said.

Horses and men emerged from the screen of dust around the base of the hill. Too many to be Jews, so the squirming threads atop Mount Giboa must be Sol's legions, preparing to withstand their enemies moving up the slope. Pieces of the mountain, looking like pebbles at this distance, detached themselves from the hillside, the solid stream of attackers dividing into several streams around the tiny landslides.

Dav had rarely thought of Jonathan in the last few months. He wondered if Jonathan were among the line of defenders atop the incline. He must be terrified—anyone would be, threatened by the huge force accumulating on the plain, muddling around as it grew larger, stalling until its officers could halt horses, archers, infantry, chariots, priests, and a glittering

statue of Baal as large as house – until they had gotten all this in order and turned everybody toward the route of attack.

Still, Jonathan was, in his way, a brave man, maybe braver than Dav himself. To keep yourself sane, even cheerful, amid the gloomy chaos that reigned around Sol, in fact that required an intense, steady courage – not Ira’s dogged stoutheartedness nor the thin, crazy foolhardiness of his own younger troopers. Instead, Dav suddenly realized, Jonathan’s bravery was *intelligent* courage. This was, he also realized, an insight of which he wouldn’t have been capable a year ago.

Did he, then, really understand people better? Had he stopped being the shallow, self-centered shlemiel he used to be? No, probably not. But at least he was aware that he spent too much time concentrating on himself; at least he knew that his own personality and God’s complicated relationship with it were bizarre and unseemly obsessions. Even if he couldn’t stop thinking about them.

The point now, though (bringing himself back to the reality at hand) was what he could do about the struggle-in-progress playing itself out in earnest on the distant mountain. Men he knew intimately might be in their final agony – Jonathan, Sol, friends, possibly even a brother or two. Yet as he looked back over his scrawny band sheltering behind the ridge on which he stood, he recognized that nothing they could do would help. An attack into the rear of that infinite mass out on the steppe wouldn’t even be a distraction from the main event.

He thought then about his old dreams of the Jordan, the parched riverbed, the horribly sunny plains, the far cliffs looming impassively, monstrosly. And now there no longer remained the sickly comfort of nightmare where immanent and impending extinction was only sleep, and there was no way he could by waking escape from the giant plodding up Mount Giboa.

* * *

Jonathan trembled from the intensity of his exhilaration. Icy ripples passed up his arms and through his chest and down his thighs. The surface of his skin was chillingly numb, but beneath his skin he felt a pool of liberating pleasure splashing through him. Incapable as usual of ignoring himself, the Jonathan who was ever-watchful of Jonathan closely inspected this happy state. The watcher Jonathan noticed the absence of all bloodthirstiness within him, yet at the same time, boldness, skill, hot-heartedness – these flooded him as he helped stone his nation’s enemies. And when he finally took up his bow as the Philistines boiled up the backside of Mount Giboa like a pot of overheated stew, he was astonished at his unflagging power and accuracy. Each arrow he nocked sped cheerfully malevolent, with a kind of arrowy awareness, into the neck or heart or lung of its target.

Was anyone watching this? He looked for his father, who stood not far away filling his notch in the line of Jewish defenders. As few as they were in the face of this enormous onslaught, every Israeli was on the front line. There was no rear area now, no knot of senior officers clumping back out of the direct line of fire.

He glanced down at himself, partly in an effort to confirm that his body was still upright and solid, that he hadn’t somehow been killed and now looked on as a happy spirit. Except for

his sandals, he was naked, like many others in the line. When had they taken off their skirts and armor?

It didn't matter: For the first time in his life, he experienced the simple conviction that Jahveh really was their shield and their sword.

His face was soaked with tears that even now (he also realized) nearly blinded him. How strange it was (the watcher-Jonathan thought) that the only real ecstasy in one's life should come moments before life's end. But that might be best: If you knew joy like this and then had to live on knowing it wouldn't come again . . . The remainder of your existence would be dragged-out, debased, grim.

"It's glorious to die young," he thought.

Leaping and stumbling over a carpet of bodies lying at least twenty yards out, the Philistines plunged into the Israeli line, making pockets where the Jews gave a little under the press, or gaps where the Jews (literally) threw them back.

The westering sun stood like a dull copper button above the Revolutionary Army of Philistia filling the steppe below them. It was hot and breezeless on the heights: Jonathan felt dessicated and weightless, like a tumbleweed, except unlike a tumbleweed he was clawed by thirst.

A wall of dust now rose over everything. It lightly scoured his parched skin, which curiously was damp only in one place—near his right nipple. He looked down. A dagger's handle was attached to his breast. Very dark blood bubbled around it. He wished he could have a drink of water before he died.

* * *

Dav stood up and walked the few feet to the top of the tumulus, followed silently by his men, who gradually spread out along the low ridge, unconcealed and indifferent. Slightly below them on the plain, chariots looped and curved aimlessly, like waterbugs on a village pond. Troops continued to flow around the base of the mountain, spreading outward among the chariots, waiting their turn for the ascent.

They watched this remote movement as though they were studying some distant and unconnected natural force, a storm at sea passing many leagues astern or a perpetually receding mirage in the Negev. They watched unconcealed, or possibly they had become invisible. Possibly they had been outsiders so long that they had rendered themselves automatically alien to national events, anyone's national events. The opposing armies in this agony did not need them, did not want them. It was very likely God did want them, even as witnesses.

There was in this battle (if that's what it was—it might have been a pilgrimage, a diaspora, the start of a crusade) an immanent abstraction that had features marking it off as God's intricate and faraway will. The battle's indistinct, ritual movements were horrible. He felt like a small child pushed back to the edge of an immense crowd watching a high holy sacrifice,

so distant that the sacrificial animal was impossible to identify. Somewhere the knives of priests plunged into the throats of victims, who might have been oxen, or doves.

* * *

Feeling dizzy, Jonathan sat down on the soft and forgiving body of a fallen comrade. Although men were in vigorous motion all around him, he heard only tiny, muffled noises, like the sounds of someone in an adjoining room settling in for the night: The click of a buckle, the rap of a cup set down too hard on a tabletop. The men, the living men (Philistines, he supposed) looked like harvesters, peasants, bland and stolid, bent over their work, their scythes flitting in the air above their heads, disappearing into the stalks at their feet. Like reapers, they seemed to pass in ragged files through the dead, occasionally stopping.

He saw them nearby, halting to sever the genitals from a fallen Jew, to prise apart his already-locked jaws and stuff the severed member in. They did this without apparent joy or even interest. It was as if, Jonathan thought, someone had ordered them to perform the mutilation, according to regulations.

A figure twice as high as the peasant soldiers stood watching these methodical dissections, his arms crossed over his golden breast, his face an image of scrupulous equanimity, silver sparks flaring out around his long hair. He slowly turned his head toward Jonathan, and Jonathan tried to smile. But his lips, it seemed, were cold, unresponsive. He felt like a child's wax doll, and under the pure, patient, and serene gaze of the towering watcher, he began to melt.

He thought of Dav. His love for him, he now understood, was his crowning achievement. What form this love had taken, the fact that it was unavowed and unconsummated, or even that he himself hadn't known the entire measure of it—these were inconsiderable now. And his rekindled love for his father, that too had been the kind of splendid gift you receive when you've already gotten your heart's desire, and which is made more wonderful because it seems that God's grace really is prodigal.

The Philistines had by now dragged their Baal-float to the top of Mount Giboa, in an effort probably to demonstrate their god's salient elevation over the Jews and *their* god.

At the moment of his death, his soul was in a state of irony. He was thinking of their enemy's confidence in their gold-plated cow, and how much good that would do them when Dav made them final restitution.

Part II

Chapter Eleven

He brought the stone over to the window and I could see the tiny scoops that shaped the slightly convex top and bottom. He placed it in my palm. I felt its edge but didn't feel the small, deep laceration. The skin around the cut felt cold, as though I'd dipped it in a spring.

Dav pinched my finger below the knuckle and stanching the small fan of blood running down my hand.

"I wanted to see how sharp it was," I said.

Scattered around Dav's chamber, there were other objects like it—arrowheads, spear-points—and heavier, smoother stones, axheads. Clay and mud still clung to some, others had been washed and polished. The clean ones looked as though someone had just made them.

"Where do they all come from?"

"These came from the cave at Ziph, where the paintings are. They're older than the ones from Jericho or the ones we found here when we were building the palace." He picked up a sleek stone speckled with black and shaped like a fat fish: Unlike the small blades, its surface was flawless, perfectly curved to a blunt point on one end and a broad crescent striking edge on the other. "These axes are newer than the arrowheads. The arrowheads are very, very old."

Even so, the flaked blades glistened and that made them look newer, definitely manmade, while the axheads seemed antediluvian, something a golem had squeezed from a rockface like a droplet of granite.

"Who made them?" I asked. Dav hefted the axhead in his hand, studying it. At these times, when he wasn't addressing a crowd or sitting in state or gloriously caparisoned in some procession, at these times he looked middle-aged, which is not to say aged, even in my then-adolescent eyes. What you saw then was the scholar in him, the aborted rabbi. The wrinkles on his face were few but deep, three cut straight across his forehead, two fanning from his nostrils, and the fine incisions, like willow branches in January, fanning from the corners of his eyes.

I pressed the question: "Was it Jews? It was probably Jews from before the Flood."

"No, I don't think it was Jews, Mina. These things were made by people who lived long before anything in our stories."

"Not before Adam and Heva."

"No, maybe not. Maybe they were made by Qayin or Avel. But they tell us one thing for certain."

“What’s that?”

“Somebody’s been fighting over Israel since God made dry land.” He laughed. “That’s how old I feel, Yasmin. Like I’ve been struggling since men made clubs out of stone and lived in caves.”

There wasn’t much I could say: A couple of years had now gone by since my father’s death, I was truly entering into young womanhood, but older people’s self-deprecating remarks about the ache in their joints or their failing memories, these I took at face value. They laughed, but they probably *were* falling apart and getting senile. Dav did sometimes seem ancient, never more perhaps than in light of what I now knew of his youth, although as I’ve said, the young Dav still fluttered occasionally in and out of view.

I now knew Dav’s story – what he had been like at my age and a little older – up to Mount Giboa, and if knowing that were the purpose for which we’d come together, that purpose no longer existed. Obviously I was old enough now for people to be fairly blasé about what they supposed to be our affair, which everybody accepted as natural. Having slept with King Dav didn’t even affect my marriage prospects – it probably improved them.

I think that each of us derived contentment from what we’d contrived to be between us, whatever that may have been. Two story-tellers? Two students of history? Me a female version of Dav, and Dav a male version of me?

It would be facile to see in us the Past and Future of Israel Met in the Present, yet Dav’s ancient weapons often stirred the memory of my vision of God by the fountain delivering her inscrutable messages and the even more incomprehensible young woman doing her inexplicable work. God had told me that my vision prophesied our heritage, but the only thing of substance I could derive from that dubious reassurance was that we, the Jews, would last long enough into a strange future (far stranger, much farther away than the past of the men who’d made Dav’s warheads) to *have* a heritage.

Prompted by thoughts, or perhaps misgivings, like these, I asked Dav: “Will it always be this way for us, do you think? Is what’s in store for us just a version of the past with better weapons?”

“Jahveh has vouchsafed to me a lineage,” he answered, apparently seriously.

“Lots of people are vouchsafed a lineage, Father of Our Nation, nearly everybody in fact.”

“I think what the Most High means is that my lineage will be highly visible among the Jews.”

“Kings, wise men, prophets?”

“I suppose so. I’m not sure. Maybe one of my descendants will finish off our enemies once and for all. Or maybe he’ll be the ruin of us.”

“Maybe she’ll be a peacemaker.”

“I wonder if all that matters – what our great-grandchildren and their children do.”

“There’s posterity . . . your fame. That’s a kind of immortality.”

“You say that because you’re a story-teller. Stories are your children and you think they’ll live forever.”

* * *

Dav now felt mortality's compelling tug at his sleeve. Like most middle-aged people with sufficient self-respect and humility to have become disinterestedly self-reflective, Dav knew that although dying provided the piquancy to one's mortality, it was not mortality's driving motif. That had to do with what you'd done, what it meant, and what was left over when the dark shut down on you once and for all.

Rarely was this what you'd expected it to be, he knew now as he breathed freely. Well out of youth, he *could* breathe freely, and with old age still distant, he could breathe easily. Yes, pride, bad judgment, and general distate for other human beings yammered wearily on in his life, but still he dispassionately knew now what was worth something and what wasn't.

What wasn't was establishing the kingdom of first Judah, then Israel, finally Greater Israel, Israel as a power in the world's jumbled game of pebbles and scratches in the hardscrabble ground. He knew that this was, however, what most men did and what most men knew they had done at his age: which was to say to devote their youth to a spirit-depleting, technically absorbing, and attention-demanding activity. Work, war, it didn't matter: You woke up at forty or fifty and discovered that you'd become very good at something that would happily eat the rest of your life if you were unaware enough to let it. And men largely lived their lives unaware.

For twenty years his days had seeped one into another so that the entire stretch seemed sometimes like a longish month, at least as far as business—running a country—was concerned.

At first, in the immediate aftermath of Sol's death, the problem had been uncomplicated and dire: To cling to Judah's core, to keep it from being overwhelmed by Philistia's victorious army, or for that matter, nearly any armed rabble (and there were scores in the general neighborhood) eager for rapine. He'd kept the borders intact by means of tireless movement along them, like a vicious dog defending his flocks, sinking his teeth into intruders' soft parts. After a while, incursions stopped: There wasn't enough spoil in Judah to compensate for the damage done by Dav's bitter, nothing-left-to-lose raids.

But Dav's men were now habituated to combat. The rabble of badly armed, discontented Jews had at some point become the Army of Israel. They had in fact become that fearsome thing among the peoples of our world, a veteran body of professional soldiers for whom pain, disfigurement, cheap death were occupational inevitabilities. And for whom victory over other men by efficiently killing and wounding those men had become a craft in which they took disinterested satisfaction.

No one knew when the balance shifted from defending their homes to extending their borders. But Judah imperceptibly grew as the young and youngish men of surrounding tribes, then nations, were decimated. The Jews had become predators in their turn.

Dav felt no remorse for the flow of enemy blood that he more than anyone had begun. Jahveh had authorized it, but there were more mundane extenuations: In all the crescent curving down from Achaea to Egypt and east as far as you'd care to go, everyone was everyone else's enemy. The priests liked to say the Jews were singularly harassed, but no one in that time and in that world was safe.

That in fact was the message of many of his songs and poems—the world is dangerous, we are at constant risk of being gored, clawed, shredded by beastlike enemies, who moreover

happen to be virtually everywhere. On the other hand, the Lord of Hosts provided a great deal of security, if He were inclined to afford it – which wasn't a sure thing.

As he gained perspective on the first half of his life, a life given over to war, Dav was impressed by how modest was the origin of glory. His "combat" with Goliath was like something your night-self might flimsily concoct in a more-than-usually implausible dream. Yet his career as a soldier had begun with just that: a few seconds of terror, the reverberating earth, the whistle of the sling. Suddenly it seemed he had become a veteran warrior, and now he could not recall what it had been like to be otherwise.

Recently his general staff had timidly pointed out that there wasn't any reason that he himself needed to be in the front line for every skirmish fought by the Army of Israel. This astonished him. He remembered an elderly baker he'd known as a boy in Bethlehem. One day his middle-aged sons approached him to say it was time he retired. Yet even though he wanted to hand the business over to his sons and grandsons, he couldn't stop getting up in the middle of the night and firing the ovens, so that when the sons and grandsons and great-grandsons showed up at the bakery to begin the day's work, he'd be sitting muzzily in a corner of the already-warm room. And when they asked in frustration what he thought he was doing, he answered, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize what I'd done until I'd done it." Rising, fire-stoking, going to work – these *were* the baker. You might as well have asked him to retire his ears.

The front line of combat had lately become invested with strangeness, with that uncanny hyperawareness in battle he knew in his very young youth. It wasn't a business like baking bread, after all – spearing, cutting, clubbing other human beings. It was not a job, not an ordinary occupation, despite the countervailing impulse, probably a self-protective one, to view it that way, the way veterans and the general staff were supposed to view war.

On an ordinary skirmish against the Kishites (who, in justice, were actually a criminal gang pretending to be an ethnic group, a hackneyed device in our part of the world), he suddenly perceived his life's work with old, old eyes, eyes aged enough to see more clearly than any child's.

The Kishites had managed to assemble enough disorganized, scrawny members of their pseudotribe to mount a comparatively dangerous ambush in the streets of Megiddo. It started with kids throwing stones; a boy slung a rock and struck the man next to Dav in the forehead. Of course the stone hadn't the added velocity provided by holy boost, and the Israeli corporal had simply stumbled back and recovered, enough to catch the kid, fling him to the ground, and kick him unconscious. A nonevent, really, yet the boys' catcalling and the shouts of noncoms were stilled so Dav could hear the "klok" as the stone ricocheted off bone covered by a thin pad of skin. He heard too the way the corporal's horny, leather-laced toes punched the kid's ribs, the crack of the ribs muffled by the boy's linen tunic.

Then a few bowmen opened up from the low rooftops, and the level of noise in fact increased severely, the Jews howling, the boys screeching, the invisible ambush party shouting to one another. But the arrows themselves were silent, and Dav saw a greasy shaft pop through a man's upper arm, and the man was no longer concentrating on his peril because what had been going to happen to him had happened, and he winced, as of course you would with a splinter half a cubit long driven through your muscles and nerves.

Kishites boiled from doorways, lanes, windows, and the fight was crammed into the tight street. As impossible as it was to swing a sword or cast a lance, they were reduced to fists, the abrupt jab of a dagger, the hilt of a sword like a bludgeon on the pate, forehead, nose of your opponent, whose breath was full and clammy on your face. Dav's twenty-five years of warring were stripped down to this depleted brawl, without the rush of chariots, the cascade of hoofbeats, the wind sent up by ten thousand charging infantry, the hundred banners, the camels, the whole fucking glorious riot.

A boy warrior rushed toward him, uplifted club in hand, teeth bared, frothing, in his eyes simple, personal hatred. Dav heard the rush of air made by the swollen club and saw where the tips of the spikes had been filed.

Dav ducked the flailing club, came up under the boy's guard, and stabbed him in the right armpit, a surgical thrust neutralizing the child, keeping him alive, with a significant wound to brag about. But the boy wouldn't retreat. He grabbed Dav's right forearm, his grasp humid and clinging. He punched the boy in his homely face, and the boy stumbled backward, only to rush on him once again. Each time he was punched, throttled, thrown down, the boy picked himself up and threw himself against Dav, like a furious child against a weary parent. In frustration Dav landed a powerful blow to the bridge of the boy's nose, killing him.

In days to come, his thoughts recurred to this squalid episode and to his entirely different experience at Mount Giboa. That culminating battle between Israel and her enemies had left him heartsick, but in viewing the distant hordes moving slowly and smoothly on a faraway stage, he had an odd realization: The remote, hallucinatory holocaust taking place on the horizon would in fact be the way all wars would someday take place. And not wars only: The worst terror that human could mete on human would eventually involve removal of just that seedy immediacy of the Megiddo street brawl.

In one way, though, his feelings toward each episode were identical. He squirmed at the memories, he was squeamish about his part in them. He felt obscurely (but definitely) that he'd behaved . . . not dishonorably, certainly not immorally . . . but unbecomingly. He felt cheap shame, and once he admitted this, it was as though a cascade of captious memories, like a ripped sack of moldy grain, poured into his awareness. Recollections of petty, selfish, sneaky, shallow, cruel youthful actions kept creeping across the border into the sober, objective, relatively blameless country of his middle age.

He could not actually regret such actions: the boy was after all a warrior who wanted him dead, and his alternative at Mount Giboa would have been to sacrifice himself. Seen in that light, in fact, his behavior at Mount Giboa was selfless. And in his interior trial, he tried to catch at extenuating circumstances, anything in the generally reprobate character of the defendant that would demonstrate a glimpse of altruism. He tried to remember whether he'd actually said to himself, "I must save myself for Israel's sake," but of course he could remember nothing of the kind. Which wasn't to say that he'd thought the opposite, but that didn't help.

Israel's victories, then, began to seem doubtful. Who after all was earning them? Dav? The Lord of Hosts? Or simply the sturdy Israeli soldier? Was Dav's success as a military leader owing to his own courage, cunning, or was all this just a sign of bloody grace?

The more Dav prospered, the more remote seemed God's former intimacy with him. Now he couldn't really remember what it was like, hearing Jahveh's voice and being able to ask questions. The court and the high priests universally agreed that Israel's ascendancy into a Nation, some place that other Nations had to account for when they plotted, and Dav's outstanding individual success as king and lover and father—they agreed that all this was doubtless a Sign from God. God loved Dav, God loved Israel.

Dav didn't think he knew what God's love meant because he was certain how much he didn't know about human love.

He often dreamed of younger women, without names, sexy but not necessarily appealing, involved with him in some unconsummating relationship where mostly they talked. Jabbering back and forth aimlessly, compulsively, from dream-room to dream-room, into bed and out of bed, they chewed over some not-quite-definable subject until the verbal chaff stuck like grit in their teeth. The bridges of the noses of these trying young women creased with anxiety, their smooth, young brows wrinkled disingenuously, as though they were play-acting at being older.

The curious thing was that neither this dream situation nor the women in it were familiar. Who were these anxious women who plagued both themselves and him with doubt?

He observed with interest men who had but one wife. He could view *each* of his wives singly, but he couldn't imagine what being married to anyone of them, by themselves, would be like. In fact, they were different women married to different men.

He couldn't help seeing his wives and concubines as a sort of collective national responsibility, with some of the characteristics of a large agricultural operation. Past forty now, he thought of his duties toward all these women as royal maintenance fucking.

I found it interesting that he was willing to talk about this to me, and the fact that he did may have meant he now considered me not merely a confidant (which I'd been from my adolescence) but a woman confidant. More. I was that kind of woman confidant that sexually secure men (those freaks of nature) often discover, perhaps even need if they're going to talk at all about what their sexuality means to them. They can't talk to other men, who obviously haven't a clue, and if they talk to other women, the women think they're being seduced.

His interpretation of the dreams was that this murky, convoluted ordinariness made up the real dynamic between lovers. The wearisome conversation in the dreams was a sort of epitome of the uncomfortable, confusing, strained interchange that two people with a sexual stake in each other served up daily. With these Liliths of the night the pattern was pretty much the same: After some discussion, they would go to bed. He wanted sex, she agreed—but, he wondered as they got between the sheets, why did they have to come to an agreement in the first place? Then they'd be fucking, but that wasn't somehow relevant, because he'd get distracted by her expression. She was preoccupied, but Dav didn't know by what, and he'd be grinding away, and she'd be absently putting up with it, and they'd both be thinking of something else. Dav: "What does she want? What am I doing wrong?" Woman: "Is this what I want? Who is this guy?"

He knew he shouldn't dwell too much on what went on in dreams. They weren't some gateway to higher knowledge, despite dreams' ability to intimate that they knew something

you didn't. Still, he thought and thought about sex until he came to the final question: Why are there men and why are there women? Isn't this, he now wondered, the main question we should be asking God? We can put up with the apparently inveterate existence of pointless evil, and we can live without knowing why we exist at all. Yet the riddle of men and women is like some malady most of us must sooner or later share, something, like gout, that is a meaningless, non-fatal torture. Are children the end for which Heva was split from Adam (or vice versa)?

In the Beginning, did God think that, left to ourselves, we wouldn't be inspired to reproduce ourselves? That we would need to be prodded, lured, trapped into duplicating our likenesses? *Why* would God think that?

* * *

The people around Dav—the counselors and lawyers, wives and lovers, children, old soldiers, a few good friends—were no less cognizant, no less intuitive than other human beings. In their honest and human way, they sensed that their king was changing, but they couldn't put their fingers on how exactly. Some said he was growing holier, some that he was growing haughtier and that was only natural in a king, and the usual assortment of fatalists thought he was going the mad, bad way of Sol.

It is not necessarily the role of a confidant to understand everything her confidante tells her, and clearly this was the situation in our case. Many things were clear enough—I could even grasp the essentials of his sex doubts—but what I couldn't possibly understand was the profound opposition within him of two ways of being Dav. Like two trenched rivers meeting from opposed ranges in the confluence of a valley, each river's upstream pounding against the other's downstream, Dav needed at once to build and tear down, to mark the world with signs of Dav and to cleanse himself from all superfluties.

And build he did. For nearly five years Dav entertained a series of architects, each earnestly hawking a national style which would get absorbed in a crop of papyrus-crowned columns, bull-flanked archways, cunning oval courts, only to be discarded for some newer, more plausibly adept design. The columns were too Egyptian, the bulls vaguely sacriligious, the courts (when you actually thought about them) lacked any conceivable use. Unsurprisingly (because we knew he could turn his hand to any art or artifice), Dav finally took over planning his palace, its grounds, the various official buildings that now began incongruously to bulge among the clean and jumbled facades of old, hill-climbing Jerusalem.

People believed that in the sides of those hills the bones of Avram and Sara were interred and on its mild summits prophets had spoken with angels. Our old capitol, Hebron, had bad associations, and by this time it was essentially a psychological slum. Sol's sour, crazy ghost racketed around its rundown streets. But we believed in Jerusalem as other peoples believed in statues of animals or bodies of water, maybe not as gods but as some *place* invested with the sense of possibility, of continual astonishment.

Many Jews swear that sunshine falls differently once you step across Israel's borders, that the air changes its savor and the way it gives off the darkness of night. There it is, one side Israel, the other side Syria, and if a Jew stands astride the frontier, he's not only spanning an idea but a palpable contrast, like a meal that begins with one country's cuisine and finishes with another's.

I'm not claiming Jews are unusual in this: The Achaeans worship springs and curiously formed boulders, the Egyptians the thousand aspects of their National River, the desert peoples worship sand dunes. But Dav had been a shepherd boy *and* a Jew, a mixture liable to make you brood on landscape. Walking the lonely ridges with his sheep, Dav understood the individuality, the identity composed of light and elevation in hilltops, so that each prospect offered up its own perspective, as each person has her own point of view.

I think he needed to fill Jerusalem with structures that firmly said, "We are of the Jews, we are the specific creation of the Israelites set against the nebulous creation of Adonai."

As it turned out, the epitome of Dav's building fever—the Temple itself—Jahveh was to keep back from him. In his entire life, it was the first thing that God had ever denied him. Yet Jahveh had given Dav the keenest sense of irony, or justice, if you will: Perhaps they're the same thing. Dav knew unmistakably what he'd done to deserve that punishment—that was simple to understand—but he also knew why the punishment had taken the character it had, why news of the punishment had not come directly from Adonai (whose removal lent another tint to his disgrace), why other painful results sprouted like pimples on the original judgment.

Obscurely at first and then quite clearly, Dav realized his children were implicated in his own sin. He did not wonder at the unfairness of this, for by now he was beginning to comprehend justice, that least human and most supernatural property of God.

Chapter Twelve

They opened the high barn doors all the way, breeze stirred the chaff on the granary floor, and dust formed a diagonal yellow panel stagily illuminating the Unnameable.

The cloth-draped mound set down in the middle of the threshing floor could have been an old piece of farm equipment—a cracked millstone or a giant-sized amphora. There was a general fit of sneezing when they lifted it off, and this diluted a little the mystery.

Gay'l stood back, looking skeptical, her slim, strong arms crossed on breasts just firm enough and large enough to support them. She was thinking that two separate civil wars were taking place, the Philistines were massing over large stretches of countryside, and Dav was now making a detour to this out-of-the-way farm. She was a thoughtful woman, a businesswoman in her previous existence, when she was married to a man whose rich parents had seen their son clearly enough to begin calling him simply "The Fool" when he was four.

However, that was over. God had struck The Fool down. In Dav's opinion The Fool had angered God because The Fool was a chintzy parvenu. Yet Gay'l had fallen instantly in love with Dav (why should she be different? she ruefully asked herself) and was content when the disagreement between The Fool and Dav had resulted in her marrying Dav. It all came about because Dav didn't always know what his troops were doing, particularly some of the younger ones, who remained sullen, vicious, full of guile. While Dav kept interminably to some backwoods camp, planning, they'd set up a straightforward protection racket, which in itself she didn't think was reprehensible. The Fool owned enormous herds of sheep, goats, oxen, watched over by bands of irresponsible teenagers. Dav's own gang of shady adolescents had moved in on the shepherds, who in any case were witless with admiration.

There had been a dispute between her current and her previous husband over the latter's political contributions to the former, by way of replenishing Dav's chronically empty supply depot. The Fool's beefy, clueless face, as he stood in the road in front of his palatial ranchhouse and refused him, was almost unbearably irritating, but Dav managed to suppress the craving to hack the farmer's bovine face into meaty wedges with a battleax.

Later, Gay'l privately visited Dav's camp. Which was a good thing because as Dav got to thinking about The Fool's intransigence—and most of all the impudent, gaping look on his face (which seemed to Dav to express the entirety of his childhood environment, everything that was disgusting about the People)—he had almost decided not only to butcher The Fool, but to

massacre everybody else as well. Or, anyway, all the male members of the family and staff. This is what he was thinking when Gay'l was brought before him. An image hung clearly in his mind, which he blurted out to her:

"I'm going to kill everybody who pisses on a wall."

Oddly, this made sense to her, but after a moment's thought, Dav realized the image—so sharp and suggestive to him—might not be terribly clear to the poised, pretty woman who stood calmly listening to him.

"By that," he hastened to add, "I mean . . ."

"I know what you mean," Gay'l interrupted. "You mean you're going to wipe out everybody with a prick."

"Well, I . . ." The way she said the word "prick" made it sound straightforward, concrete, and peculiarly unemotional. Its usual vulgarity was gone, and instead it sounded . . . not exactly dignified, but at least natural, no-nonsense. Like the woman herself. For the moment, this expressed itself in her figure, which through her dress's discreet bends and twists also seemed mistress of itself, strong, lean, graceful, with lines not like a ewer (in the usual male epitome of females) but curved like a cypress bow.

"Let me talk to him," Gay'l said. "I personally guarantee you'll get your supplies."

The way she said "personally," Dav thought, was sort of sexy, as though she'd somehow meant that she was offering her body as insurance.

The next day The Fool, humbled and contrite, led a long pack train into Dav's camp. Little good that did him, for the farmer was already condemned, and later in the day had a stroke and died. The day after that, his wife went off with Dav.

Dav now claimed two wives, Gay'l and Sol's daughter Michal, although you couldn't find anybody who'd actually witnessed Gay'l's marriage, and as for Michal, after Dav had fled from Sol's palace, she announced that her marriage to him was null and void. Michal aspired vainly to a kind of aristocratic propriety that had never been much in evidence among our upper echelons, neither in her father's court nor in Dav's—that kind of respectability would only arrive with Shelom, after she was dead.

As different as they were, Gay'l and Michal often reacted alike to many of Dav's actions. I guess this wasn't surprising: Any intelligent woman who got involved with him quickly found that she was alternately yanked toward him by his immense physical attractiveness while she experienced a less dramatic, but steadier, sense of skepticism about his undertakings.

The recovery of the Ark for example, which was now revealed in a mote-speckled shaft of morning light entering the barn door. Maybe Gay'l had this wrong. She had no patience with mysteries, she didn't acknowledge them if she could help it, but the Ark was uncanny. She remembered waking from a nap as a child in a silent house, stepping from her room into an empty, light-flooded hallway, and being convinced that everyone had turned into ghosts while she'd slept. That was the collective mood—as though the Ark was a two-way opening admitting the inadmissible and maybe making an exit into some other life beyond their own.

If you concentrated on what the Ark *was*, perhaps, you could rid yourself of this swoon of dread. For after all it was only a piece of decorative statuary, about the length of a child's coffin. What it represented was another story. She stepped closer and tried to make out the two

figures apparently crouched over a central cask. The figures weren't human, she decided. Possibly they were demons. Or angels. Since they didn't bear any resemblance whatever to any other idols she'd ever seen, either in Israel or any of the many heathen countries she'd visited with The Fool, she supposed that the person who'd created them had been (a) suffering from severe hallucinations or (b) personally acquainted with the subjects. She had the uncomfortable feeling that (b) was the probable explanation—these were likenesses of heavenly beings. And as heavenly beings, messengers of Jahveh, they couldn't be expected to meet human preconceptions.

They seemed to shake the chaff from their shoulders, to appreciably warm and scintillate from within their own golden hearts. A sound came from them, like the keening of a heartbroken young widow, like the moan that she'd never offered up for The Fool when he died. Then one of the figures turned its bent face sideways and up, toward her. Its expression was inexplicable. No human emotion corresponded to what was going on on the statue's features. God was after all frightening. There was that too in Him (or Her), just as there were dreams and nightmares, sudden and pointless afflictions like the accidental deaths of children. Night came from God, and scorpions and babies with three (or no) legs. God was like nothing so much as the desert, and from the desert—along with the immaculate void—came phenomena that were dark, instant, ubiquitous. Sandstorms blacking out even the void, making a greater absence even out of nothing.

With a real effort of will, she forced herself to look away. And when she glanced back, the Ark had resumed its former lines. She knew that the Philistines hadn't kept it long before returning it, and she now knew why. She also knew that calling it "cursed" (the Philistine's view) or "blessed" (the Israelis' tentative view) was completely specious. The object's sacred power for good or ill—if it *was* an object, with customary characteristics of the material world—was entirely beside the point.

Her opinion was that God had made it and God could have it. Still, she knew that men would never give up something harboring this much power. They would go to any length of delusion to convince themselves that they could channel it in their favor.

"Does anybody know what God wants us to do with this thing?" Gay'l asked the group in general. It included several senior theologians.

Dav's face was stunned, adoring, distracted. "This is the Heritage of the Jews," he said, as if that explained anything.

"Hm." Gay'l was doubtful. "How are we supposed to exhibit it? You can't just set it out in public view—people would have seizures, there'd be riots. It's too . . . volatile."

"We will build a Temple of the Nations," Dav said swoonily to the barn's roof. He began listing possible dimensions and construction materials of the Holy Place.

She knew that nothing she could say would change his mind, and she thought that building a public facility for the Ark was like sticking a captured lion in your backyard doghouse and letting it watch the kids.

* * *

Michal loved her second husband, Phalti, and she missed him—not terribly, for pining after people wasn't in her nature, but still their separation was painful. Phalti and she were a lot

alike, much more similar than she and Dav, who was constantly surprising her, and surprises made her nervous, which wasn't surprising considering Sol was her father and Jonathan her brother.

Phalti and she had been playmates. His father had been Sol's Secretary of Trade, so their backgrounds were similar, except that she was the king's daughter and Phalti was by definition lower on the social scale—if there was such a thing as an Israeli social scale, Michal thought sourly. None of the royal families in the surrounding kingdoms (and some of these were dubious enough as it was) offered a suitor for Michal. Probably this was because they didn't want a lunatic for an in-law. A lunatic ruling a country full of lunatics.

Actually it made perfect sense that people like her father and Dav ended up as kings of Israel. A people's leader naturally was a kind of personality soup, like a regional dish, made up of the most distinctive local ingredients. It didn't matter what it tasted like—leeks and cardamom— as long as it was typical of the people who ate it. So Sol and Dav were preeminently compounded out of Jewishness, like a kosher stew—arrogant, introspective, brave, reckless, dreamy, smarter than anyone else in the immediate vicinity.

Phalti, on the other hand, might not have even been a Jew, just as Michal herself could probably pass as something else, given half a chance. Sometimes she daydreamed of being a minor Egyptian princess, a Syrian chatelaine—something established, someplace where there was calm, luxury, order.

Oh, she couldn't deny that she'd been seriously infatuated with Dav when he'd first appeared in her father's court. It was kind of a fad, really. Her sisters had all been madly in love with Dav, and so had she. Then, before she knew it, they were married. She couldn't even remember their wedding night. Had they had one? At some point or other before Dav was driven into exile, they'd had sex, yet sex with Dav was distracting. Mixing up one part of life with another. Sometimes they would have just had sex, and she was feeling sort of sleepy and content, and he'd suddenly pop up out of bed and strap on his sword, or maybe he'd sit bolt upright and you could tell he was hearing some heavenly message, or he'd throw off the covers and sit down at his table and begin writing one of his songs.

At first, she liked to hear him sing. The words weren't very important. They didn't make a lot of sense to her, and even though everybody made a big deal out of it, she suspected nobody else knew what he was talking about either. Like her, they just liked to hear him sing, they liked the sound of the words. And they liked to think that what they were doing was spiritual, that God would be pleased with them. As time passed, she was recurrently subjected to Dav's songs: he tested them out on her, until he realized that she wasn't much of a critic. She began to be unsettled by them. Maybe the melodies got weirder, less like folksy shepherd tunes and more raucous. Or maybe she even started to understand a little of what the songs were actually about, which was not the pleasant nonsense that she'd first assumed. She suspected Dav's poems were about being out of control. They were horribly violent. Why didn't anyone see that? Some of the punishments he wished on their enemies were perverse. She feared that he might end up crazier than Sol some day— even more dangerous to be around, if that was possible.

Many women, she knew, wanted men to be scary and spontaneous and wild. These women were nuts, Michal thought. She knew what it was like to be a little afraid of your husband, to be anxious about what he was going to do next. Would he commit mayhem? Would he humiliate you? Would he act so madly that it contaminated you, so that you felt you were also becoming unhinged?

Fortunately, she wasn't alone. There were other wives, especially Gay'l, who clearly understood him. Gay'l definitely had a normalizing (if not exactly calming) influence on Dav. He listened to her and she gave him plenty of reality checks. She was older than he was and that probably gave her authority. She wondered what sex was like between them. With her, Michal, he was fairly creative, erotically. Maybe he learned something different from each member of the whole sexual team, his growing number of wives and concubines.

Through her open window high in the palace, she heard the brass horns of Dav's outriders approaching the walls of Hebron. The hills magnified the noise, like the blaring of giant rams. Soon after she could make out other noisy elements of Dav's approach, as if the rest of the clamor were catching up to the reverberating bleating of the horns. She saw them now, a disorderly train snaking up the valley road, carrying a glittering burden high in their midst.

They'd evidently found the Ark and were returning it to its people, the Jews. Her father had been leery of the Ark. He was unwilling even to talk about it, and she felt that in this her father had been uncharacteristically rational. People said the Ark was the place that God was in more than He was in anywhere else. Her father said that was a contradiction: Jahveh was by definition everywhere. But if he was *more* in the Ark than He was elsewhere, then you obviously had a concentrated version of Jahveh, and that, it seemed to her father (and to Michal), was not something you particularly wanted to be around. Which of course was why the Philistines had sent it back where it came from.

As the procession neared the palace, the sound of tambourines and timbrels and drums was audible along with the trumpets' blare, and soon Michal also heard singing, Dav's ringing tenor above all the other voices. At last the column of celebrants appeared around a bend in the street below her window, with Dav, half naked, at its head.

He was dressed in a kind of holy apron painted in mystic symbols, which priests wore when they were dispatching dumb animals. But the priests always wore priestly robes under the apron, which, being an apron (and a sort of decorative, notional apron, at that) was definitely not meant to be worn as one's only garment. Dav was singing at the top of his lungs, thrashing about, dancing back and forth from one side of the street to the other. Independently, his private parts also danced. His penis gyrated, Michal noted. His testicles bobbed.

Her skin felt numb, her bones turned to ditchwater, and a kind of gauzy, greenish veil puffed and undulated over her eyes. She experienced quite literally an ecstasy of degradation.

Limp with abasement, nearly fainting, she dimly noticed Gay'l only a few steps behind their husband.

What was she thinking? thought Michal, as she slumped to the floor.

* * *

Dav was making up poetry faster than he could sing it. The verses raced through his mind so vividly that he could actually see the characters of the words flashing by. Rhythms

appeared to him, looking like dancing snakes. No sooner did the words' syllables sound in his brain than they attracted to themselves tones and then a melody.

The Ark spoke with the wind on the hills of Eph'phra'tà,
Its song was the whine of a bowstring, the arrow's whistle,
And when we found it in the fields of the woods,
It pierced our hearts and we wept . . .

Like Michal, people watched from their windows as the procession passed—close proximity to the Ark was known to be hazardous. At the very least, you'd be subject to holy emanations, which while on the one hand might cure whatever ailed you, on the other hand might strike you dead. The Ark's past associations with punishment of Jews were clear in the public mind.

At the same time, Dav hoped the Ark would dissipate the dense, harsh and obdurate surface that lay within him and that patinated the world around him. Objects—a sunlit wall, a stylus dropped on a tabletop, the cut of a hill-ridge—these were now inarticulate, their cores cold and solid, like his own. The world was made up of edges, and though he viewed it with never-brighter clarity, everything conspired to abrade and jar him, as though he were continuously jostling his way through a packed souk filled with impassive strangers.

The Ark was different. It held at its center something lambent and ductile, the Living Presence, and through that indwelling vitality Dav felt he might lighten the world's density.

The burden of life. He'd carried it (he concluded self-pityingly) longer than others had to. He'd had no youth to speak of, not much of that idyll before the standard allocation of stony necessity that God issued to you in middle age.

He had not sought responsibility. He had not sought power. He especially hadn't sought fearful admiration. His downfall, really, was simply that he wanted to be liked, to be popular.

Although he *was* enormously popular with his foot soldiers, with whom he'd shared deprivation and exile, he knew that the others—the ambitious men who constantly surrounded him—did not like him. Possibly they admired him, and certainly, like most men drawn to politics (he had discovered), they were animated by fear and distrust of people who answered only to themselves or to an interior scale of righteousness. Politicians are baffled and frightened (as by something unseen and supernatural) by individual codes of honor and the occasional man or woman who has no choice but to act on them. Well, thought Dav, political men were themselves a kind of joke of nature—a minority of treacherous, sneaky sheep seeking to bully the greater mass of sheep, from among whom they were prepared from time to time to take sacrifices, to encourage the others.

And although he was styled "King Dav" by these "advisers," as well as by Israelis in the street, he did not lay claim to this kingship within himself. He had, after all, never seen a king, not a real one. His months with Sol were a counterexample at best, and it didn't augur well, he thought, that the Jews' first king was a psychotic.

And there was the enormous gaggle of priests, prophets, acolytes, seers, theologians, hierophants, and mendicants who still held enormous sway over nearly everyone. Retrieving the Ark was in part a sop to them. Dav sensed that if he were its keeper, he'd strengthen his

authority over them, as much as this was possible given the ossified egotism and ecstatic self-regard of the politically religious.

Their leader was Natan. Natan always now lurked near Dav, giving off a strange odor—like wet rock perhaps, like rain-whipped flint. Dav's human background had changed: He slowly realized that he was missing the frank and plainspoken camaraderie of his first followers, the veteran professional soldiers, without politics. Men like Irawere still around, of course, but they seemed crowded out by the priests and the ever-larger body of boys who'd recruited themselves into Dav's army.

Maybe different times needed different men, Dav thought. After Mount Giboa, young Jews had hardened, although this was not to say that the old stalwarts—the widowed old women without sons and the campaign-hardened troopers—did not harbor the same thirst for revenge on Israel's enemies. Rather, the new Jews (of which he recognized himself as one) had no patience with defeat, with the wry and resilient fatalism that ran, it seemed to them, like a filament of rot through the generation of their fathers. Why must the Jews ever be third-rate among their neighbors? Why must they ever be beaten as soon as any other power took the trouble to beat them? Thus the theme of his song:

You are not
You are not
You are not
Paying attention.
We are burned out,
The national neighborhood's
Laughing stock . . .
Maybe you've gone blind—
Israel is out of your mind, out of its mind,
Maybe You're out of Your mind,
Huddling in the Ark, blessing in the dark,
Plotting retribution . . .

The words clacked in his ear, drowning the shouts and clash of mixed instruments clattering through the procession. Whirling, slick with sweat that burned his eyes and misted his vision, he saw the young priests and warriors flash by in a smeared circle. Upon all their faces was the rictus of violent rage. Their distorted mouths moved in tandem—perhaps they were chanting in unison—but Dav could not hear their howls. He spun his dervish-dance in the silence his poem made.

The faces of the men about him were dark, their eyes were grave and menacing, and they gazed forward, straight ahead, as though they saw some ultimate vindication in the street ahead, the path washed in the gore of their enemies.

But in their midst, rising over their heads, the Tabernacle bounced jollily. It was for the Ark, and not the rising viciousness of these New Men, that Dav would take the inevitably bloody course that was, he knew, the sole way open to him. The Ark had made them into a juggernaut, its spiked wheels were the priest-commissars, its battering ram Dav's child shock troops. His sense of uncontrol, then, didn't arise from his qualms about gaining obedience from

these fanatics: for the time being, he knew he could command them. Rather, and as usual, his strength and his weakness was Jahveh's overreaching authority, Whose driven purpose Dav began to suspect he understood. Which was to say that there wasn't any understanding it, but only the ecstasy of instrumentality, of obeying this relentless current pressing at his back. He had grown used to it, maybe he'd even accepted what Jahveh had told him in his own dim prehistory: That God had chosen him.

Dav danced naked. His genitals beat heavily against his thighs and he keenly felt the eyes of the women peering at him from behind their shutters.

He wanted to fuck somebody.

Chapter Thirteen

The more women he had, the more women he needed.

Women travelled to Jerusalem willingly, on the off chance that . . . actually, many weren't entirely certain what chance they sought. His erotic appeal, after all, was only one facet of the Image of Dav now carried around by all Israelis, as though he'd become an interior idol, a god of many faces, that each of us held close, prayed to, contemplated. We are a small nation, Dav had moved about all over it, and many of his subjects had seen him in the flesh (in contrast to the remote king-deities of our neighbors).

Dav's voracity only got to be scandalous because it was disorganized, manifestly and feverishly intense, mad. And of course that lust which filled the court with the odor of rutting, the hallways with the constant scent of inflamed labia, achieved the level of wildness it did simply because it was Dav's, who was incapable of anything short of excess. He had no capacity to dawdle and moon in moderation, for only acts committed in obsession seemed to him worth performing.

Orderly potentates—the king of Persia, the Pharaoh of course, even Philistia's Dictator for Life and small-time sheikhs—channeled their sexual needs via the traditional bureaucratic solution for lust, which is to say the harem. But Dav's chaotic days and nights and Jewish women's loathing of harems combined to make his love life a series of semi-illicit intrigues, which after all probably held their own piquancy for the participants.

Still, at this point people simply thought that the young king's morals were youthfully dissolute. Nobody actually approved of his messy sex life (the standard perversion rumors inevitably percolated among the beau monde), and the priests inevitably muttered in their beards, but we really didn't much care who Dav was fucking as long as we weren't getting fucked by the Philistines, or the Egyptians, or the Syrians.

That is, of course, until bat Sheva.

* * *

It was the season of long, soft evenings, late spring, when householders held off lighting their as long as they could, squeezing the last moment out of the dying, lilac-colored dusk. At sunset Dav retreated to the palace roof, his escape from the politicians skulking in corridors, soldiers massed in hallways, women fretting in bedrooms, the citizenry ready to pounce on him in the streets. There the evening sky was still bright, and from the sunwarmed parapets he

looked below into the darkening streets. Roofs tumbled down the hillside beneath him, and the maze of walls that at street-level was a puzzle of abrupt angles and sudden turns resolved itself into neat courtyards.

Dav had the desert-dweller's acuity. He saw clearly these tiny, private fringe-lit squares where Jerusalem perhaps had its real life. Families eating their evening meals in the balmy dusk, children playing tag around the central cisterns and the old people emerging to sit in the cooling air. He felt godlike, with God's benign and minuscule gaze, able to view these ordinary human tableaux magnified and to contemplate the unhurried goodness of common life. Dav thought that it was in these daily tasks and recreations the Jews in fact demonstrated their righteousness. It seemed to him that if Jahveh's judgment took place here, at the end of our day, then we'd all get a better hearing.

He'd begun to toy with the kingly idea that these were *his* people. Feeling patriarchal wasn't necessarily a question of age, he realized, since even in his village days some of his contemporaries were quite prepared to settle down and start bossing a woman, her family, and her offspring. A demented sense of self-importance comes easily to many men.

More precisely, he felt as though he were a sort of older- brother-in-chief to the people of Israel, and he felt a vague but self-satisfying conviction that they too felt this. One evening as he sat on his rooftop, mentally turning over this pleasing perception of himself, he idly glanced into a courtyard he hadn't previously noticed, even though it wasn't far from his own walls. The afternoon had been hot—a precursor of summer soon to come—and he'd stayed longer than usual, cooling off. Night had fallen: the sky had turned from amethyst to actual black, and yellow lamplight picked out the city streets tangled below him. Maybe the time of day had something to do with his not having noticed this particular courtyard before—it was after all quite small, at an odd angle to his point of observation, long and narrow. But it was very well lit, almost as though there were torches burning invisibly under the small, graceful arcades that surrounded the open space. The people living there had to be well-to-do to burn oil at that rate.

A small, wiry woman came into the courtyard carrying an enormous ewer. Spiky hair thrust out from beneath her babuschka like a tangle of dried herbs, and she lugged the ewer to a bathtub set in the middle of the yard, struggled tilting it to pour out its contents, and went back inside for another jug of water. After a while, a second woman entered the courtyard, undoubtedly the bather ready to cool herself off before bed. She looked up and scanned the hillside above her walls, even looking briefly in Dav's direction. Could she see him? Evidently not, for she slid her loose cloak from her shoulders, and it fell crumpled at her feet.

She seemed preternaturally close, as though some djinn had swept him down within arm's reach of her. He saw her clearly, in detail, and it was as if God's hand had only moments ago finished her, as though she were Heva quietly waiting for Adam to wake up and gaze on her. She was (Dav couldn't think of any other way to put it), she was *finished*. And in every aspect she was as he would have a woman be.

Yet every aspect seemed mutable, about to shift into some other way to look. She was tall, but only enough to lend her grace. Her thick hair, unbound and falling in fat curves down her back, was perhaps black but in the lamplight it shifted to the colors of silver and blood. Her hips made smooth, generous arcs up to her waist, which was in contrast narrow, two hands'-

breadth around, and her breasts, round and large nipples, were nevertheless neither heavy nor flaccid. And in her deep russet eyes, which shone like oiled cedar (and which unseeing glanced curiously again in his direction), serenity, intelligence, and glory rested at their ease. Her long nose – ruled straight and thin and a little ascetic – ran in ironic perpendicular to her sybaritic lips, whose corners' curves suggested the onset of a smile.

He could feel her lips especially, how his lips would feel pressing against them so that they were blended, sore, tumescent, delicious. Underneath his loose linen cloak, his penis had naturally aroused itself and stood out, strung taut and ready like a bow. It felt to him as though it had somehow added an inch or two to its ordinary length in erection, that it urged him on to penetrate as deeply as he could between the thighs now lowering themselves out of sight into the tub.

Desire had so overcome him that the thought that he might be doing something mean-spirited and squalid – namely peeping at a naked woman under cover of night – only flickered raggedly in his conscious mind, or what was left of it. The solid reality of fucking this woman, whoever she was, seemed to him a foregone conclusion, to the extent that he might conceivably have leapt from the roof and broken his neck.

He heard rustling behind him, someone cleared his throat. How long had he been up here on the roof that they'd sent someone to get him? He tried to gain control of his body, to make his voice simple and cool, like somebody who'd been lost in supernal thought among the incorporeal and impartial stars. He cleared his throat contemplatively.

"Yes?" he asked, without turning.

"Your supper's getting cold, sir." Good, Dav thought, a servant. By now, the woman had emerged from her bath and reentered her house.

"Come over here for a minute," Dav asked, more by way of an idle request than a command. "How well do you know this neighborhood?"

"Very well, your worship. I used to be a palace messenger, when I was younger, before my knees went. I couldn't run up the hills anymore without something going out of joint. You could hear it, Your Infinity, sort of clack-clack-clack, and then I'd tip right over face-first. Like my knees was suddenly not connected to my legs, and then what good was I as a runner, given all the hills this city's got?"

Dav pointed to the courtyard of the bather. "See that house down there with the tub in the courtyard?"

The ex-messenger peered along Dav's pointing arm.

"I should have mentioned that my vision's not so good, either. . ."

Dav stood behind him, gripped his head and turned him directly toward the house. "There. The long, narrow courtyard, with the copper tub next to the flowerbed."

"Ah, of course, I see it. That's the house of Uriah, a merchant."

* * *

Dav caught himself. He'd nearly begun tying a knot in the tassels hanging from the tablecloth. An emissary from Ish, Sol's remaining son and now the "king" of vague regions to the north, was haranguing Dav's council. He didn't seem to be making sense, although perhaps that was because Dav wasn't paying close enough attention.

"Yet twenty reams of land between Bar Yusef and Beth Yar, which goes over to my glorious liege under the Covenant of the Grunting Boar." "Grunting boar" couldn't be right: maybe he'd said "the year before." He droned loudly on: "And in the south, one hundred times one hundred hectares, and more, of placid sewers, that the kine of my Heavenly One may freeze . . ."

Dav was beginning to understand that Sol might not have been intrinsically crazy but that being king had made him so. And maybe it didn't make any difference whether it was King of the Jews or King of the Sixteen Yokels—the job was surreal.

The mental image of her body was unnaturally clear, given his distance from her the preceding evening. It seemed to him that lately he'd looked more and more vainly for diversity in women's bodies and that any real variations were insignificant. All things considered, women had breasts, waists, hips, and legs. These could be small, large, taut, or zaftig, and individuals could be tall or short. Women's faces, of course, were another matter, and maybe that was where true and subtle differences between women lay. He understood vaguely that this was a male viewpoint (that women saw enormous differences among themselves on which they dwelt obsessively) and that, moreover, it might have been the viewpoint of a man who was growing increasingly jaded.

A priest, one of "his" priests, was now angrily replying to Ish's delegate, a fairly surprising reaction, Dav thought, to utter nonsense. But the priest's diatribe was nonsense, too.

"In all our days of grievance, and in all the fields of toy . . . toy . . . toy," the priest barked.

"Toil?" wondered Dav. "Toilets?"

Yet small things mattered in a body as well, he conceded to himself. Whether the flesh curved over or turned down in passing along the point of the hips, or the length and softness where the skin spread from the lips of the vulva to the inside of the thigh. Even knees could make a difference, whether the bone stood out in clear relief beneath translucent skin or where loops of fat made little crescents beneath the ruddy pad. Hours of close inspection were necessary, though, before you began making those kinds of distinctions.

The bather's body was of a different order, it seemed to him, and he summoned it up as she rose from her bath, smoking a little in the cooling air, her long back copper-colored and shining, only a slighter lighter, newer tint of bronze than the basin from which she rose. She half-turned her shoulders (broader than a woman's, or even a youth's) toward him so that one profiled bell-shaped breast was counterpoised to the extended open arc of her hip swooping down her thigh and back to the left buttock (which itself was shaped like a small, perfectly molded loaf of bread). He saw the black, wet strands of pubic hair drip at the just-parted apex of her legs, and he saw the sheen of her long neck as she lifted and wrung her heavy coil of hair.

Emerging from this vision, Dav looked about him at the men seated about the court. His advisers wore sour, distasteful, or openly sarcastic expressions as the emissary from Ish struggled on with what was apparently becoming an appeal. As the poor man's audience grew openly contemptuous of him, he began to stutter.

"Ishb . b. b. b. bo . . . t . t. t. teth . . ." It was unfortunate that his king's name happened to be unpronounceable in any case. "Is the son of Sol." He paused and looked around the room

hopefully. Only Dav, who hadn't been paying attention, looked even mildly encouraging, so the emissary decided to deliver his argument solely to him. "Since he is the son of the former king, then he must himself be king on his father's demise." He halted again, cleared his throat, and peered earnestly at Dav, who now looked merely noncommittal. These interruptions, Dav thought, aren't helping his case.

"This is according to the law. All nations agree. This is the law. Father king, son king."

"The nation of Israel is like no other," replied Av. The attendant priests all nodded, the military men set their chins firmly. "Its Law is the Law of God."

The emissary looked worried. Obviously there was no denying any of this, but where was it leading?

"Jahveh cursed Sol," Av continued.

"Ah, well," the emissary retorted feebly, "that's open to opinion."

Av ignored this. "And Jahveh has blessed Dav."

Dav wasn't so sure, and it occurred to him that Ish was after all the brother of Jonathan and Michal. Ish was then in a sense doubly his own brother. Dav pointed this out.

"Ish a member of my family," he said.

"We're all family members, more or less," Av said pettishly. "This is a small country."

"Theoretically," offered a small, mousy man who had never in anyone's recollection said anything during these sessions, "the entire population is somewhere in line to the throne."

"Anyway," Av said, ignoring this interruption, "in our system, God chooses the king."

This, as everyone knew, left open the question of *how* God signalled His choice: It wasn't necessarily clear. Knowing who was cursed was much easier.

As king, Dav felt enslaved. Even in exile, in hiding, he had greater freedom. He could more or less do what he chose, selfishly, and even later, when most Jews thought he was acting for them, that through him, their real will (and of course God's) was made manifest, he had some freedom of action. Now the rooms and walls and furniture of the palace seemed like bars and palings, and their fetid *thereness* seeped sobriety, balanced judgment, dull reason. He was frightened by the prospect of dreamless, visionless, harsh waking life.

His imprisonment boiled down to just this: He couldn't just walk down into the town and slyly knock at Sheva's backdoor, bribe her maid, flirt with her in the souk. Ridiculous schemes occurred to him—he could disguise himself. He could wrap himself up from head to toe, go to her house, insinuate himself somehow, and then rape her.

He decided he was losing his mind but in some rational fashion that didn't have even the distorting grace of ordinary madness.

A disturbance had begun on the floor of the throne room. Two guards were thrusting the emissary across the floor while members of the court slapped and spat at him. The noise level had risen considerably, and several people were actually shrieking. Maybe his own insanity was leaking out and saturating the brains of people around him, and the Kingdom of the Jews was melting away like meat from an ox bone boiling in soup.

He'd have to find some pretext to have dealings with her husband. Afterwards, it wouldn't be too hard to make arrangements to get her alone. Or possibly when he actually met

her, he'd discover that she was repulsive in some way: she could have disgusting table manners, or pimples, or she could be incredibly stupid.

Well, actually, it wouldn't matter if she were incredibly stupid.

* * *

She stopped in the middle of the courtyard and looked up, gazing directly at him. He began to step back but realized this would be worse than having been caught watching her. It would appear sneaky, marking him as the peeping Tom he half-consciously suspected he was. Better to brazen it out.

Yet her direct, intense stare discomfited him. At this distance, she probably couldn't make out his identity, and this likelihood made him bolder. The anonymity even felt a little kinky: in fact, the entire, remote encounter seemed a little kinky, and he at once suspected she too was aroused by this situation, watched by a nameless man from a distance, wondering how long he'd been watching her, perhaps suddenly realizing that she'd exposed herself bathing there in the open. In any case, she didn't rush shyly away in retreat. The way she returned his frank gaze was frankly indecorous.

Dav tentatively raised his arm, started to wave, broke off, and pretended to stretch. She shielded her eyes for a moment, and then waved briefly but unmistakably. He tried to think of a hand gesture that would signal her to meet him in the small alley behind her house. What he came up with was a kind of come-hither flapping of his hand. She stood quite still, smiling up at him.

He pointed at himself, then at her, then again at the alley. She stood up straighter, now evidently recognizing what his ridiculous gesticulations might mean. She made an indecipherable motion of her head, not quite a nod, perhaps some trick of the air in the distance between them. Perhaps the distortion of heat waves rising from the streets only made it seem as though she'd gestured. She slowly raised her arm, pointing generally toward him. But meaning what?

Then he realized she wasn't pointing at him but at the alley beyond her wall.

The lane was narrow and made one abrupt turn midway along. To the right rose the windowless wall of a low building. He felt as though they were meeting somewhere in the wilderness, in the pleasant shade of a small arroyo, where the temperate midday breeze was channeled down its bed. Subject to only slightly different fates, they might have been a farmer trysting with his neighbor's wife somewhere miles from the nearest town.

Where the alley made a turn, there was a small door in the wall by which she was standing, maybe so she could make a quick escape. She wore a light robe whose hood was thrown back, exposing her head and neck, and he found looking steadily at her face was nearly unbearable. He glanced away. His body was attracted to hers like rain is attracted to the earth, as by a force ineluctably downward, badly needing an object that would absorb and dissolve it.

Apparently she responded to this sense of their bodies' independently dragging, prodding, pushing them together. Her eyes were very large, and wet, rather as though she'd been crying, except that they glittered with arousal. Like Dav, she delightedly, nervously awaited what this exterior force would do with them next, where it would toss them.

Was she beautiful? That question had no point. Her face was one he'd always known, familiar perhaps because it had been with him since his birth, before his birth. Jahveh had put it there – the copper-colored eyes, her chin mimicking the downward apex of a heart, the heavy, twisted coils of hair pitchy as a prisoner's cell.

She was looking at him, Dav thought, with the same conglomeration of apprehension, recognition, and sexual delight that surely shone in his own gaze. She swallowed. A tiny bulge appeared on her long, creamy throat and moved in a curve toward her chin.

She was backed into the doorway of the garden wall, his hands slipping her skirts up to her waist. Their mouths together made a seamless egg, a warm, damp space where their tongues poked and skittered autonomously like lizards. His palms and fingers fit the shallow concave of her hipbones and buttocks as though he and she were formed to one pattern, made like Adam and Heva from the same basket of bone and muscle. Her legs wrapped around him, he tilted her against the door, and she seemed weightless as his cock socketed in her vagina. An assortment of liquids oozed, poured, spurted from them both. His sweat was like a layer of oil soaking into his skin, turning it too into oil, and merging with it he felt the sting of vaginal fluid flowing down his thighs.

Pulling her lips from his, she bit her hand. He for his part was speechless. No words for once farted around in his thoughts but only resonating groans as he lifted her purposefully, rhythmically. As each felt the other shudder and come, they rippled simultaneously, releasing outward into the body of the other.

No sooner was this over, than he felt he wanted to do it again, immediately, but consciousness was now returned sufficiently to note that they were standing, after all, in the street. He disengaged himself and stood back from her. Her cheeks and forehead gleamed, her lips parted. Small, audible puffs came from them.

"Dav," Dav said.

"Bat Sheva, wife of Uriah."

He walked quickly toward the palace, she turned and opened the door behind her. Neither watched the other depart.

Chapter Fourteen

He dreamed that he was walking the streets of some megapolis – Memphis or Babylon – alone, and it was late in the afternoon of a cool, sunny day (perhaps a holy day), although not quite dusk because he glimpsed a cusp of the sun at the edge of the lowest roofs. He kept coming to open places – souks, agoras, plazas – where the stately, monumental buildings fell away to broad plots of stone, evenly giving up their captured warmth. Occasionally, there were simple fountains. Facades were often constructed in the new style, with columns fronting a porch, and on the porch fashionable statuary, goddesses usually, looking noble.

And it became gradually apparent to him that she was everywhere indwelling in this city – that he breathed her in the balmy afternoon drafts and leaned upon her in the porticoes and, in fact, walked through her.

When he opened his eyes, he felt as though he hadn't been asleep at all, as if he'd been wakefully considering all this – his stroll through the city-as-woman – and had come to a conclusion, now partly eluding him. He knew in any case why so many people revered goddesses.

Sheva was not necessarily divine, but neither divinity nor the State of Israel mattered much to him now. Instead, having sex with Sheva somehow contained both worship and patriotism: she was his native country and the straight path to his heart, to his soul, perhaps to some even more fundamental part of him. With Sheva, sweat-slathered skin to skin, all boundaries between them collapsed, he at last felt what it was to be not-Dav, and this revealed itself to him now (in a more sustained revelation than Jahveh had ever been pleased to give him) as his true home, his destination.

When they were together, they had sex, repeatedly, continuously. Their conversation was confined to plotting when and how they would could next be together to have further sex. And yet each had knowledge of the other that was entire, easily beyond that anyone else had had of them. He stopped sleeping with Gay'l and Michal since this now seemed pointless, an affair of sexual plumbing.

His fascination with what they could do together with their bodies – he and Sheva – was inexhaustible.

Nevertheless, the obstacles to their meeting were very nearly insurmountable, and he exercised all his intelligence now on surmounting them. Sheva, actually, was more ingenious

than he about this, and the avidity she threw into devising ways to come together excited him as much as anything else about her.

But it was inevitable that he take someone into his confidence, and he chose Ira, whose wholehearted virtues as a soldier obviously didn't include sexual faithfulness or duty to deceived husbands. Ira found a small house, little more than a hut, not far from the city walls. The house sat by itself atop a small hill, with a small enclosed garden. There was one large room pierced by two large windows, and a smaller room, evidently used for storage, in which they found a straw mattress and a table. Otherwise the rooms were empty. The garden prospered despite the fact that no cared for it. Perhaps this was because the flowers and herbs that grew there were desert plants. The plot's single low, thorny tree exuded some sort of musky-smelling sap, and on sunny afternoons, the intermixed scent of sap and herbs and tiny, desiccated flowers filled the cottage with an odor like burning sandalwood, frankincense, cinammon.

From time to time, they fucked rolling on the ground in the garden, crushing stems and petals, like perfumes pressed into their skins.

During the first afternoons in the cottage, when they rested between bouts of lovemaking, they simply lay curled together on their straw pallet. Their skin sang. Yet as time went by, and as this secret place remained secret, they began to have conversations. This was not entirely a positive development as far as Dav was concerned, chiefly because what Sheva said was frequently disconcerting, although it was hard to say how. It seemed to him sometimes that she harbored some far more trenchant peril than anything he'd confronted in war and exile. Not that the danger was vague and thus scarier because it was unknown, rather, what she said to him seemed to imply a whole spectrum of threats, and he began to think that she was infinitely capable of harm, just as she was equally infinite in her capacity to heal him. To the extent that she'd been the only person in his life so far to complete him, so she had equal potential to extirpate him, to in fact murder him.

One hot day they lay naked in the sunshine overflowing the little garden. She rolled out of his arms and stretched herself at length, pointing her toes, arching her hips a little, thrusting out her arms directly beyond her head. She looked as though she were preparing to dive into the sandy earth. He kissed along the lower edge of her ribs as they dipped toward her back, and he felt the hard, smooth bone on his lips. She sighed and unflexed, and he rolled onto his back. For a moment they stared at the sky, unmarked by clouds, fathomless, a shade of blue hinting at violet.

"Uri wants me all the time now," she said finally.

"I don't want to hear about Uri."

"I think it has something to do with us. He smells something."

"Like what?"

"Oh, maybe he can smell all this fucking. I'm not saying he knows that—he's not really aware of what exactly's going on. But on some level, the message's coming across, 'Sheva's getting fucked and fucked and fucked.'"

"So?"

"So it makes him horny." She rolled onto her side and propped her head in her hand, watching him. Dav was silent. "Don't you want to know if I'm letting him?"

"No."

"Well, I'm not. But he's becoming insistent."

She lay back. Her profile, Dav now noticed, expressed something very different from her face when he looked into her eyes. He wondered how common this was, that someone's profile and the same person's frontal visage seemed to come from two different faces. General wisdom said that you could ferret out deception by looking intently at the eyes, but that was only a partial truth: In reality, profiles sometimes revealed more. In their bony and inflexible line, they were harder to fake: Maybe they etched out individual futurity, like lines in the palm of the hand. For one thing, Sheva looked rather older in profile, or possibly the sharp lines of her straight nose and the single sinuous crease in her brow were foretastes of old age. Her mouth also looked different, firmer and resigned. In broad sunlight, her hair had the iridescent darkness of a blackbird's wing. It even shone with the same purplish sheen along the deep horizontal lines where she'd brushed it back.

Seeing her this way, Dav was suddenly aware of her nobility, her aristocracy. Aristocrats had always been something that other people had, not Jews. You had to be like the Egyptians or the Babylonians, long-established and immensely rich. Yet it was typical that she was married to just anybody, to a rug salesman.

"What did you think of Uriah, when you were first married?"

She sighed.

"I can't remember. Probably I didn't think of him specifically at all."

"How could you not think of him? What about your wedding night?"

She looked mildly surprised. "Our wedding night . . . No, I can't remember anything about that, either." She paused. "I know where it happened, of course. Damascus, it was. I recall the city a lot better. My father was a small-time trader, investing in ramshackle caravans up to Syria. Usually he lost money on these caravans. That's how he met Uriah—they'd gone in together on a cargo of something, and for once my father made a tiny profit. So Uriah was a genius businessman, if only our family could hook up with his operation. What a catch! The old story. Marriage was inevitable."

"So now what's your opinion?"

"It hasn't changed," she said, laughing and turning toward him. "I still have a hard time remembering him when he's not around."

Dav was preoccupied.

"Why are you asking *me* this?" Her smile was fading. "You actively chose your wives. In fact, the second one, Gay'l, they say that she chose *you*, too."

"Each new wife, I was looking for you." He thought this sounded gallant, and, anyway, he meant it sincerely.

They lay amid the crushed herbs for a while, embracing, wordless.

Finally she said, "The situation's hopeless."

But Dav didn't see it that way; although he'd known despair, he was incapable of hopelessness, and in fact did not understand what it meant when people said they'd lost hope.

Even when he watched from afar the destruction of Sol and Jonathan on Mount Giboa, even then what he'd experienced had as its background a sort of generalized, instinctive knowledge that things would turn out all right. If this was a gift of God (and he more or less presumed it was), then the blessing was not in his being chosen—which meant that the game was rigged, a pleasureless, foregone conclusion—but rather in having been *born* hopeful. Although he only understood this vaguely about himself, Dav unconsciously harbored the conviction throughout his life that events were ultimately under his control, and so his optimism was a natural condition, inevitable as sunrise.

To achieve mastery over events, however, required scheming, which he had been comparatively late in learning how to do. But if he'd been slow in grasping the arts of manipulation, once he *had* grasped them, his use of them was masterful.

Thus he began to see a way out for them, an avenue that was at once bright and obscure, like the inchaote glaze a potter briefly glimpses before he slams shut the kiln's door against the heat. And like the glaze when once it's cooled and set, the pattern of his plan would soon be irretrievable.

As he thought through these things, Sheva watched his face, which for a time looked as though he were suffering from some low-grade, chafing pain—like a bad, clinging headache. Then the crushed fold across the bridge of his nose and the pinched lines around his mouth relaxed, and his face was immobile. It had become like the masks the Achaeans used in their uncanny celebrations, part ritual, part entertainment, part mystic rite, and completely tragic.

And as though in some rite where the lines have already been made up, spoken, and spoken again, he asked, "What is it that you want?" She tried to call up a response, whatever it was the ritual called for, but more than anything else, she wished she could retreat from him.

She began to say that she wished they'd met earlier, before her marriage to Uri, but stopped, knowing how ridiculous that was, how pointless he'd think her saying it. Wishes for some decorative and decorous life, where sex was fulfilling and conversations with your husband were always pithy or witty—these somehow demeaned what they in fact felt toward each other, however you might define that.

Pretty longings for a sanitary past with Dav directly contradicted that deep-seated strand of romance in him, woven from filaments of desperation, rage, and wildness. In certain things, she knew, he had no limits, and she had begun to understand that his desire for her was fueled by his capacity for some literally unspeakable act. People said he'd been chosen by his god, by Jahveh of the Jews, and the Jews' god himself seemed to behave in extreme, inhuman ways.

Dav for his part clearly understood that he was sinning, and he was a little surprised by the novelty of this understanding. In the past he'd felt guilty, and many times he'd certainly done wrong acts—and had known that these acts were wrong—but now, unequivocally, he was involved in a sin. This gave him a certain sense of release.

He felt entirely free, and this too was a new experience.

* * *

Natan held the hawk's severed neck above the stone-cut bowl in a niche of the temporary temple. It was hard now, in the shadows, to see the colors of the hawk's feathers—

red like split cedar, bright gold polished like a peasant's hoarded single coin, and a remarkable blue. Natan wouldn't have believed feathers could be blue until he'd seen them for himself.

Doves' colors, too, were often lovely and unusual. He had gotten to see a lot of them, given the huge numbers required for sacrifices. But numbers in and of themselves, Natan now knew, were meaningless to Jahveh. It appeared that extreme self-denial (such as, for example, perching on some torturous outcropping, going without eating and taking just a few sips of water out in the relentless sun, praying that just a cloud would float by and block it out for a minute), even the worst kind of abnegation couldn't gain His attention.

He felt as though he'd start to cry in a moment, knowing that sacrificing the hawk would also be to no avail. Like a lover inwardly decayed with jealousy, he pressed back the image of God speaking to Dav. He did not want to see this mental scene, but his mind staged it over and over.

At the same time, he tried to put out of his mind the probable futility of this new twofold strategy: sacrificing ever stranger animals and carrying on this one-sided conversation with Jahveh in hopes that He couldn't forever be silent, if only out of pity, out of politeness.

"I speak to you, Lord of Scapegoats," he inwardly intoned. This was more or less how he always began, letting Jahveh know he was about to start to talking to Him, alerting Him, so to speak. The hawk felt like a sleeping child's hand in his palm. Its blood had ceased to flow. There hadn't been much. Now he really did start to weep, his tears plopping into the tiny pool of blood. "If You *are* speaking to me, if I'm not hearing you, then maybe you could find some other way to communicate . . . possibly you could give me some sign that I couldn't mistake for anything else . . ."

The slaughtered hawk fell from his hand and he slouched back in the temple niche. The temple's main framework was made from cedar and its smell was overpowering. Curiously, flies never swarmed around the altar, as they did when sacrifices were held outdoors in good weather. It was the cedar fumes that kept them away, Natan thought. The scent often helped, sedating him, helping him put things into perspective.

The Ark lay surrounded by flambeaux at the opposite end of the temple's hall. He watched it as if it might do something; he wasn't exactly sure what. He knew from experience that if you stared at it for any time at all, it changed sizes: it grew so small that you might have to strain your eyes to see it, and then, an instant later, it was so close and so large that you felt it pressing you down, overpowering you.

He spent too much time here.

He imagined what a new, glorious temple would look like, six times the size of this dark and puny place, made of all kinds of stone, precious metals, columns like the Egyptians and Achaeans and Syrians had in their temples, and lots of steps. His vision of the Palace of God was quite detailed, despite his otherwise pedestrian inner resources. Mentally building the temple, block by block, plinth by plinth, was delightfully simple; he saw it rise of itself in his mind's eye, assembling itself like some sorcerer-enchanted tower. There the altar rose on molten bronze plates that flowed upward and froze in place, and here in the near distance the shining marble keystone clinked into its place in the center of a monumental arch.

He was in an agony of anticipation to begin construction, but at the same time he knew Dav was not supposed to have anything to do with building the Temple, which meant that Natan would have to wait until Dav's death (or dethronement) to proceed. He was sure that he would outlive Dav.

These two certainties—the way the Temple would look and the fact that Dav wasn't to participate in its construction—indeed may have come from God, although Natan suspected that relying on this assumption would be obscurely blasphemous.

Israel didn't need any more blasphemy than it already had. When he was a boy living in a small village straddling a small crossroads, everyone had been delighted with life. Every family was prosperous, and they lived in bright mud dwellings with little holes pierced in the bricks to admit light, and there was a kind of music that played always in the background—bright, happy music. Husbands and wives were unfailingly true to one another: People didn't even know what sex was.

Every morning the shiny green leaves of grain in the fields that spread in every direction out behind the mud houses, every morning they made the earth glitter, and you could smell bread baking, and Natan had thought innocently that that was the odor of the sun rising.

The hands of the young village teacher had also borne a kitcheny scent, like cardamom perhaps, or cinammon. His fingers, too, were dry and floury, and Natan had an inexplicable reminiscence of their taste. Sitting at the teacher's feet in the shade of an ancient olive tree, Natan had been as happy as he was ever likely to be. The young man's soft, kindly voice rippled around his students, each day adding a few more laws, prohibitions, admonitions from Jahveh's Code. Natan never needed these repeated: Once he heard it, the Law seemed more like bunches of, say, fruit already in his head and only needing the teacher's gentle prompting to peel back the skin to reveal the rind of Truth. God's Law was certain, unvarying, and had been from the beginning what it would be to the end of time. It didn't matter what the adjuration or proscription was, really, nor did it matter whether Natan understood it. If every year on July 15, you were supposed to burn up thirteen bulls, two sheep, and fourteen lambs, then God had His own reason for that. There was no point in going into it.

As for the more transparent regulations—the ones having for instance to do with sex—what was there to question? Even human beings could perceive the intrinsic strangeness and danger of sexual relations. People having sex was the sole reason that life was hard, that you couldn't always live in your village as a small child with the reassuring music in the background and sunlight, smelling baked goods.

It had been the young teacher's duty to teach Natan about sex, demonstrating in fact what it was you should never do. Since Natan didn't have a natural grasp of technical wickedness, it was important for his teacher to repeat the lessons. In fact, they were horrible, those times bent over some piece of discarded farm machinery in a disused utility shed. It occurred to him that these experiences were probably how he knew what the teacher's hands smelled like.

In the end, though, it was crucial that a priest thoroughly understood the wickedness of sex. They couldn't say of him, as they said of many more unwordly clergymen, "What does he know about our temptations? He's a virgin."

* * *

Dav tried to suppress the thought that Natan was a pain in the ass, not only because it seemed too petty for a king to think this but also because he suspected that underestimating Natan was risky. So when Natan asked for an audience, Dav always complied. Now the priest, with his weird smell of burnt baked goods and his skin that looked like the underside of old lemon peelings, shuffled into the throneroom. Natan apparently made his way through the world skulking from shadow to shadow. In the most sun-splashed room (such as this one now), he found some splotch of shade dingy enough to obscure his face.

“Hello, Natan.” Dav had discovered that it was always wise to be circumspect when he interviewed priests, seers, self-identified prophets, and other assorted holy persons. He was himself the best evidence that Jahveh was capable of randomly and suddenly choosing the most unexpected people as the conduit for His messages.

From his hard-won experiences dealing with Sol, Dav had concluded that the best way of handling depressives was to be upbeat oneself.

“So, when should we get started on the new temple?” he said, clapping his hands on the armrests of throne in a hearty, ‘this-has-all-been-agreed-on-and-let’s-get-started’ way. Dav knew that he needed consensus on this project, that it was too enormous to undertake without priestly enthusiasm. More dimly, he required Nathan’s buy-in, although why this should be – why he needed the consent of an antisocial nerd – was a mystery. Natan made him anxious.

“Go,” said Natan, “do all that is in thine heart: for Jahveh is with thee.” This was intoned in the priest’s usual annoying, sepulchral stage whisper, the voice of somebody who didn’t talk much to other people and had at once an unsteady and overwhelming sense of his own importance.

“Then that means I’ve got your blessing? We can set a date to start construction?”

“What is in thine heart, that do.”

“Natan, what I’m trying to find out is what is in *your* heart. Given the fact that you’re the Ark’s most faithful servant, I want you to have some say in the matter.” Dav felt annoyed with himself: he clearly knew that in flattering these kinds of people, he simply diminished himself to no effect – men like Natan, like someone who never got the punchlines of jokes, were impervious to flattery.

“Thus saith the Lord . . .” Natan began, and faltered. The Lord, of course, had actually said nothing that Natan could pass on. Yet he forced this thought from his consciousness: it was too humiliating. However, he knew – he was *certain* – that if the Lord *had* given any instructions about the temple, Natan knew what they’d be.

The other people collected in throneroom were watching him, smiling, all except Dav. He flushed in the shadows, and suddenly felt words, phrases, pronouncements gush against the base of tongue, like bile burning your throat when you started to gag.

“Shalt thou build me an house for me to dwell in?” Natan asked.

Dav nodded encouragingly.

“God says that ever since the Jews left Egypt He has lived in a tent.”

"That isn't our fault . . ." someone said.

"Let him continue," said Dav.

Natan looked about him defiantly. "The Lord says, 'I have lived in a tabernacle in a tent.'"

"We've been under attack," Dav said defensively. "There wasn't anyplace we could permanently set up with the Revolutionary Army of Philistia perpetually on our doorstep . . . In fact, the Philistines actually captured the Ark. What could we do?"

But Natan wasn't listening.

"And everywhere I walked with the Jews in their wanderings," Natan continued: Natan felt that at this point God Himself had taken over the narrative. "Did I say one word to the tribes of Israel, whom I had in fact commanded to feed those very same tribes, Why don't you build Me a house of cedar?"

Dav was confused. His messages from God had always been much clearer. He felt as you do when a third party reports the conversation of someone you know well—your best friend or your father—but the words don't sound right, and you think, "That isn't how my father would put that."

"I'm sorry," Dav interrupted, "I don't understand the gist of the question: Is God saying that we should or shouldn't have taken the Ark out of the tents and put it in a more permanent structure?"

"Therefore," began Natan, ignoring Dav's question, "therefore, say to my servant Dav, 'I took thee out of the sheep-pen, from following sheep around day in and day out, and made you a king.'"

Why, thought Dav, was God reminding him of the obvious? Was this the preamble to a major chastisement? What if God, through Natan, was about to reveal his relationship to Sheva?

Natan, however, continued in this same vein of biographical summary: "Wherever you went, went I with you. I cut down your enemies so that wherever you look, you have no enemies." This was dubious. "And now," said Natan, trembling, "and now you are a celebrity. Like the Pharaoh."

"Look, where is this going?" asked Ira. Again, Dav motioned for quiet. All of this was starting to sound uncomfortably authentic. It was precisely how God introduced important procedural changes.

"Moreover, I appointed a place for the Jews, namely Israel. I planted you here like crops, and protected you, and sheltered you from your enemies, so that you wouldn't any longer be afflicted by your neighbors." The image of Mount Giboa, the Philistines snaking up its sides to decimate Sol's troops and to mutilate Jonathan, fleetingly passed through Dav's mind.

"Since the time I commanded judges over you, and caused you to rest from the National Wickedness . . ." Natan abruptly halted, panicking. His mind was a blank. Yet concurrently the conviction was rapidly seizing him that Jahveh was indeed controlling his speech.

Dav, too, was convinced that Nathan's words had all the earmarks of divine narrative—that tell-tale mixture of anxiety-provoking reminders, esoteric promises, and, above all, the get-ready-for-this, doom-laden build-up. He looked at the faces surrounding him in the

throne room: They too had stopped snickering at Natan, who had become for them a holy seer (and thus potentially hazardous).

Natan seemed stunned by God's message, so Ira offered encouragement: "'Since the time God commanded judges,' and so on . . . Then what?" But Natan had regained momentum.

"Also Jahveh tells you that He will make you a house."

"Good," said Dav. "Good. By house, I assume God means a temple."

"But when you have died, and are sleeping with your fathers, I will set up the seed of your scrotum, and I establish for him a marvelous kingdom." Natan was now staring at the bronze plates inlaid on the ceiling, which glowed in the afternoon's dull heat. And although the material world remained for him as usual impenetrable, although he still could not see God, as Moishe had seen him, nonetheless Natan for the first time in his life sensed that God was nearby. It was as if God had always stood just behind him, at his back, close but obviously at the same time invisible. Inspired, Natan added: "And the Jews will be second to nobody."

"And this one, Dav's son, will build it. He will build the temple."

Dav's heart sank. Maybe he'd misunderstood.

"God says that I'm not supposed to build His temple?"

"No. You're not." Natan suddenly felt enormous compassion for Dav, overwhelming sadness. Empathy was an utterly new experience and it flooded him. Natan's sorrow filled the throne room, engulfing the king and his future, and to Natan now, for the first time, God's voice came through without muffling, without the noisy crackling of Natan's own thoughts.

His voice throbbed with such pity that the courtiers began to weep and Dav vaguely felt the taste and scent of his future.

"For reasons best known to you, O Singer of the Jews, God has denied you any part in building His temple." And then a literal inspiration filled Natan—a simoom from God, arid and violent, corrosive, bright, and joyous.

"But this He says to you for your comfort, Your kingdom shall have no end . . ."

Chapter Fifteen

Dav and Joab, his chief of staff, were discussing the nightly crop of corpses—sometimes badly mutilated, but most simply with their throats cut in a grim simulacrum of a second mouth.

“They aren’t robbed?” Dav asked.

“Negative, chief. Searches of the deceased victims have revealed sufficient remaining personal items of an expensive nature.” Joab was addicted to the blowy and abstract verbal style that the new wave of officers had picked up. Dav gazed blankly at him.

“In other words, some of them were still wearing jewelry, they had money in their purses . . .”

It was hard to know sometimes whether Joab was actually listening. He appeared to be staring at something very close to Dav’s left ear while he constructed the next verbal ziggurat making up his report.

“Average unfavorable casualties within the immediate urban sector number about four per incident, while extra-urban, or rural, casualties total an average of 12 to 15. These latter, however, are less common, ranging from . . .”

“What kind of people are being killed?”

“Sir?”

“Are they rich people, poor people? Priests, government men, soldiers?”

“Hostile actions do not seem to distinguish among targets.”

With “targets,” Dav had a momentary inward glimpse of Sol’s archery range, and then remembered he and his general were discussing human beings, whose poor bodies were slashed, broken, dismembered. “I understand that the slain are sometimes found mutilated.”

“Mutilation is frequent.” For an instant, a sort of skim formed over Joab’s milky brown eyes, suggesting perhaps compunction. “Pre- or postmortality, cannot be determined . . .” he hesitated, “One theory offered has been that mutilation is a determinant of decease.”

“They’re tortured to death . . .”

Joab squirmed slightly. His job was getting less military and more like being a policeman. Dav intended this. He felt that a head policeman was what was needed.

Simple murder for simple gain had always been commonplace among us and among our neighbors, part of that general cruelty so ancient and habitual that it merely made up a part of the harsh boredom in which most people lived out their lives.

Both Joab and Dav knew that apparently motiveless immolation of people (as opposed to randomly sacrificed sheep, bulls, doves, and lambs) was something Jews didn't do. Jahveh's constant attention militated against yet further random violence. For that matter, pointless murder wasn't particularly a feature of anybody else's culture, either—none of our neighbors engaged in it.

"Maybe it's the Philistines," Dav said, following out this train of thought.

"Intelligence reports discount that probability. There is no well-documented instance on the part of the enemy of targeted, small-scale hostile urban actions."

"Maybe they're changing tactics. Since they're not getting anywhere on the battlefield, they're trying terrorism, trying to demoralize us."

"It's a betrayal of the public trust," said Joab sententiously.

It was difficult to say that these acts of terrorism—if that's what they were—were utterly unprovoked, or that they were political actions at all, rather than crimes cloaked as political actions. Although the strikes, like spells of severe weather, were by and large dispersed randomly throughout Israel, certain places (like farms that were hit by more than their share of cyclones) appeared to be magnets for "negative political activity," as Joab's analysts put it. These places were always clumped along particular borders, like flawed clayware thrown by a sloppy potter, cracks beneath the glaze of anxiety, treachery, confused allegiances, or, as Joab said, betrayal.

Betrayal. It was utterly subjective, Dav thought, very often unintended. Yet it was everywhere. Two people fucked for their own pleasure, but then a child was born of their entirely selfish immersion in lust, and the very fact that this child had to live out a life of the usual frustrations, physical discomfort, inevitable boredom—just to be born, that was the beginning of betrayal. The crises that God produced, these you could at least pretend were random. By the same token, though, manmade disaster created an enormous capacity for the kind of anxiety that everyone just then was feeling.

Israelis, who had grown admirably inured to the swift and cataclysmic changes of mind that marked God's progress through their history, were now for the first time experiencing true paranoia. It ranged like brushfire along the crackling outskirts of their interior landscapes, finally leaping outside into the world. The fringes of physical safety collapsed. The desert flowers of remote places now stank.

One such place was to the north, in an indefinable region which generally marked where Dav's claims overlapped with those of Ishy, son of Sol. Key trade routes ran through it, but it didn't occur to anyone, particularly traders themselves, that detours into safer territory might be prudent. That would have meant lost time, dead camels, increased outlay.

Dav was experiencing a discordant sensation: This very atmosphere of distrust, random violence, and betrayal made him rest easy, made him feel as though he were shielded from some stern and relentless watcher, some nosy, prudish neighbor who'd up till recently had checked his every move. Because he could view with equanimity the apparent flood of terror

and political chaos that flowed around them, he had become in effect master of its currents, not only keeping his head above water but using the push and pull of the waves to disguise . . . what? Possibly he was himself unsure what he was covering up.

"There are too many aliens," Joab said in an uncharacteristically straightforward fashion.

"I'm sorry," Dav said, "I was thinking of something else. Could you . . .?"

"I said, Your Highness, that there are too many non-Jews in Hebron. It's what happens when you get a little success."

"Too many for what? I'm not understanding you."

"Too many for what you'd call cultural purity. Ethnic dominance. Certainly too many for to ensure internal security."

"You mean Egyptians, Syrians . . ."

"Moabites, Amelakites, Hittites."

"Hittites . . ." Dav paused. All he had to do, he felt, was not to interfere with the formation of this instinct forming on the outskirts of his awareness. If he let it evolve without really concentrating on it, shaping it—and he knew it would come to fruition on its own—then he couldn't actually be held accountable for it, could he? "Why would Hittites be suspected of anything? Everybody knows that they're only interested in making money. It's not even clear if they've ever even had a country."

"People," and by "people" Joab meant "Jews," "people think Hittites have incorrect religious opinions."

"Why? They go to temple, they observe the Holy Days. I'd have thought they were model converts."

"Well, you see, that's the problem, Your Highness. They're very, as one says, *broadminded*, they'll believe in anything. . ."

Dav almost said that believing in anything was what the Jews were best at, but in the current climate of stepped-up ideological purity, it was better to keep your thoughts to yourself, even for the king.

"But take someone like . . . Uriah. He's a well-known Hittite. In fact, people call him 'Uriah the Hittite,' like part of his name. You see him in the temple, not too emotional but still when he prays, he prays with feeling. He made a better-than-average contribution to that temple fund-raising drive. Of course, he's not a real Jew, but he's trying, don't you think?"

"People don't generally think he's a Jew in his heart. As for myself, I wouldn't know. It's a matter for theological opinion."

"What if he made some kind of gesture that would prove the depth of his commitment? What if he did something especially patriotic, something, you know, closely involved with combating terrorism?"

The lines of Joab's square, placid face grew smudged, as though the simple ideology usually resident behind it was blurring his thoughts and thus at the same time smudging his expression.

"I'm losing you, chief . . . You mean this guy in particular, or just some representative resident foreigner?"

"No, I mean him—Uriah. He'd be a good choice. He looks like a good citizen, he acts like an observant Jew, he wants to be one of us. He'd probably jump at the chance to prove his loyalty."

"I guess so . . ." It was difficult getting Joab to leap ahead, even a pace or two, along the track of thought where Dav was leading, in part because Dav himself hadn't allowed himself to think through the scheme that had nevertheless already formed itself within him.

"Look, the worst attacks are Israeli caravans, outside the cities . . ."

"That's right, chief."

"So we send him along a really bad patch of highway, but with a special forces platoon in disguise, then when the terrorists ambush them, they waste the terrorists. See?"

Joab clearly did not see.

"It serves several purposes at once," Dav added.

* * *

As if modulated to the discordant civil music shrilling from place to place throughout Dav's kingdom, his family produced its own racket. But Dav, as he listened to the swelling interior monologue that promised to deliver Sheva to him, was deaf to the cacophony at hand.

Av'shalom, "his father is peace." Or another interpretation of the name of Dav's favorite son: "the peace of his father." It was irony too heavy-handed to be missed by a nation expert in irony, except by the young man himself. Despite the keen resemblance to his father as a young man—although a wirier, more knifelike version—people still wondered if Av'shalom really were the son of Dav: his soul was not the antipathy of Dav's (for after all antipodes of the spirit often mark boundaries of a common interior landscape), but its negation. Or keeping in mind Dav's astonishing variety, maybe Av'shalom's character was just a splinter of his father's enormous whole, a long, raw, sharp piece broken off almost inconsequentially.

When Av'shalom was about ten, Dav organized a lesson in slinging for him and his younger brothers—a fairly rare instance of Dav's involvement with all of his sons at one time since even as children their constant jostling and rivalry grated on him.

On this occasion, though, he had their attention: aristocratic boys didn't learn how to use the sling, and none of them had ever seen their father actually use this poor boy's weapon he had enobled. Naturally, they wondered if he was as good as used to be. Maybe he was never any good. Maybe people had made up the story about Goliad like they made up all sorts of other Dav stories. Anyway, they were his sons, he was Dav, they gave themselves up in varying degrees to idolatry, even Av'shalom, who had reached that point in a boy's life where he begins to suspect his father is less than heroic.

Dav showed them how the sling was made, how you chose a strip of hide cut from the soft skin joining a lamb's haunch and belly, how you stretched and cured it, finally chewing it. He told them how you looked for stones in a wadi, preferably one that ran from time to time with snowmelt which carried small, scoured spheres of granite cracked from the mountains.

And finally he showed them how the stone was slung, which, like all fine athletic feats was too simple and perfect to be really visible to the uninitiated: His sons thought they could do as well, or better, but their slung pebbles landed along a wild arc everywhere in the vicinity. The boys laughed at one another, pushed and joked, and were generally delighted to be under

their father's eye. The ridiculous discrepancy between their ability and his was even a source of contentment to them.

Except for Av'shalom, who refused to try. His brothers' railery had no effect on him, and his father went from joshing encouragement to pique as he urged him to sling just one stone.

"What's the point of making of a fool of myself?" he asked. His voice was calm, rational, not sullen or impertinent.

Dav tried to control his irritation. "You can't make a fool of yourself if you've never done something before. Nobody expects you to be good at something the first time you try it."

Av'shalom stared placidly toward the jar Dav placed some distance away as a target. Evidently, he considered the issue closed.

Not for the last time, Dav considered his eldest son and the saddening fact that he did not know him well. He knew none of these boys very well: there were too many of them. He had to concentrate to remember which of his wives, concubines, casual acquaintances had given birth to which son.

It was also disconcerting that none of the boys was like him. Oh, they bore enough physical resemblance to him to assure him that they were in fact his offspring—particularly Av'shalom. But in contrast to most men, he didn't actually care whether he had or hadn't fathered everyone of these children. All he wanted was one child to be not merely an echo of himself but instead a higher or lower-pitched version of his same note, an answering rhyme, a chord in the same key. Naturally, he wished his eldest, Av'shalom, could be this chosen child.

What Dav did not know is that Av'shalom *was*, in a curious way, a simulacrum of Dav: He acted as a father surrogate for the masses of his brothers and sisters. He remembered the personalities, tastes, secrets of each of Dav's offspring. He remembered who mothered each child.

He was the only member of the royal household who was like this; the rest of the family carried on in a lax, absent-minded way. Many people found this quality rather endearing, particularly if you'd ever witnessed the running of neighboring regal families, with their harems, and cowed children, and barking, idiotic patriarchs. Their familial nonchalance was partly the reflection of the respect Dav continually bore for other people's personalities and partly an outgrowth of the strong individuality of the personalities concerned. As a result of all this, Dav's children formed a sort of tribe in their own right, with Av'shalom as their tutelary head. Their mothers were far too consumed with jealousy, love, and fascination with one another to pay much attention to their respective children, at least after the age of five or six.

As a child I knew these children well, their personalities, tastes, secrets. I knew Tamar perhaps better than the others. But as I began by saying, I was too enmeshed in the doings of adults to lend much interest to children, and Tam was . . . well, in fact, it is difficult to say what Tam may have been.

Surely she was as malleable as the lightest clay, and yet I don't mean to imply that she was passively otiose. Perhaps she, and not Av'shalom, was most like Dav of all his children. It's difficult to comprehend the extent of the kind of innocence that both Tamar and her father possessed. All I can describe about it are its occasionally extraordinary effects—the actions that

Dav and Tam would sometimes undertake stunning everyone around them, and in searching for motives, people would wonderingly say, "They're so *naïve*."

Av'shalom was only slightly older than Tam, and as I say, watchful over her as over her sisters, watchful in a literal sense as well. Whenever she was around, he gazed at her.

So the first wave of Dav's children reached adolescence during this period of upheaval, displacement, of which terrorist attacks were only a fluttering symptom of far deeper faults. Joab, it's true, had widened our "security buffer" (as they were fond of calling it), and those of us who were then in our teens hadn't ever known what it was like to be beleaguered, to slide your shield quickly on your forearm and sweep your lance or bow from the corner because the Philistines (or Moabites or Syrians or Egyptians) were at the town limits, down the next street. Perhaps if we had grown up in earlier heroic times—times absent of irony and free of anxiety as only times of real fear and great threat can be—perhaps we'd have been less desperate for freedom. For we sought our own liberty as though it was an enemy we had to devastate, to seek and destroy.

Nothing made us angrier than what Jews had always thought of as "sacred"—sacred tabernacles, sacrifices, commandments, laws, places, people, animals, rocks—the whole Jahveh-cringing country (we thought) was drowning in divinity and nationalism.

Of course, it was very difficult to express this admittedly inchoate but intensely real interior ferment (and it was as real as anything—as Sol's madness and Jonathan's death). But we didn't need to express it, not at least to each other: People of our generation, to which Av'shalom and his brothers and sisters belonged, didn't need to articulate what was to us a sort of anxious miasma that we couldn't help breathing.

Still, this took different people different ways. All thought of having brothers and sisters is strange to me, as an only child, and I can only wonder what it might be like to have someone who is and isn't like you. I think it would be disconcerting, and even stranger to have sibilings born of a mother different than your own. I suspect the result might be that the alien moiety would be in garish conflict with characteristics that were like your own: Your siblings would be like demon versions of oneself.

Avshalom's half-brother Amnon, for example, was the victim of imagined illnesses. He spent a lot of time in bed, asking for esoteric food to be brought to him, for royal physicians to mix up some outré potion he'd heard about somewhere (when he wasn't laid up, he hung around the herbalists in the souk). If you'd said to Dav, "What kind of a kid's Amnon?" he would have to think a moment, trying to remember which of his sons was named "Amnon." Was he the plump one with the spotty complexion? The short one who never seemed to wash? To his peers as well he was a fuzzy space where somebody stood and whined, a self-pitying blur at the periphery of their lives. After he was murdered, what people remembered most about him was his boring descriptions of his bowel habits, the odor of medicine that perpetually clung to him.

Possibly it was out of this general inattention—in the end the cruelest kind of contempt—that his own damp violence flickered.

It seems unlikely that he harbored any true, implacable adolescent desire for Tamar. More probably, he loathed her. She clearly possessed so much that he didn't have. He chose her out of evil's oldest, dingiest, most etiolated motive: resentment of innocence.

He lay one day languishing in bed, his mother rather grudgingly attending him. She didn't ordinarily encourage her son's tedious malingering, but this time, she thought, he looked really sick. His forehead was hot and dry to the touch, like the hot smooth brick of an oven. After all, she was his mother, and being his mother, she couldn't help recalling the times when he was sick as a small child: His forehead felt much the same then, and she felt the tiny fluttering of maternal solicitousness.

Meanwhile, Amnon floated in that soupy, achy cloud that fevers cause, and as fevers often do (especially with adolescents), this one made him horny. In a hot vision speckled with fever spots, he looked past his mother kneeling over his cot and fantasized Tam ministering to him. It was easy to imagine the slick, cool feel of her fingers on his brow, like linen chilled in the night wind. He could smell the woody scent of oil in her light brown hair. Most of all, he envisioned her pity, her compassion for him. At last she would pay attention to him, as he faded from the earth.

"I need a full-time nurse," he whispered to his mother. His wispy gasps were very convincing, very like the expiring gusts of somebody in the final stages of collapse. She was now really alarmed.

"I'll get one of the old women," she said, holding her son's hand tightly. "They're more knowledgeable than the doctors anyway."

"No, I . . . I want one of my sisters . . ."

This caught her up a little short.

"One of your sisters?" She pictured to herself this group, made up of either a gaggle of egotistic teen-aged half-wits or more or less babbling children. "What on earth could one of your *sisters* do?" She decided Amnon was delirious.

"I want Tam. . . I need Tam to nurse me."

Actually, she thought, this made a little more sense. She hadn't considered Tam, who was the only one of the sisters who might actually be depended on to perform a service for someone other than herself. Very likely, she'd do it willingly.

"All right, son, we'll see if Tam can nurse you."

He sank back into his pillows and fell into a delicious nap.

And as it turned out, Tam undertook quite willingly the nursing of Amnon, although she was a little puzzled that he'd asked her to do this. She hadn't after all ever cared for a sick person, and as she hadn't herself ever been sick, she was at first a little at a loss to know how to go about it. But she soon discovered that "nursing," at any rate insofar as Amnon was considered, simply involved waiting on him. Still, he did look sick: colorless, sweaty, his hair matted and dirty. He slept a lot, and then she sat by the window, watching the sky change, or she worked on the endless pile of sewing that is every woman's lot (even a princess).

Meanwhile, Amnon did not always actually sleep but furtively watched her watching the sky or sewing. Moving about through his febrile, gauzy vision, Tam seemed extraordinarily desirable. He had to shift his covers around to disguise his frequent erections. And as his low

fever continued, her continuous presence rubbed, literally, against him. Her breasts brushed against him as she bent over to straighten his blanket, her arm swept his cheek as she adjusted his pillow, her fingertips gently pressed his lips as he brought a cup of water to his mouth. It was though her body were acting on its own, flirting with him.

A low stool stood beside his bed, and one morning as he was shakily trying to set down a half-eaten bowl of porridge, it slipped, spilling its contents onto the floor. When Tam kneeled to wipe up the soggy cereal, her robe fell a little away, revealing the tops of her breasts. She finished cleaning the mess, straightened up, and looked directly into Amnon's poleaxed ogle. What was he looking at? Maybe he was delirious. She reached out to feel his forehead and he grabbed her wrist, pulling her awkwardly over him. Yes, she thought, he must have a very high fever, and, dropping the sopping rag with which she'd wiped up the oatmeal, she patiently tried to pry his fingers from her arm. But as she did this, he grabbed her free arm and kissed her.

His kiss was creepy, and while he was kissing her, he managed to pull her up on to the bed so that she now lay awkwardly across his chest. It occurred to her in passing that he was stronger than a sick boy should be. He continued to kiss her, while doing something with her clothing, pulling up the hem of her dress, groping her legs. Still, she wasn't afraid of him. Mostly, what she felt was a combination of mild surprise and moderate revulsion, like the first mouthful of some unidentifiable foreign stew that she was tasting out of politeness.

She didn't actually understand what was going on. Of course, she knew that he was forcibly kissing her and inexplicably yanking her clothing—she supposed that this was what people meant by “sex”—but to what end, she was uncertain. Amnon by this time had succeeded in working her clothing up around her hips, and she could now feel his bare, gellid skin against hers. This was more than distasteful; she now began to feel a little nauseated. Yet she couldn't help herself—she was also curious. If this was sex, what happened next?

There was something like a long, warm finger pressing against her thigh, but not his fingers since he was still holding her against him, some part, evidently, of him. What it probably was, she thought, was the male organ, of which she had only a dim notion. Was it always hard like that? What was it made out of?

He released her left arm, reached down, manipulated this object of his, and then she experienced an abrupt, sharp pain and felt him inside her. In his ineptitude, he had torn something, she was wet, and then he convulsed against her, and the pain swelled as this ridiculous appendage pumped within her. What a fool he was. He'd probably hurt himself. He'd certainly hurt her.

As he lay limply soaking in fetid sweat, she pulled herself free and straightened her clothes. She didn't know what performing sex (if that's what it was) might do to somebody who was sick. Maybe the convulsion meant that he was going to die.

“Are you all right?” she asked, a little grudgingly.

“Ungggggg.” He groaned and half-opened his eyes, his stupid jaw hung open. He looked ludicrous, like some barnyard animal. But he didn't look like he was going to die, and so she could now let herself be angry.

"You're a creep. You're disgusting, you pig." He looked up at her witlessly. "And more than that, you're a big baby," she vindictively added.

"Babies don't fuck," he grunted. His face formed itself into a kind of wormy smirk. She was nonplussed. "Fucking," that's what her sisters talked about in simpering, salacious whispers. It was what peasants called sex.

"That's not what happened," she uncertainly replied. "You don't know anything about it."

"What's to know? I stuck my thing in your thing, and I fucked you. You don't have to be a genius."

She began to have serious doubts. He was a boy, and even though it was universally known that boys were abysmally immature, they were also loathesomely knowledgeable about the really gross aspects of life. Between her legs, she still hurt, and she turned away, lifting her skirt to see if she could tell anything. A thread of blood ran down the inside of her thigh, and there were other unidentifiable fluids spread about.

All at once, she knew that, yes, he was right. They *had* had sex, or more accurately, *he* had had sex: She didn't consider herself a participant . . . But, she instantly added to herself, that's not what other people would think. It wasn't what, for example, her sisters would think: They would giggle and say snippy things behind her back. And then the worst thing occurred to her, like some noxious physical byproduct—vomit or mucous—rising up and making itself unignorable: When you had sex, you had a baby—at least that's how she thought it worked. Her mother had once said something to her on the subject, but she couldn't remember exactly what: Her mother had been embarrassed and little confused. Now she wished she'd paid more attention.

"You're sure . . .?" she asked sullenly. Now he was sitting up, grinning at her. He was remarkably recovered.

"Yeah, I'm sure. You and I did the deed, I plugged your hole, we screwed, we . . ."

"I get the picture, you jerk." She pictured to herself what it would be like to pound his face with a rice-mallet. Then she remembered.

"Then if we actually did what you say, you'll have to marry me."

"Fat chance." She wasn't prepared for this reply. It was typical, though: boys might know about all the creepy aspects of sex, but they were idiots when it came to how you were supposed to act.

"When two people have . . . sex, then they have to get married." She paused, and then added uncertainly, "It's the law."

He guffawed.

"It's not the law. If a guy has the opportunity get some pussy, then he does. And I did."

For the first time in her life, she sincerely wanted to see another person seriously hurt, she wanted him to be killed, horribly.

"Oh, yes," she said, now more sure of herself: she'd thought of something. "They'll *make* you marry me."

"What? Who'll make me?" Now it was his turn to feel anxious.

"Av'shalom . . . Av'shalom'll force you to marry me."

He looked sick again, this time in earnest. He understood the force, the plausibility, of this threat, but before he could say anything further, she backed out of the room, glaring vindictively at him.

“I’m going to him right now. I’m going to tell Av’shalom what you did.”

* * *

Uriah knew he was being fucked. Every parched breeze that stirred along the desolate road chilled him. What was worse, this feeling—like he’d come down with swamp fever—had begun even before he’d left. It had crept upon him, day by day, as though a blunt, inexorable action was being planned somewhere both hidden and close at hand, by plotters who impersonally laid out scheduling for something that would do him irreparable harm. The few instincts he had were all wrapped up in business, but these were vigorous, grown stronger through his trust in them, and so for a long time he suspected his rivals were scheming to ruin him. Maybe one of them had worked out a new route through the southern desert at the end of which was some new product that soon everyone would want, and maybe his competitors were figuring out a devastating marketing plan. And all the years he’d spent schlepping the weary leagues to dusty, flea-infested villages well off the tracks, selling, selling . . .

By this time, he thought, he should have been quit of the sales side of the business, but things hadn’t worked out as he thought they would when he was a kid attached by sufferance to the big caravans, peddling whatever he could pick up cheap in their shadow and protection. Usually, he could be philosophical, though: Perpetual anxiety, balancing the odds, remaining stolidly realistic while taking just enough of a chance. He’d even accepted the fact that he wasn’t going to get any help from his family: his sons were still too young, his wife, Sheva, was . . . Who knew?

Although none of his suspicions took the form of suspecting Sheva, yet small pieces of his paranoia fluttered like ribbons around her. Nonetheless, it would never have occurred to him to suspect her of adultery. Whether it was a virtue or not, a vacuity of desire (except where his business was concerned) was a part of his make-up. And even in business he wasn’t actuated by greed. Rather, he liked the craft of entrepreneurship, as he often styled it to himself. Building a business was a kind of architecture, where you drew up precise plans and cut and planed and shaped. Over a long time, you fitted the pieces together—the big deals, like supporting beams, and the small but important transactions that worked like joists. The process took years, and one day you looked around and you had a well-built house, but like any house it was subject to God’s will, to war and fire and earthquake.

A delegation from Dav’s court had shown up at his office two days ago, and the moment he saw them his heart fell. They were always manic, these government men, and on this occasion they demonstrated a sort of hysterical bureaucratic joy. At any time, the appearance of courtiers meant at best some bumbling and transparently self-interested interference in his business. At worst (and this looked bad), they were positively dangerous. He remained glum as they babbled about patriotism, about his (Uriah’s) immense opportunity to enhance his stature as a public man.

What it boiled down to was a risky scheme to ensnare terrorists, which would have been laughable had it not been so patently dangerous.

He contemptuously studied the men of the antiterrorist squad who accompanied him. They looked bloodthirsty enough—in fact, they themselves looked like terrorists and not at all like a scared band of travelling businessmen inexplicably strayed onto the chanciest piece of real estate between Israel and Syria. They darted about among the livestock, weapons poking out from under their clothing.

For no apparent reason, their leader halted the caravan on a stretch of road barren even for this desolate route. They'd been travelling only an hour or two since breakfast. The camels, disgusted at this pointless standstill on the way to the next place to eat, made honking noises.

Here the ground was a pale yellow. Tumbleweeds, the only vegetation in evidence, occasionally fluttered across the faint road. One hand's-breadth above a distant range of jagged hills, the morning sun was turning from buttery yellow to white, shrinking from the amorphous blob of sunrise to a hard, defined disk. Soon it would be getting really hot. Easily the most prominent feature of the landscape was silence (the camels had quieted down and looked around uneasily).

Uriah's frustration was nearly a kind of despair. It seemed to him as if all that he'd ever accomplished was evaporating, like a wadi in spate emptying suddenly onto the wilderness hardpan: As impressive as it seemed in its original course, now it was instantly absorbed in endless, thirsty, useless sand. He thought of his pretty wife, whom he'd never gotten really to know. He'd spent too much of his life on the road.

The hard-cases of the antiterrorist squad were watching him. Their attention was grim and speculative.

* * *

Despite his father's wearisome anecdotes about leading flocks and finding lost lambs and various other rural delights, Amnon thought sheep-shearing was stupid. Worse, it was pretentious in a way he couldn't quite define: King's Sons Rediscover Sheepish Roots. It was a public relations stunt, really, having them spend a weekend in pseudowilderness giving haircuts to sheep.

This time he was fairly certain the idea was Av'shalom's—his father was too distracted or too indifferent these days to care about what his sons were up to. At least Av'shalom seemed about the same as far as he, Amnon, was concerned, neither friendly nor unfriendly. Probably Tam had chickened out and hadn't told on him after all, so that was okay: he'd gotten laid and gotten away with it.

They'd been awakened hours before dawn and mounted up in a cold drizzle. Since then, the weather had been changeable—chilly mist alternating with puffs of warm breeze, with the sun passing in and out of heavy clouds. Before the weekend was over, he'd have come down with a bad cold. That's if he was lucky: the last time Dav's sons had been summoned out for one of these farmfests, he'd been stabbed in the foot with a pitchfork (almost certainly on purpose) by one of his brothers.

These were the king's flocks they were shearing, so there were thousands of sheep involved. Obviously, they couldn't be expected to process more than a token number of head, but meanwhile there was an endless supply for as long as Av'shalom decided they should work. It was nightmarish, like a long, sinister dream where you're forced to cut fleece nonstop

for days, weeks, years. The neverending dumb, squirming bodies. The blood from countless scissor nicks and scratches pooling up at your knees as you knelt struggling in the gory mud, shearing yet another sheep.

Adding to this impression was the claustrophobic space in which they had to work, a stone-circled corral about fifty cubits across, whose rocky walls (high enough to prevent the loose sheep from jumping out) made you feel like you were at the bottom of a pit. Four or five sheep were let into the enclosure at any one time, one being sheared and a couple of others waiting their turn.

Amnon supervised the actual fleecing, while Av'shalom bossed the men herding sheep outside the corral. They were there all day long, and eventually Amnon felt as though he'd always been there, his feet cold and wet, the clefts and striations of the wall's stones becoming as familiar to him as his bedroom furniture.

You had to be maddeningly attentive when you were shearing sheep, which didn't make much sense until you'd actually had to coax, and chase, and wrestle with the fucking beasts. And you always seemed to be crouched over, even if you were running after a ram. It wasn't a task where you could let your mind wander, but once in a while Amnon stood up and stretched and looked around. He thought it was strange that each time he did this Av'shalom was sitting on top of the corral wall watching him. Probably his older brother thought he wasn't up to this full-of-shit job which any idiot could do.

Toward midafternoon, the milky and insipid sun finally appeared. Av'shalom's servants carted several large jars of wine down to the sheep-shearers, and his brothers began to drink. It wasn't long, given their weariness and their unaccustomed exposure to fresh air, that most of them were, if not quite groggy, at least in a mildly incapacitated swoon.

Amnon's mood cleared up. He started to tell dirty jokes, which as drunk as his brothers were, no one laughed at (a few of the younger brothers giggled, but they of course hadn't been told of Amnon's criminal behavior toward his half-sister). Regretably, Amnon was one of those men who worked himself into giddy desperation when people didn't laugh at his filthy jokes: Instead of shutting up, he upped the ante—telling slimier and slimier stories until somebody forced him to stop, which in fact one of his younger brothers suggested he do.

"Shut the fuck up, Amnon, you asshole," said the younger brother, who tried to smile by way of showing that he wasn't saying this out of prudishness.

Amnon was laughing in a contrived way at a particularly gross and jejune punchline. He stopped laughing, his smile faded.

"Who the fffffuck you think yyyyyou're talking to, shithead?" The cold, the alcohol, his frustration made him stutter. The brother thought that it was best to leave well enough alone and didn't say anything. Amnon was kneeling in the bloody mud, sheepshears dripping in his right hand (as the shearers got drunker, the sheep's injuries got more serious). He stood up and advanced toward the younger brother, waving the shears in the brother's general direction.

"I'm gggggonna cut off your balls," Amnon said slyly, jabbing the point of the tool at his brother's crotch. People stopped what they were doing. One or two of the sons of Dav—the older, observant ones who'd known Amnon all his life—had more or less expected Amnon's

sour, repressed vitriol one day to leak out. The violence he'd perpetrated on Tam was only a nasty prelude.

But as he advanced toward the boy, four of Av'shalom's servants (the ones who a while ago had brought the wine and, everyone assumed, had stayed around to cadge drinks) now slipped down off their perches on the rock wall and sidled toward the place where Amnon was now tipsily waving the shears in the general vicinity of his brother's worried face.

Witnesses' testimony about what happened next is hopelessly confused; people were drunk, events happened too fast, other inexplicable things happened at the same time, such as that many more of Av'shalom's servants, all armed, suddenly appeared out of nowhere, surrounding the enclosure.

In any case, the four servants closed on Amnon, and when they stepped away moments later, he sat in the mud, clutching himself. A ewe stood immediately behind him, and both Amnon and the sheep were staring fixedly at some indefinable point across the circle. Then Amnon rolled backward, and the ewe side-stepped out of the way, rolling her eyes in concern. Her small hoof splashed a delicate russet spray on Amnon's cheek, while bright red pools spread outward in several places about the garments on his breast.

One by one, tearing their gazes from their fallen brother, each son of Dav looked up and saw Av'shalom's servants levelly watching them, maybe sizing them up. Some of the brothers turned and with as much sangfroid as they could muster, sauntered toward their horses. Others backed away, stumbling but keeping an eye on the servants.

Still others ran away as fast as their feet could carry them.

Chapter Sixteen

Gay'l stood before the king and mused on his remarkable head. It was like one of those Achaean carvings of people's heads, rock metamorphosing into flesh, pitchy black curls picked out with sea-gray, each circlet of hair gracefully, painstakingly chiselled.

His body could still strike her like a surprise blow, the exciting, barely contained threat of his powerful shoulders and arms. Yet now the skin was stretched thin across his forehead and checks; it looked friable, fine lines like cracks in glass ran from the corners of his eyes. And his body now looked, as it always had from time to time in her memory, indefinably convalescent, fragile. He sat at the rough dining table he used for a desk, his elbows resting on a large tablet he'd been reading, and he looked out into that void where, Gay'l knew, he'd always spent much of his time. Maybe his god was there, she thought.

She sat across from him, drumming her fingers, waiting. Michal stood farther away, unwilling to come near to him. This was because she was angry about Sheva. She was the angriest of all Dav's angry wives and concubines, and for once in her life Michal was proving herself exceptional, at least in rancor. She led the other women, with the exception of Gay'l herself, in a rebellion animated mostly by spite.

The baby had been the last straw. *Her* baby was likely to shoot forward in precedence over everybody else's babies. What was to prevent it? Michal lost no opportunity to complain that Jews didn't have any actual royal traditions, that we had only a kind of made-up, ad hoc kingship—so the king could decide any of his children could inherit the throne, as long as he had the will to enforce his decision, and obviously Dav did.

On the other hand, things didn't appear to be working out too well with Sheva's newborn son. The baby was very sick. In fact, Gay'l had come to Dav to report the latest bad news. The six-day-old child was fading, not fast or dramatically, but inevitably. Despite herself, Gay'l felt pity for Dav; she could spare little sympathy for his other wives, and in truth she unwillingly shared his dismissal of them as more or less attractive fertility receptacles lacking individual personalities. And she decidedly did not pity Sheva or even her baby.

"It would be best," she said, "to prepare for the worst."

"You mean the inevitable," he said tonelessly, continuing to inspect the void.

"Yes, the inevitable."

There had always been between them, from the very first time she'd come to plead for The Fool, this one rare blessing—unstudied truth-telling. And there was a corollary gift, one more intermittent, rarer, possibly more to be treasured: beyond speaking the truth, the ability simply to know it in each other.

"God . . ." he muttered, and Gay'l knew he meant that God might, if He wished, if He still valued Dav enough, give the baby a kind of mortal waiver, a temporary suspension.

"Well, maybe . . ." she said doubtfully, but not disbelievingly. Who knew with Dav and God?

"You're going to call on *God*?" Michal said sardonically from across the room. "You think *God* is going to rescind what's happening here?"

It was strange hearing Michal say the word "God." Gay'l realized that she'd always assumed certain words simply weren't in Michal's vocabulary. It was as if the inability to think and speak about dreams or passions or ideas was some birth defect, like somebody born deaf who one day out of nowhere began singing.

Her face, too, wore an uncharacteristically ironic expression. She made her mouth smile.

"I don't believe you. You think you can just go on doing anything you please? God judges anybody you don't happen to like, but you don't come under scrutiny? What a fucking hypocrite you are. You're the king of the assholes, Dav . . ."

His gaze dropped slowly from Michal to a point a few inches forward from where his fingertips splayed on the tabletop. The three of them remained motionless. There was nothing to think, their lives had come to a halt, and nothing more could happen until one terrible thing took place. Yet it wasn't clear what that thing might be—possibly the baby's death, possibly not.

There was at the very back of the palace grounds a waste area, used to store things that no one quite wanted to throw away: derelict furniture that might be repaired, pottery that with a little ingenuity could be patched. These objects in limbo surrounded a plot of bare earth, itself the product of indecision—somebody had once wanted to plant a miniaturized orchard there. In fact, a few stunted orange trees and snarled olives grew amid the trash.

Dav left the room and walked through the little-used, poorly lit hallways that led to the back of the palace complex where a small door opened to this one scuffmark in the otherwise smooth and cheerful texture of the royal garden. He lay down there, his lips in the dust. He mumbled to the ground and with each word he ate a little dirt.

It was important that he cling to the ground, as he had that night in the desert when he'd been swallowed in rock. It was as if everything subsequent had followed from that night: violence—violating women, crushing men. But now he no longer wanted to abjure violence. He no longer wanted to enforce his will or God's. It was hard to tell which.

Adonai: perpetually sidelined while

We live our lives in mud,

Where we mostly need you.

To live in sin, to slog through mud, to eat dirt.

Our mouths gaping, gasping the soil of our misdeeds.

He could still speak to God, he found, but he couldn't pray. How did people lose their faith? What a blessing that would be. But it was inexplicable: How could you *not* know God

was always around, not so much implacable as perfectly opaque, so that knowing even His tiniest intention was like trying to see through obsidian. He knew now that he'd only been provided with the illusion of freedom, until recently when he'd begun to act outside God. Ah, he thought, that must be what they mean by "transgression." He had behaved as he had wished by fucking Sheva, killing Uriah, and, he supposed, ignoring his children so that now they were killing one another. And all this was indeed a kind of freedom, but one which was like the freedom a cart had when it tore from its mountain ruts and flung itself down a cliff, shredding the beast tied to it to bits.

Yet knowing this did not in the least placate his anger toward God, particularly in this one brief against Him: His separation—more than that, God's unwillingness to dwell with them in this marsh of His making, in this damned bog.

Still, he prayed to Jahveh, Adonai, Elohim. He prayed that the baby would be dissociated from him, not through death, he quickly added, but somehow by his ceasing to be its father. Any other arrangement would be acceptable: never to see the child again would be fine, as long as it didn't die because he'd contaminated it with his filthy, piglike acts.

For a while he rolled around on the ground, writhing, squirming, bucking his groin toward the sky and grinding his pelvis into the earth. These spiritual exercises must have gone on for some time because eventually his body was spent, even though his mind kept yammering on and on. He lay facedown breathing the national dust.

Irrelevant notions intruded on his grief from time to time, like soothing and insignificant backeddies in a torrent of miserable thought, and it occurred to him that he was inhaling Israel. Not only did the thought act as a temporary sedative but the act itself was palliative, as if this powdered Jewish soil were a kind of analgesic. He was the king of this dirt, he realized, with shame. He was the king of the Jews and of the Jews' real estate. To be king of buildings and mountains and deserts was a pure, sweet aspiration. Unfortunately, to be king of those things, you also had to be king of everything else, everything human—families and children and marriages.

He was abysmally ashamed of his stewardship. Maybe he'd always been ashamed of it, from the beginning when he could not grasp why people followed him, admired him, actually died for him. But if God had been keeping up His part of the contract, if Dav had been chosen, then you'd think that at the very least there'd be divine guidance at important points. Not *less* guidance as time went along—which was, ridiculously, the case now— but *more* holy instructions as things got more complicated.

Indeed, he realized that he was ashamed of them both, of himself and of God.

There must have been something more that he could have done for this Jewish ground, whose innocence seemed to him then irreproachable: the bright, bittersweet evenings when light like rosy powder sifted dustily through the beige and gray-blue stone streets, the sky above keen and its lightest blue of the day; the hills at noon in autumn as you stood on a ridge and the newly chill wind frisked you, and you remembered the interminable brightness of childhood.

Childhood. Probably Sheva's son wouldn't have one. Crouched like a dog near the ground, he watched his tears plop, spread, and quickly evaporate in the dust of Israel.

As it grew dark, men appeared in the courtyard. They watched him and whispered among themselves, frightened of him. Still crouching, he asked:

"Is the child dead?"

They nodded in unison, apparently so that no one of them would be responsible for this ill-omened response. He rose, shook the dust from his garment and – though it was hard to tell in the dusk – the counsellors thought they saw their king smile to himself.

* * *

Natan looked different, but Dav couldn't put his finger on the change. Maybe he'd gained weight: he seemed to have more gravity to him, more bottom. He also looked younger, but nowadays everyone looked younger than he did. More than anything else, the conviction in Natan's steady and lunatic gaze was itself convincing, brought about perhaps by intimacy with God, who had made Natan into whatever it was God wanted him to become.

Dav was quite willing to listen to what Natan had to say, prophet or no prophet. He recognized, of course, that absorbing the thoughts of other people had to some extent the effect of drowning out your own, and he very much wanted to extirpate the buzzing in his head.

Natan was explaining what was going to happen next, "next" not necessarily meaning "next in the normal order of human events." "Next" meant "the next important God event."

"You have done what you have done," Natan said. "That part of your life is finished."

"I would like to perform a ritual," Dav said musingly, "do you think that Jahveh would prefer anything in particular?"

Natan stared at him blankly.

"Don't misunderstand me," Dav added. "This wouldn't be a ritual of *expiation*. I'm not trying to make up for anything."

"Good. Because there's no way you can do that. You made some very, very bad choices."

Dav sighed. "I never had a chance to choose . . . That's what happens when you're a choice yourself. That's what He told me once . . . I was chosen."

"You are his instrument." Natan said this nearly to himself, in a tone (Dav was surprised to note) tinged with compassion. "I can't imagine what that must be like . . ."

Dav inspected Natan for a long minute, tapping his fingers on the armrests of his throne. Finally, he cleared his throat.

"Well, then, prophet, prophesy."

"Sheva is pregnant with a son."

"Another son . . ."

"This one is the one. Your heir."

"Fine. But that's not what I need to know. Will he be better than I am? Will he do better things? Will he be different enough from me that he won't get dragged down in these . . . these *personal* issues?"

"Yes, my king, he will be different. He will be better and wiser and he will build up the City and raise the Temple."

"Then I'm satisfied . . ."

Natan did not know how he knew these things. One recent morning he'd woken up and simply knew them, and they existed with a weight of conviction impossible to question. So, he assumed, this was knowledge come from God, despite the fact that God's voice hadn't rung in his ears like the world's biggest bronze gong, His word hadn't been written in flashy, fiery script back and forth against the temple wall. And its possession had a curious effect on Natan, which was that he had gained a kind of tolerant objectivity, and in turn this spurred in him a kind of pity for the people God had his eye on, chiefly Dav and his family. In fact, he now felt protective of his king. Knowing how the narrative would be played out (at least in the near term), Natan wished there were something he could do for the actors. But there was nothing he could do. Like a listener to a grim tale, he could only hear it out.

In contrast, Dav no longer thought of himself as a character in a story. He suspected that this had to do with how little nowadays Jahveh occupied his thoughts. Before, God had been the teller of his life's tale, the director of its drama, the priest of its ritual, while in the weeks since the baby's death, neither poetry nor prayer seeped up through his spirit as these had always done, poetry and prayer being in fact indistinguishable to him.

This was a relief—that euphonious phrases and holy outpourings no longer crashed through the gates of his mental life, drunk with God, rowdy and hysterical. If he could manage it, he decided he'd rather not be a poet anymore, and he especially wanted to avoid being Jahveh's confidant. Things looked promising in this regard: Perhaps Natan (given God's fecklessness) was the new Chosen Jew. The poor man was surely showing the signs, and all to the good, having grown humbler, slower to speak, evidently more tolerant.

On another occasion, Natan had broached the topic of Av'shalom, the thought of whom made Dav squirm inwardly. He didn't know exactly why this was, although he suspected that this particular son was his own epitome of gracelessness, the summing up of his multiple failures of intelligence and will and honesty.

Natan awkwardly tried to prepare the way for rapprochement between son and father by telling a story, although he didn't like stories and mostly didn't understand them. But the idea of bringing Dav around through a fable with a pointed moral appealed to him—it was what prophets did.

"Once upon a time there was a widow-woman," he began. Dav involuntarily settled down into the listening-to-a-story slot people cuddle into when the formula "once upon a time" pops out of the mouth of just about anyone, even known manglers of tales, like Natan.

"She had two sons, and the sons had a fight in a field. . ."

"Where was the field?" interrupted Dav.

"The field? I don't know . . . I suppose it was next to her house. It was the field were she raised her crops."

"What kind of crops? A widow-woman would only have enough land for maybe a truck garden."

Although he vaguely understood that people liked stories that were embellished by inconsequential details, Natan wasn't sure he could continue if Dav was going to keep asking about trivia. It was hard enough to keep straight the main events.

"It was a truck garden, Excellency—the widow-lady had a truck garden and the two boys were working in the garden and they got into a fight. . ."

"This isn't the story of Qayin and Avel, is it? It sounds familiar."

"No, Excellency, this is a different story." Natan paused, warily expecting some other interruption, but Dav seemed to have reverted to being a listener rather than a questioner. "And one son smote the other son . . ."

"He 'smote' him?"

"Yes, excellency—that's how the story goes. So one boy smote the other, and pretty soon the whole family was risen against the old lady, the widow. And they said, 'Give us the boy. We're going to lynch him for killing his brother.' And the widow said, 'I know he probably deserves lynching, but he's my only son, and my husband as you know is dead, and if you execute the boy, then my husband's name will vanish from the earth.

"Somehow she got a temporary reprieve from her family and went to the king of her country and told him the story and he said, 'As the Lord liveth, there shall not one hair of thy son fall to the earth,' meaning, I suppose, that the son shouldn't get hurt . . ."

"Yes, I understand that." Dav sighed. "And I suppose the woman went home and chastised her family, and the son was allowed to live?"

"Yes, excellency, that's what happened."

"What about the fact that he'd killed his brother?"

"I don't . . . I'm not actually sure how that turned out, Excellency. Probably Jahveh devised some punishment."

"Or not," said Dav. "Maybe God forgave the murderer . . ."

"God's mercy is infinite," Natan sincerely replied.

"And so should a king's be, too . . . That's the moral of the story, isn't it, Natan?"

"Yes, Lord . . . Maybe it's time you allowed Av'shalom to come out of exile."

Dav fell silent and Natan felt as though his king were inwardly measuring him, sizing up the depth of his understanding, and Natan felt very shallow. In the misery of his former life, outside the notice of God and man, trying to master convoluted rites and not only himself abide by the numberless divine prohibitions but explain these to others, he had thought that the job of being a prophet would be wonderfully simple: Being a prophet, you'd be purified, you'd be a kind of singularity, without worldly baggage and distractions. God spake, you listened.

Yet that wasn't what happened at all. Instead, prophecy had somehow entailed getting mixed up in politics, and that had meant getting embroiled in Dav's family problems, and the deeper he sank inside the infected tangle of relationships, the denser became his life. Jahveh talked to him now, yes, but God's instructions only complicated matters.

Natan knew he wasn't up to the job. Well, that was knowledge too late won—what could he do but press on?

Dav finally said:

"How should I demonstrate God's mercy if I'm not God? I'm only human—so why should I tolerate one son's murder of another?"

"It doesn't seem to me . . ." Natan paused. He knew what Jahveh wanted, and he thought that this should have made him perfectly sure of himself. But that, unfortunately,

wasn't the case. His instructions were clear, yet maybe there were subtleties he'd missed. "Amnon was a rapist . . ." Natan lamely added. This didn't seem to be the point somehow, but it was why Av'shalom had him killed.

"An *incestuous* rapist," Dav said. "Otherwise, God wouldn't need an execution, not for mere rape. It was the incest that was unnatural. He seems pretty blasé about rape since it only involves women . . ."

Natan suspected that something in what Dav had said was blasphemous.

"All right then," Dav said after a while, "tell Av'shalom that he can come home."

* * *

Of course, Av'shalom's return from exile remedied nothing. Nothing was healed, nothing was even patched over. Dav knew that like the mysterious equations of the Babylonian mages, which piled expression upon expression like their famous tower, leading to some long-foreseen and inexorable conclusion, the end was in sight for him and his family. He sometimes thought that God wasn't even part of the equation anymore; maybe He'd set the terms and let things run their course. In any case, Dav knew that God was no longer paying attention, not specifically to him.

He had this new son, Shelom, and this was the one the soothsayers said would make the difference. Shelom was the Dawn of the New Age. Yet all the same, Dav reflected that in his favoring of the young God *was* just. When you reached middle age, it was high time you took responsibility for yourself: You had or you hadn't put together the toolkit you needed to patch up your life when it started (all the more frequently now) to leak.

Dav himself didn't know why he couldn't stand Av'shalom, but he found his son's person repulsive, as though he were a leper or a multiple amputee. Particular aspects of Av'shalom's appearance appalled him: the color of his skin (which seemed waxy, embalmed), his eyes' polluted cast. This was all the more puzzling because everybody said he was remarkably handsome.

And Dav also didn't understand why Av'shalom persisted in agitating for an audience. Why couldn't he leave well enough alone? Especially considering their past indifference to each other.

Av'shalom had set himself up as a lawyer, and nowadays he posted himself by the courthouse door, collaring litigants as they swaggered nervously in to argue their suits before the high court. The manner in which he sought power was time-tested, not to say hackneyed: namely, to so woo and debase himself before the people that they'd call his name in their sleep and demand that his father pay attention to him.

Yet it was disconcerting to find the king's son in your face as you entered the legal vestibule.

"Have you got a good lawyer?" he'd ask, pushing aside the defendant's assorted family members (until that time, the chief legal defense was to assemble as many character witnesses as you could). "The court won't assign you one—not *this* court, not the *king's* court! But don't worry: I'll make sure you get everything that's coming to you." Overwhelmed, the litigant hadn't any choice but to explain his case, with Av'shalom nodding and raising his eyebrows in

surprise at apposite moments, and ending up with the (now) client thanking God he'd found this princely attorney.

And there wasn't any question that Av'shalom turned out to be brilliant in court. It's usually forgotten that for better or worse he permanently altered our legal system so that litigation wasn't done anymore by amateurs – usually wise amateurs, it's true.

He didn't only argue cases before the high court. He also went on the circuit, and in every city, town, and two-bit burg he visited, the local grandees put on the inevitable victory dinner. For these occasions, he had of course a set speech, one that made the simple point that if he, Av'shalom, were made "Judge of Israel" (an epithet that had all sorts of reverberations among us without actually mentioning kingship), things would be a whole hell of a lot fairer. He attacked the "cult of personality" which, he said, was our undoing.

Dav still shunned the quest for popularity. Whatever it was that he was seeking (and now what that was seemed sometimes dead and buried), the least of what he wanted was political admiration. The People of Israel, since his youth, had had a crush on him, and although this was nothing he'd ever encouraged, he was accustomed to universal adulation. And he was sage enough to realize, as Av'shalom's star rose in the distasteful firmament of public opinion, that for a long time he'd counted on the indulgence he was unconsciously awarded by a grateful people. Yes, there was a time that he'd had trenchant doubts over exactly why he was entitled to general approbation and a kind of amnesty from the rules governing every other Jew's life, but now he couldn't even remember when that time had ended.

Yet this long era of complacency *had* ended. Like a man waking on the first day of enslavement, he was painfully conscious of the comfortable freedom he'd ignored only the day before. And part of the punishment was that he could now savor, as he was too obtuse to have done before, the bright, calm daybreaks and serene dusks of that former life. He had been all too facilely habituated to that mental ease, but now anxiety (to which we habit-loving humans never become used) made the air about him dense and muggy.

He yearned for the field, for struggle. He wanted to plan and carry out ambushes, to sneak into the enemy's camp as he'd done in Sol's day (although he had vague misgivings about his middle-aged body slithering around tent pegs). Blood and thunder and aggression – he'd thought he'd outgrown them, and maybe he had: But rage, that was still down at his root, as blunt and vigorous as it had been when he'd wanted to roll boulders down the sheep-dotted hillside onto his nagging father.

He dreamt often of his father, who in these dreams was always youngish, in his late twenties or early thirties, and who had inexplicably changed jobs: Now he was a fisherman. His fishing ground was the Dead Sea, and a lot of the action of the dreams took place on the salt-plaques shore, with the heavy, tepid water lapping around their ankles as his father pulled in his boat. Dav never wanted to see the catch of the day, which invariably was made up of big, doughy, penis-shaped things, recognizably organic but not necessarily animals. He knew that his father had pulled these from the sea's deepest trenches, and by doing this, his father seemed to transgress some tabu – a violation that God had overlooked, making the sin more horrible.

Frequently his father was dead in these dreams, but that didn't appear to put a crimp in his fishing. And sometimes, Dav was unsurprised to discover that his father had really been Sol

in disguise all along. Recently, Av'shalom too had barged into this serial dream, just as he'd intruded into Dav's self-esteem.

They would all stand silently in the fetid, saline heat at the edge of the Dead Sea—Dav, his father, Sol, Av'shalom—wearing far too many clothes, all of which were perpetually damp. The misshapen sea creatures rotted in the sun on the hot boards of his father's boat. They were silent because they shared a key piece of knowledge: his father's catch involved some mutual, vaguely sexual shame. But nobody could, or wanted to, put this into words.

Also left unsaid was the understanding that all of them were either dead or going to die, but this knowledge didn't disturb them. It was the least of their worries. Jahveh, the Father of them all, had long ago condemned them all to execution—*that* they could bear if only Adonai would keep His revelations to Himself. On the sea's sterile shingle, they prayed the prayer of all good men : Give us oblivion, O Lord, take away Your Enlightenment.

Inevitably, Av'shalom left Jerusalem, taking his thousands of followers with him, journeying down the road to Hebron, the former capital, Sol's city, the callow scene of Dav's legend-soaked youth. He stopped in Bethlehem to see his grandparents, who had no idea who he was. Helped into the roadway before their farmhouse (actually larger and considerably more attractive than the peasant's hut of Dav's legendary birth), leaning on the enormous biceps of their great-grandsons, they blinked in the light of Israeli high noon and in the coruscations of their royal offspring's golden breastplate. Who knows? perhaps they'd forgotten about Dav. The other sons had stayed at home, helping on the farm, raising families and Dav had become as mythical to his own kin as he was to everybody else.

Chapter Seventeen

Turning around in the saddle to look back at Jerusalem was irresistible. If God had ordered him, like Lot's wife, not to cast a backward glance, he too would have been magically transformed into a salt lick.

With the morning sun still low behind the the city, its western walls were in greenish shadow, as though covered in moss, like a smaller, softer version of Babylon's gardened ramparts. He sympathized with Lot's wife. The priests taught that her specific sin was her self-willed perversity, which simply demonstrated how little they understood people's motives: Sodom was glitzy, seedy, trashy, doubtless, but it remained her city, her place in a world only a little less debased. Dav sympathized with this woman, he understood her city-dweller's need to see her city from a distance. If you loved a city, the view of it from a distance was overwhelmingly seductive. The more you got to know the music the streets made as they ran forward, changed rhythm, curved, crescendoed out in open squares, dimuendoed in lanes, the more you wanted to grasp the anthem as a whole, from outside.

Israelis were calling it King David's Royal City, but Jerusalem was his city only as it belonged to anyone who felt as he did about it, where its buildings, plazas, boulevards grew down so deeply in you that the cityscape was always the background, occasionally even the subject, of your dreams, where you become a sort of patina to the cobblestones and street corners.

The royal caravan had trooped by—wives and children, the court, his military entourage—he lagged behind thinking that he loved no one as he loved Jerusalem, not Jahveh, not Sheva, not a child, which was not to say that he loved the city with a greater love but only that he attained unstained peace in loving something inarticulate, noble, incapable of returning love. For some people, horses or waterfalls or rustic valleys filled this same niche of adoration. And as a Jew he realized that what he felt was idolatry.

But why not be convicted of that, too? Idolatrous, adulterous, murderous, lecherous—the second King of the Jews, to whom Adonai had vouchsafed . . . well, some sort of future publicity, immortality in one form or another.

Perhaps God once again wanted them to take up residence in the wilderness, and there was justice in this. Not only did the desert burn away all distractions so that you couldn't help paying attention to God's presence; more, the place that was no place, where the horizon started

at your feet, that was a more palpable presence than burning bushes, angels, maybe the Ark itself.

Ira rode up beside him. Without needing to look at him, Dav could feel his old comrade in arms sulking.

"What is it?" Dav asked, still facing forward toward the file of refugees moving east.

Ira hesitated, perhaps from respect, unwillingness to question his king's decisions, or maybe he was only pummeling home his displeasure. Finally, he asked, "Why are we doing this?"

"We're fleeing."

Ira sighed.

"I don't understand . . . What is it we're fleeing?"

"We're escaping from Av'shalom – don't be stupid."

"I'm not the one who's being stupid," Ira mumbled. "What's he going to do? That so-called army's a joke. We'd obliterate them."

Now Dav glanced toward the older man: "That's what we're fleeing."

Hours passed, the land rose and then fell, and they descended into the valley of the Jordan. Dav watched the faces of the courtiers, wives, and children as they filed down the hillsides to the banks below. When they'd left Jerusalem, their expressions had been different – many of the adults had stiffened with resolution, the older children laughed softly, the younger ones snuffled, some of the old people weeped. But now they all wore the same bleak, weary look. He watched their feet shuffle in the whitish dust. Their sandals were ridiculous. The soles were too thin, the straps were too delicate. Looking at them made him want to sob. What would he do with these bewildered city people in the desert? He wasn't Moishe, these weren't his tough, fatalistic peasant ancestors.

In the distance over the trail by which they'd just come a small cloud appeared, too small to be stirred up by a pursuing army, while to the east, coming through a cleft in the hills across the Jordan, Dav saw a larger body.

"So," Dav asked Ira, without preamble, knowing that in the field the old soldier and he saw and singled out the same signs, "what do you think?"

"That's nothing to worry about," he replied, pointing eastward and then swinging his arm north, "and that can't be anything to do with our enemies. Wrong direction."

"Everybody seems to know where we are."

"It's not like the old days."

Soon the smallish puff of dust to the west connected itself to a trickle of overdressed people walking beside a tapestry-draped wagon. Before long, they could make out Natan leading a bedraggled squad of priests. Natan himself appeared however unwearied, impassive and ascetic as usual, looking as though he were hiking for health and neither particularly enjoying or disliking the exercise.

"I have delivered the Ark, O Transport of the Hebrews," he said loudly once he was in earshot of the exiles.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Ira whispered. Ira tended to think of the Ark as a kind of hard-to-control superweapon.

Dav was too tired to be exasperated: "Why have you taken the Ark from Jerusalem, Natan?"

Natan was a little surprised by the question: he thought his motives were obvious. "I . . . It was . . . to keep the Holy of Holies from the . . ." he couldn't actually think what theological commination was appropriate for the king's son " . . . the Profaners."

"They're Jews, too, Natan. I don't see how religion comes in to it."

Here Natan knew he was on firmer ground. "It's always a question of religion for the Jews," he said firmly.

There was nothing to say to this since everybody knew, for better or worse, its truth. After a while Dav said:

"Well, you'd better take it back anyway. We're about to have a civil war and something might happen to it."

"If that's what you'd like, Staff of Jahveh . . . I'll have it sent back with the others."

"You need to go back as well, Natan," Dav said gently. Natan was crestfallen. First the sandals, now this: Again Dav felt like crying. He pulled himself up. "I need you in Jerusalem."

Although I was standing around nearby, in case something happened that would make good material, I wasn't listening very closely to what they were saying—Dav and Natan—because my feet were sore. Everytime I closed my mouth my teeth ground against fine dust, and no matter how much tepid, camel-stinking water I drank, I was still parched.

I didn't immediately hear Dav call to me.

"Yasmin," he repeated, rapping out my name as my father had occasionally done. I slunk up to him like some witless concubine called out of the harem.

"I'm sorry, my king . . ."

"You're going back to Jerusalem with Natan."

Feeling even more like a harem girl, I thought I might faint. Then I felt overwhelming anxiety.

Walking away from his soldiers, Dav beckoned to me to follow him a little way off the trail. When we were out of hearing, he stopped.

"It's time for you now, Yasmin." He looked at me indecipherably, and I realized that I was seeing that Dav who I'd always dismissed as a collective illusion: David the King. He actually existed.

"What time?" He continued to gaze at me, and I gradually understood he was willing me to understand. "I'm not ready," I said, not specifically knowing what it was I wasn't ready for, but definitely knowing that whatever it was, I wasn't.

"Most of us aren't. I wasn't ready for . . . this." He might have meant being king of Israel, or his life, or merely the situation we just then found ourselves in. I didn't question him. "I want you to do what you can to support Av'shalom."

"I don't understand this, Dav. Is this some kind of political code? You say 'Support' but you mean 'undermine' him, right?"

Dav gazed at me mildly. "I meant what I said. You're to return to Jerusalem and support my son any way you can."

* * *

I'll say this for Av'shalom's soldiers, they were clean-cut. Of course, that made them even slimier. Mostly they were northerners, and the northern Jews had resented Dav for some time now. Oh, they bragged about the Might of Israel around foreigners, but the belief that Dav favored the southern tribes bit and nagged at them like a chancre that burns with every move you make. They were a *proud* people, an epithet you use when the people you're talking about are ignorant and arrogant and have been around for a long time.

Several of the soldiers escorted Natan and me through the palace. They were very polite, even as they mincingly nudged us through the archway into what had recently been Dav's throneroom. Av'shalom sat stiffly in a simple chair placed in the center of the court, staring at us. The throne behind him was conspicuously empty.

"It was said," he said, "you had fled with my father. Why have you come back?"

"Where the Ark goes, there go I," Natan answered, simply enough—fortunately for him, he didn't have to lie, something of which he was constitutionally incapable in any case. My situation, unfortunately for me, was different.

No one said anything for a minute or two while Av'shalom, who was clearly thinking something over, peered off into space. Then he said to Natan, "That sounds plausible. You can go back to doing what it is you do with the Ark." Natan started to back out of the throneroom. "But I'm cautioning you not to move it again."

"I serve the Lord," he said ambiguously as he walked in reverse through the royal portals.

"Which 'Lord' do you think he means?" Av'shalom asked nobody in particular. "Me the 'Lord' of this country, or God the omnipotent 'Lord'?" At that point he apparently noticed me still standing in front of him. "What is she doing here? Put her back with the rest of the concubines my father left behind." A dozen or so concubines had gotten lost in the shuffle and had missed the procession when it had moved off from Jerusalem.

"I'm not a concubine," I said.

"Did I say you could say anything?"

"You didn't say I *couldn't* say something."

"Is that why he keeps you around? to act smart?"

"I am smart."

"My father is an old man. He's too muddled to know when a witless girl pretends to be wise. I'm younger and quicker."

"For one thing, King Dav's not old. And also I don't have any pretensions to wisdom. I'm simply an observer."

"You mean a spy. That's why you've come back."

"I'm the Royal Chronicler," I said. I wasn't the Royal Chronicler, we hadn't ever had a Royal Chronicler, I'd never written anything like a chronicle. Yet as soon as I described myself this way, I knew that I would be writing . . . well, I didn't actually know: The stories of the Jews, I suppose, the ones I'd been listening to all my life.

My announcement startled Av'shalom.

"You mean you've been writing down everything my father's done?"

"Everything your father's done, everything Sol did. Even more—everything the Jews have done since the Garden of Eden."

"I'm not interested in the Garden of Eden or what Sol did. I'm only interested in current events."

"I've recorded King Dav's mighty deeds as a boy, how he killed Goliad, how he miraculously escaped being killed by Sol."

Av'shalom narrowed his eyes. "Mythology. What I want to know is whether you've recorded the expansion of the Empire of Israel."

"There isn't any Empire of Israel."

"Maybe not. But there will be."

Av'shalom sat thinking and we all stood around waiting for him to finish. Then he said: "All right, from now on, you'll write the Chronicles of the Empire of Israel, from its humble beginnings to its apotheosis under me."

"Whatever happens, I'll write it down," I said, truthfully enough. "I'll start with the struggle between father and son for the kingship."

I watched Av'shalom's handsome face deteriorate into an expression very near lunacy: his eyes widened, his boyish mouth popped open, and his skin turned yellow and white, like badly tanned lambskin. The transformation was ghastly in its forcible departure from the natural Av'shalom, who was suave, sane, and very attractive. We were witnessing the birth of a new Av'shalom, and I learned something important in watching the metamorphosis: Becoming a king really does transgress the supernatural. Although the transformation often leads kings, counter to the evidence of their eyes and of all history, to believe they're both immortal and omnipotent, they do for a short space partake of something divine, diabolic, anyway nonhuman.

"The struggle between my father and me," Av'shalom said to the air about a hand's-breadth from his nose, as though he were trying out this phrase, "is tragic but necessary." He halted, evidently waiting for me to say something.

"Tragic but necessary," I repeated. "I'll write that down."

Av'shalom tried to smile and said, "When the final conflict comes, the end will be tragically inevitable."

"Very likely," I said. "But when will that be?"

"What?"

"When will the final conflict be?"

He was disconcerted. "Not for a while," he said shakily, and then regaining princely momentum, he went on, "My army prepareth!"

I saw my chance: "They better not prepare too long. The longer you wait, the stronger Dav's forces will be."

"Maybe But," he lowered his voice, "my northern tribes are difficult to work with. I'm not sure they'll respond well to my leadership."

"Confidentially, I've been among Dav's people, and I can tell you that it wouldn't take much to destroy them at this point. You don't have to have a trained combat force. All you need is to set your army loose. They're looking for revenge—it'd all be over in a few minutes."

All at once, Av'shalom's face relaxed. He looked young, handsome, mortal. His dark brown eyes softened and I found myself, to my intense surprise, softening with them.

"You really weren't my father's concubine?" he asked timidly.

My heart was loopily banging away below my left breast.

"I've never been anybody's concubine," I said. Which was truthful enough.

* * *

The ten women whom Dav had left behind stared amusedly at Av'shalom as he stood in the doorway of the harem. The women were young but not youthful, alluring in a direct, genital-tugging way. Each was an expert in some sexual specialty and took a craftswoman's pride in her tools and skills.

Av'shalom's plan was to fuck each of these women because fucking his father's concubines symbolized that he was now cock of the walk, so to speak. Although for most men this would be tiring but a lot of fun, for Av'shalom, the ravishing of the concubines was political duty, pure and simple. He wished desperately that it were otherwise, that public opinion had matured past the point of barbaric desert rituals.

But he'd counted on the women being . . . younger, shyer. The actual women were unmistakably more experienced than he: They'd know how little he really knew about love-making. He envisioned having to think up a different sexual position for each of the ten women, but he only could think of two. He'd heard there were more, but for the life of him he couldn't imagine what they might be. Also there were acts besides simple copulation about which his brothers had smirked, but he'd always walked away or shut them up. Now he wished he'd found out what all the snickering was about.

In my part of the palace, I was in bed with a board across my knees, trying to make good on my boast that I was a chronicler. I'd decided to start with Joseph, whose story was one of our best: intriguing characters, exotic settings, sex, action, violence. I was trying to come up with a tricky opening, starting, say, with Joseph as an old man thinking back to his boyhood, or possibly beginning with the weaving of the piebald coat. (I had to waste a lot of papyrus before I learned just to begin a story with its beginning.)

The tapping at my door was so diffident at first I couldn't tell if I was actually hearing it and after I'd satisfied myself that a real noise was being made, where it was coming from. I got out of bed and went to the door.

"Is somebody out there?" I whispered, the way you do when you think you're hearing things and you don't want other people to think you're talking to yourself.

Av'shalom made a kind of humming sound only barely perceptible as an actual noise. Maybe, I thought, the palace has gotten haunted.

"Mutter, mumble, Av'shalom," he said incoherently. I cracked open the door.

"What do you want?" I said impatiently. I softened my voice. "It's late."

"Can I come in?"

"Why not? You're the king."

He plopped on the edge of the bed, looking depressed, and glanced down at the counterpane. Then he jumped up and stared at my bed as if it were a crocodile. He edged over to a stool near the window and gingerly sat down. He looked up at me earnestly.

"There are a lot of difficult responsibilities, being king."

"This was your choice," I reminded him.

"I don't mean the political decisions, war and diplomatic missions and things . . . I guess it's the . . . ceremonial aspects that are so hard. Sometimes I don't feel Jewish, culturally I mean."

I sat down on my bed, facing him. "Well, lots of people have trouble with the things you're required to believe as a Jew. It's hard remembering all the rules."

"I'm not talking about religion," he paused. I was thoroughly confused. "I mean *domestic* responsibilities." I pictured Av'shalom polishing the floors and dusting the royal furniture in some obscure royal ritual I'd never heard of.

"Surely," I offered uncertainly, "those can't amount to much?"

"Oh, but they do. Right now, there are only ten, but think what it'll be like when there's an entire harem."

The light dawned. "Oh," I said.

He gazed at the floor as though he were confiding in the tiles. "I'd prefer having just one . . . person around."

I was lost again. "To do what?" He glanced at me quickly and then resumed his conversation with the floorboards.

"For, you know, to be married to."

"Oh."

We said nothing for a while, Av'shalom slumped across from me while I looked over his head and out the window where a half-moon rose, bright and immaculate, looking very impersonal and businesslike, not at all romantic. The small lamp by my bedside guttered and went out, and we sat embarrassingly bathed in moonlight. Without looking at me, Av'shalom got up and sat next to me on the bed and took my hand.

We sat that way until the moon had risen past the top of my window, until finally with his free hand (surely he hadn't been trying to figure out how he'd do this all this time) he turned my face to his and kissed me.

Even so, I was surprised. I was still very young, after all, and I don't know what I'd expected. I suppose I'd always assumed I'd marry Dav, the way small girls think they'll marry their fathers. As we very slowly, in gentle stages, fell back on the bed, I was content, and I thought that I wasn't very much different from other girls after all.

* * *

We woke up simultaneously, a good while past dawn, and for some time we floated among the frozen waves of sheets and coverlets lapping against our skin. With his clothes off, Av'shalom was very, very young, strong and fragile all at once.

The breeze carried the scent of rain about to begin, as though the air were a bud and the rain a flower within it about to burst. Through the doorway out to a small balcony, gray, late-spring sky stretched evenly over Jerusalem, still undisturbed by the foreboding bulges and violent rips of summer thunderstorms—a day you knew would be repeatedly interrupted by short tattoos of pattering rain, dampening and darkening the city's sand-colored dust.

But on this first morning of not-being-a-virgin, I wanted brazen August sunlight to inundate the world. I wanted the world to steady itself, to glide along in a hot, stately way, like a ceremonial barge on the Nile moving through time but unencumbered by it. I wasn't (that morning, at least) interested in the past, and I didn't want to speculate about the future.

I discovered that I'd lost the orphan's impunity which had made me question Dav, my elders, about the story that the Jews collectively told themselves. Before last night, I'd had the luxury of assuming I was a Jew without having to enlist. But being a Jew meant being party to covenants: Maybe the big Covenant was center stage with us, but it represented lots of other lesser, but no less binding, contracts—with each other, with our unerasable past, with a laughably uncertain future.

Whatever Dav said, no matter how freighted and universal, I had the license to deflate it. Dav awarded me that license, and spurred in me (for better or worse) the irony native to us. But I had no irony with Av'shalom, that obvious target of subtlety and the double view. His simplicity made me want to cry.

I didn't want to speculate about the future, but I knew quite well what the near term held for Av'shalom, and I needed to explain this to him so that his singleness of purpose would comprehend it.

"I need to take back something I said yesterday."

He sat up, looking as though he were bracing himself. "What about?" His voice cracked.

"About your father . . ."

He slumped. "You *were* his concubine."

"What? Of course not. It's nothing to do with that. It's about his army. They're not like I said they were."

He'd relaxed. His face settled into a weird expression of near-passivity. "Oh?" he said indifferently. "Then what are they like?"

"They're still the Army of Israel. Whatever Dav does, they're ready for you. They couldn't ever be unprepared." This appeared to have no effect on him. He was making some barely audible noise. Perhaps he was humming. "So you're right—you shouldn't rush into anything."

"I've also changed my mind about what I said yesterday . . . I'm going to pursue him and bring him to battle."

"I'm telling you that's a bad idea." I hesitated. I couldn't see any way around telling him the truth. "Dav isn't retreating from you, Av'shalom."

"Then how do you explain the way he took off when I approached the city?"

"Sometimes it's hard to say what Dav has in mind because Dav himself doesn't know. Whatever reason he had, he wasn't fleeing your army."

"He was fleeing me."

What was there to say? From any angle, this was the right conclusion: Dav fled his son as you might stay away from your house to avoid a loathsome caller. Or you could say that Dav humanely declined a clash with his son because his son would quite definitely be killed.

"So let him go—That's what you've got to do with parents—just let them go." I didn't know I knew this until I said it, and I surprised myself. Sometimes the wisdom you gain is smothered in the hardship it takes to gain it.

"That's also what you do with children—My father thinks so."

I put my arms around him, and we lay silently in the warm room, with the rain smelling like sweet grass. Occasionally, you could hear the soft splat of raindrops on the windowsill.

After a while I said: "Let this go. You and I can go on from here without him."

"You know that's not true. We're Jews, we can't escape our heritage."

"We're human beings—we can be anything we want. We're not slaves to Dav or to God. We're not bound to covenants made in bad faith." I was young, and being young I'd awakened to the bitterness you feel living under other people's ideas of who you are—another recognition that came as I formed the words to say it. Maybe that's what comes of losing your virginity, I thought. "We don't *have* to be Jews."

Av'shalom laughed, ironically (possibly he too had changed). "God has chosen us, Yasmin."

"For what? To commit suicide?"

"Just to go on, I suppose. Events propose themselves, and we're called on to carry them out."

"To endure them, you mean."

"To endure or not, as God disposes."

The evenly spread tissue of overcast made it hard to tell what time it was. We could see people bustling around in the halls outside my door.

"They're looking for me," said Av'shalom and he started to sit up. But I pulled him to me, my cheek against his smooth chest. His skin smelled like cypress needles, crushed underfoot, and I imagined Av'shalom and me walking upward through a grove of hillside cypresses and coming out into a clearing on a high ridge. We could see other ridges stretching all the way to the sea, and between the ridges, there was no one else.

Finally he got up and slipped his robe over his head and stood for a moment looking through window. Maybe he looked as his father had at his age, but I didn't think so. In fact, now I could see no resemblance between them at all. I saw that Av'shalom was taller than his father, by perhaps half-a-head, and I wondered why I hadn't noticed this before. He was darker, his bones were slim and long, his thick hair straighter and shorter.

If I had for the past two years of living close to Dav made him the imago and model of beauty, now I had a better, literally tangible incarnation in Av'shalom.

And what I had judged fussy and pompous in him, I now realized was only the poorly patched together crust covering his introspection and loneliness and his need for steadiness within his violent, passionate, occasionally lunatic family.

As I lay in bed watching him, he turned to me and began to speak but stopped and sighed. Nor did I have anything to say. In any case, I began to feel such unlocalized panic that I couldn't have spoken if I wanted to. *My* life was what was important now, my loving Av'shalom. What was just was our spending our lives together, from now on, without interference from his crazy family and their fucking politics.

But later that day I watched Av'shalom's army form like a shallow lake and then slowly leak down the northern road. The sky had thickened, and now the desultory pattering of drizzle had transformed itself into drumming rain. The northern tribes, the malcontents of the south, and all the nation of Israel who resented Dav, who envied him, or suspected him of sacrilege or treason – their day had come.

Chapter Eighteen

“He looked good, the prince, standing up there on the little hill with his men. There weren’t many of them – the best he had, I guess – but they stood their ground, like real soldiers . . . They weren’t real soldiers, though . . .”

Ira said this dispassionately, professionally. Any analysis of how men behaved in combat was a mixture of four simple elements, whether they were brave or cowards, whether they were professionals or amateurs. You could be a cowardly professional, for example, or brave amateurs like Av’shalom and his men briefly holding their tiny summit, but Ira knew that amateur soldiers no longer had any business on the battlefield.

“The rest of his men,” Ira continued, “poured off the battlefield like water from a broken jug. Av’shalom and his men stood their ground as long as they could, and then they backed off slowly, fighting along like that, not running – just like real professionals. Well, that’s how it goes – in a rout like that, some men leave the field slowly, shedding blood on their way, and people are going to leave them alone, go after the people who’re running with their backs to you.”

I did not want this picture in my mind, but I couldn’t help imagining Av’shalom and the young men who remained loyal to him, first withstanding the shock of Dav’s front line, fighting back on their tiny height, then giving ground grudgingly against Dav’s veterans, with Av’shalom’s banners flapping ephemerally above them. The vision was repulsive, and it was compelling, and I despised myself for falling victim to the whole mendacious, cruel, brutal trick that men put over on one another. That war is glorious, that dying gloriously is glorious.

Ira and I were standing on the rampart of Mahanaim’s western gate, where Dav had sat for two days and a night awaiting news of the battle. Ira was too old for war. He should have been honorably retired, but Dav never noticed when some aging warrior had long since fulfilled his duty to Dav or God, or whatever God and Dav had decided between them. Like any of Dav’s “mighty men” (as Dav’s publicists had tried to get us to call them), Ira needed neither laurels nor ribbons nor medals to signify the countless battles, skirmishes, brawls he’d been in. His face was hashed with long, white scars, many so old that they’d been rubbed down like ribs of chalk.

He rubbed his left hand where his first and second fingers had been, practicing the warrior’s long-distance stare toward some region where threats never stopped being produced.

"Av'shalom's army broke down, scattered into little groups. One man, never more than three or four, running off into the forest. It probably made sense to them—if they got to the woods, they'd be all right. They'd hide until things blew over. Deep in the trees, nobody'd find them.

"I watched them break up and head for the trees, and I knew what was going to happen to men scared like that, without leaders. Each man for himself.

"Our men knew we were victors, but now we were hunters."

He was silent for a while, and I wondered whether he'd said all he had to say, leaving me to imagine the hunters and their prey in the wilderness. I didn't prompt him. Finally, he went on, still rubbing his three-fingered hand and looking out to that specific distance peril comes from.

"Well, they were the enemy. . ." he looked at me. "Not, 'there's something about you and I can't stand you. You slandered me behind my back, you cheated me, you stole my lover. You're my enemy.'

"But that's not an enemy, because even when you hate him, you may not even know it, but some part of you understands that your enemy is a person. He couldn't even *be* your enemy if he wasn't a person that you could know how he feels, how *you'd* feel if you were him.

"When you're a soldier, when at last you've got to do things to men from another country, another town, some other tribe, *then* you make them your enemy. And what that means is they can't be people anymore. They're like something disgusting—shit or pigs or your own bad dreams—that are trying to be human beings, and you can't stand it. They're horrible, you're furious that something so unnatural should try to be like you. And in your outrage you want to cut away the meat from their bones, take away this arrogant disguise of being a person.

"Av'shalom's army, Jews. . . the enemy.

"They went into the forest about midday. It had been raining a farmer's rain, soft and steady, but it cleared that night. There was no moon, but in that wild place, the stars seemed brighter than usual. There was light enough anyway, you could see the skin of naked men against the forest floor. All over the ground they were, so that you might think if it was daylight patches of white flowers might be there or after the rain mushrooms had sprouted everywhere. You could smell blood, though.

"We killed everybody. Men escaped, but they may as well have been ghosts. Because we killed everybody.

"And starting back, I thought, 'I'm done with this. It isn't necessary to go on because we've killed everybody.'"

He still hadn't said what had happened to Av'shalom. Perhaps he didn't know, and I foolishly hoped that no one knew. But I am who I am, and I cannot not hear the story to its end.

"What about Av'shalom?"

"He was killed," Ira answered.

"You're certain?"

"They brought his body back this morning." He was lost in his own thoughts, paying no attention to me, but nonetheless I struggled to keep my face impassive. As an afterthought, he said, "I think we may have seen the last of Joab."

* * *

Joab's lifelong impassivity was shredded, fled like the enemy, whose defeat you would have thought he shared. In fact, they all seemed defeated—Dav, his generals, courtiers, wives, councillors. I thought they were all hypocrites, and I longed for Jahveh to split them collectively open in the midst of their self-serving grief.

Dav hadn't moved from Mahanaim's gateway maybe because he liked to be outdoors in the fresh air when he got news of a child's death. Someone had remembered to bring his throne; otherwise he might have cast himself into the dust, as he had done when Sheva's firstborn was dying. He'd been there ever since we'd arrived at this remote city. One court faction held the opinion he was making some symbolic point—*sitting-in-the-dust-of-humility-and-watching-for-the-Lord*, for example, while others simply thought that sitting outdoors in the shadow of the old gate probably made him less restless. Perhaps being under the sky reminded him of his shepherd youth.

It was there, alone except for a watchman stationed above him on the gate's lintel, that he'd heard the news. Two young officers eager for promotion had actually raced each other back to Mahanaim to tell him, but he seemed to already know what they had to say: He was weeping when they ran up, panting and gleeful, to describe the murder of his eldest son.

"I thought my instructions were clear." Dav said, looking evenly at Joab.

The general's chagrin seemed to intensify. He cleared his throat and started to say something but thought better of it.

"Just tell me the truth."

Joab looked as if he might throw *himself* down and start squirming in the dirt, which I thought was the least he could do. "Both armies were scattered all over the forest, Lord. I hadn't . . . there wasn't any chain of command, no lines of communication . . ."

"So you weren't there when my orders were disobeyed?"

"No. I mean, yes, I was there, but . . ."

"But you killed him anyway."

"I didn't lift a hand against him," Joab protested. "He was badly wounded."

"Then he died as you were trying to bring him back?"

"No, he died there . . ."

"I'm going to ask you again. What exactly happened?"

"He was on horseback, riding fast through that wilderness. There weren't any paths, and then he got tangled up in that tree."

"He got tangled in a tree."

"His hair got tangled. It was some kind of tree with long thorns, maybe a wild plum, and there was a low bough, and he got caught on the thorns."

"That doesn't explain how he got so badly wounded."

"He made a heroic stand, Lord, a fighting retreat, he was surrounded. He must have taken several wounds then."

Dav was silent, Joab cleared his throat, and both men looked like strangers waiting for someone they knew to happen by.

"Av'shalom was to be spared," Dav said finally, as though he were appealing to us, arguing his case before the Sanhedrin, or, more likely, Adonai. Then he turned and headed outward, away from the city, toward some tents erected in the field before Mahanaim, one of which he entered.

I followed him. No one else was inclined to be around him, but I wanted to make him face what he'd done, to take responsibility for Av'shalom's murder, which he was failing to do, either because he was a hypocrite or moral fool. Or perhaps I was the fool, the court fool, again enjoying the exemption that God and the king granted to people who didn't count—children, storytellers. It didn't occur to me that, as king, Dav could have, possibly should have, had me killed on the spot.

He sat cross-legged on the ground, neatly tucking his robe around him, as though adjusting his garments was the most important thing on his mind. His face was untroubled, or, not that really—better, his expression sent no human message, though it looked serene: It looked like the unflickering face dead men wear.

"What did you expect?" I asked. He looked up, still neutral, still disinterested. "You goaded him until he had to attack you, and then you set your best killer, your lead dog on him, and nothing else could happen *except* killing him."

"I never did anything to him, one way or the other," Dav said to the sand.

"That's *right*," I said viciously, "that's fucking right. He wasn't quite what you expected so you ignored him, just like you ignore everybody else. Except God, of course. You like God all right."

He smiled a barely adumbrated smile. "But God doesn't like me."

"You and God have had a falling out and you have your son murdered . . . That's how it is." There was no point in his replying to this fatuous accusation, and so he didn't. "Isn't it?" I continued. "Av'shalom wasn't a shepherd boy, and he wasn't one of your hard men from the wilderness, strong and silent, and he didn't go around screwing every woman in sight . . ."

"That's enough, Yasmin," he said mildly. "You've had your say."

I was going to go on and explain what the *really* immoral thing was about his sexual behavior—not that I was entirely clear about what that was—but all at once I realized that, yes, I *had* had my say, and in quick succession I also recognized that I had lost the king's ear. He and I could no longer be . . . whatever it was we'd been. Not lovers, certainly, not father and daughter.

Maybe there wasn't any ordinary, human way to describe the relationship you have with a king.

Chapter Nineteen

I remember the threshing floor and the mill-house next door with the blind mule whose misery, even when I was a callow maiden, put my own problems evanescently in relief. I remember watching the miller trying to stop the mule in his blank, agonizing circuit. He had a hard time, the mule, coming to a halt, as though in accepting the terms of his absolutely featureless and, for all he knew, eternal imprisonment, his only comfort were in fact in carrying it on. Because if he stopped and were relieved of his torment, then he would have to acknowledge there was something else.

In contrast to the philosophies of some of our neighbors—the Babylonians, say, or the Persians—what we Jews believe can't countenance circles, orbits, the endless round of existences which, for many gentiles, are a curious reassurance. Nor are we partial to the carefully diagrammed afterlife of those existential engineers, the Egyptians. No, I think that Jews (if they thought about it all) would say that existence is like the flight of an arrow, or a slung stone, starting in swift violence, keening upward through the air, growing nearly invisible, and then driving into something, or, on the other hand, missing the target entirely. Which is doubtless why I found the mule's interminable circle intolerable, and I wasn't alone in this; I noticed that other people, too, other Jews, couldn't spend much time in the mill house.

Dav obviously hadn't bought the hilltop where the old threshing-floor and mill house had stood because people couldn't stand the suffering of a mule. He bought it *because* it was a hilltop and because it was the last large space left by Jerusalem's building boom. But the temple itself? Everyone knows the story. It was left to Shelom to build the temple on his father's real estate.

I see it there now daily from my garden well outside the city walls. I told Ira that I wanted to move out of the palace, for the sake of everybody's level of comfort. I wasn't exactly an embarrassment—I wasn't significant enough for that, particularly in light of everything else we'd recently been through—but whatever motive there'd ever been for my being part of the king's retinue had obviously turned sickly and died. So the State found me somewhere to live, a cottage with a little garden on an odd-shaped hill not far from the city.

Ira and I loaded the single donkey we needed to transport my things. Girls' clothes and papyrus rolls don't weigh much, and we walked beside it silently through the high-summer fields. The corn was still green and the grapes still small and hard, but their leaves were fat and

dew-slick, making the whole landscape look edible. The scent of warm soil, sweet like some festival pastry, billowed over the road.

When we got to the cottage, the sun had already rubbed away the plum-colored dawn light from Jerusalem's bone-colored parapets, and the white city was beginning to pulse, to heat up, and I thought that it was good I could be outside it now.

Things had changed for the Jews: we began to suspect not only that were we a force to be reckoned with in the world, but that we were on our way to becoming preeminent. Well, God and Dav had always told us this, of course, although, being Jews, we were sceptical.

As I opened the shutters and the light at last filled the main room, I had the sensation that the cottage hadn't been much lived in. It was neither derelict (no dust motes hung in the shafts coming through the windows) nor much used.

"Who owns this place?" I asked Ira, who was carrying the last of my parcels through the front door. He handled my insubstantial baggage as though it contained eggs and glassware.

"It belongs to the government."

"But who lived here last?" The little house was like some family's modest summer retreat, which they'd outgrown but sentimentally held on to, hardly an official residence, even for the lowest-ranking delegates from an obscure province.

"The king used it . . ."

"Really? For what?"

Ira had been fussing with my largest bundle. He'd been retying the cords, which had loosened. When he straightened and turned to face me, his bulk took up a lot of the miniature room. He was clearly trying not to move much lest he topple a wall or put his head through the ceiling, and this of course made him look a little stiff.

"For entertaining, you might say. When he had to entertain somebody and they didn't want to be around other people."

"Oh." It was Dav's trysting place. I didn't know whether I wanted to live in his former lovenest, yet as I looked around at the smooth, pinkish planks of the cedar floors and walls, the sand-colored beams, the exquisite neatness of the little house, I thought that, yes, this perhaps would be a good place for me, for a while anyway (now I'm amused as I look back at myself as a character in my own story, not knowing the obvious future—that this would be as much of a home as I'd ever have). The wind had risen and the cottage rocked very slightly, the beams and planks creaked, as though we'd cast off to sea in a seaworthy little boat. The breeze held an odor from the front garden so insistent, so lovely, that it was as if a beautiful woman had entered the room, someone you couldn't stop looking at.

"The garden's mostly herbs," Ira said. "Not very practical. Oh, and there are some lemon trees."

A lemon tree blossomed by the window in the next room, where the following day I began to write.

Years have since passed in that room. I found out that the lemon tree blossoms incessantly, like a tree in a children's story, while the features of the room itself—the little table on which I write, a cabinet, a chair, a brazier for the winter—their properties as tangible objects

dwindle, also like a children's story, as though they were enchanted objects possessed by a sorceror-queen.

When I am in that small room by the lemon tree, everything in life, every ordinary reality, drains down the gulf that the chronicle makes. The chronicle swallows everything around it, not least of all me.

* * *

Although I had nothing to do with the court, I wasn't a recluse. I simply returned to my natural ambit, streets and souks and caravansaries and inns. People knew who I was, but motivated perhaps by sympathy for someone once favored at court, no one ever asked me about the palace, what the king was really like or if the sexual gossip was really true. Eventually I understood that they felt, as I did myself, that my time there had been a minor misfortune better left to obscurity. After all, who wanted to be intimate with kings? Kings were well-known grief-sponges, if not for themselves, certainly for those associated with them.

And I also travelled – throughout Judea and Israel, of course, and down into the Sinai, and farther still, to Memphis and the cities of the Nile. Travelling suited me. I discovered I had the authentic traveller's basic prerequisites: I wasn't attached to minor comforts, not particularly attached to my homeland's cuisine, language, or entertainments, and I could survive nearly anywhere with a small packet of clothes and a few shekels. On the positive side, I was hungry to know the ordinary lives of non-Jews. The dreamlike bulk of Karnak or the startling cultural festivals of the Achaeans interested me only slightly: I was so far from being a tourist that when I ran into another Jew in some farflung seedy inn, I found him more astonishing than the most local local custom.

I liked the cities best. I felt safest, most sheltered, when I was on city streets, where I could smell the different odors of stonework, the way a farmboy can tell one sheep's droppings from another's. A town's mews, and tiny blind streets, and the niches scooped in the town walls were to me like the tucks and curves of a mother's body where a child comes to be folded in, insensately to rest.

Yet I learned the most, I suppose, from the desert, since gradually the only knowledge valuable to me was what I could use in the chronicle. And the chronicle's chief background was of course always the desert. There were scenes, of course – like Joseph's or Moise's – in urban settings, to say nothing of the opening act in a tropical garden. But the desert was so intrinsic to my story that it was in fact a protagonist, with all of a well-crafted hero's moral contradictions.

And each time as I watched the hills of Judea subside into nearly pure space, and as a few days later we entered the landscape of Gaza and Sinai, I thought of Dav's exile here where the single and unavoidable feature was the hot, skylike waste itself. While we were there, no limit of time seem to attach itself to us: Months might have passed, or hours. Only at sunrise and sunset did color enter back into the world, even though only in the hues you might see flaring from mineral glazes in the pottery-makers' kilns. There was nothing pliant in these hard indigo and mustard horizons, and the only softness came at night, with the intimacy of the constellations.

In the city, urban day and night were simply differently colored versions of each other: Jerusalem's noises were different at night, not always fewer, and there were always the familiar markers of the cityscape, lit by torchlight or moonlight.

But in the desert, two worlds succeeded each other distinctly – The baking vacancy when the sun seemed to have no set position but to radiate everywhere out of the ridges, and wadis, and flatlands, erasing the horizon; and the night, whose chill brought a sky filling and filling with lines, dots, volumes of light. The passage of light to dark in the desert was like an exercise in mathematics, with day an abstraction of imaginary numbers and night a fixed but insoluble problem in what the Achaeans and Sumerians called geometry.

I came to have the feeling that people have far out at sea – that you are entirely remote from the customary self-satisfactions of living among crowds of people, as delusive as these may be. Out there (amid the infinite and impassive sand or salt waves), nobody's going to come to your aid, your sway among men (if you've got any) is not only pointless but derisory, and all there is, perhaps, is God.

As an Israeli, it's important to have at least some tiny sense of the desert – to know what surrounds you, to understand your neighbors – but as a Jew, awareness of the desert is essential. God's not *only* in the desert, of course, but being in the desert is like a stern and hieratic acknowledgment that you take God in your course, that sooner or later you'll surrender to her will.

From my conversations in the souks and caravansaries, I knew that non-Jews, heathens – for whom Jahveh was fractured among countless djins and demons and godlets – lived in a steady state of fear, subdued and constant, like the loose sand that twitched over the hardpan even on the stillest days.

Sometimes when we stopped to rest at midday, and I lay with my head against a camel's belly under a bolt of linen stretched from the camel's saddle to stakes in the sand, floating and sleeping on the waves of heat, I considered the Woman of the Fountain. I didn't so much doubt her Godhead as wonder that she'd adopted that personification: For now I knew insofar God was visible, she was best envisioned as this immaculate, dry-fired desert overarched by immaculate, icy stars. Her instruction wasn't in stories or visions that tinkled like the fountain's spray.

But that only drove me more to tell stories about people who had wrung, or thought they'd wrung, some grudging advice or riddle or music from her. Moishe's rules, each word not so much cut from stone as dropped like irreducible pebbles in his mouth. Dav's psalms. Shelom's songs.

* * *

Shelom, Sheva's son. I was in Damascus trying to trace Av'ram's passage to Israel, when I learned that Dav had chosen him as his successor. I had to stop and think, 'Which one was Shelom?' Then I remembered this was the one Sheva had had after her first had died. Like a lot of other people at the time, I was bitter, in my case because Av'shalom should have been my king, as opposed to yet another in the faceless legion of Dav's male offspring.

But the rumors had been confusing. I was bemused by being no longer an insider but just another Jew who got her news through the insatiable story-producing apparatus of Israeli rumor.

One day after I'd returned to Jerusalem, I was in the marketplace, idly moving from stall to stall. I was looking through a pile of pomegranates, and I realized that an old woman nearby was staring at me. Glancing at her, I felt that odd shift you experience when your mind and your eyes are trying to collapse two pictures into one, like a drunk concentrating on bringing the path before him into focus. The woman I saw – gray-haired, gray-cloaked, gray-faced – had still the sharp, dark eyes of somebody I knew. Gay'l. Then she smiled, and she all at once was Dav's smart, watchful, erotic eldest wife. Neither of us was a gushing, fondling woman, but she reached out to me, and we stood that way, at arm's length, holding hands affectionately. She inspected me closely, and finally she said,

"I'm happy for you, Mina. You've grown into the woman I'd hoped you be."

I was a little startled she'd ever noticed me, surprised that she'd devoted enough thought to me to wonder how I'd turn out.

"I never thought you paid me any attention."

She continued to smile, but now as though what I'd said was a joke between us, as though in a minute I'd sober up.

"You were the only interesting one, dear."

I wanted to ask one of what. Of Dav's concubines? Of the younger generation? Surely not of everyone in the palace.

"I didn't have much personality," I said with smarmy, and specious, self-effacement. Feeling embarrassed, I tried to recoup. "I mean I was so young when you knew me . . . too young to . . ." I grew flustered and halted.

"Too young to have a personality? No, the possibilities were there. It was only a question of whether they'd be realized. I think they have been."

It is of course always pleasant to discuss yourself with an older woman who shares your own estimate of the depths and intricacies of your character, even if she's only being polite. I relaxed a little.

"What did you think I might become?"

"More and more curious, which isn't something women are encouraged to do."

"I've never thought about it. If that's what I am, I guess I didn't need encouragement."

"Yes, that's what I mean." She paused. "Everyone says you're a great traveller now."

Talking about myself, telling my own story, was unfamiliar to me, and I suddenly realized that this was something I very much wanted to do. I hadn't even thought of myself as that until now, as a "traveller." My sole self-definition was one I'd borrowed: I was a chronicler, and since I used that role to sum myself up to myself, I more or less unthinkingly said,

"Travelling is important . . . for the chronicle."

"Ah, the chronicle. So you're really writing it . . . the story of the Jews."

"I want to make sense of it. I don't seem to have any choice."

"Maybe that's what God has prepared for you."

At times, when I had imagined myself into the dialog between Jahveh and some bewildered human being, a Jew, who in some hour that would be like no other in his life brushed against some outer region of God—at those times, I suspected that, yes, perhaps God wanted me to write it all down. At other times, though, I anxiously wondered whether the chronicle wasn't an enormity, a unforgivable sin.

So I replied, honestly enough, "I hope so."

She took hold of my hand. "What you're doing is right, Mina, because you're doing it for us. Who knows? Perhaps there's something in it for everyone, for non-Jews. I don't happen to think we're so unique."

There didn't seem to anything more to say on this subject.

I realized then I hadn't asked about the person most central to both our lives. "How is Dav?"

"Dav's finally grown old, like the rest of us."

"Shelom will be his successor . . ."

She laughed. "That was another near thing. Let's hope your generation brings some stability to this country."

"Was it . . . Was it as it was with Av'shalom?"

"No, it was farce. Just another faction trying to foist off yet another contender, Adonijah, son of Hagg'it."

"I don't know who that is."

"You're not alone. It was the first anybody'd heard of them, except maybe Dav."

No one was willing to definitely rule out the possibility that Adonijah was Dav's son, maybe even his eldest son. Apparently, Gay'l said, he *had* known Hagg'it in his boyhood, he may have gotten her pregnant, and therefore this rather middle-aged "boy" could have been a claimant to the throne. It was hard to tell, largely because Dav himself refused to comment.

On official days when his presence was mandatory, Dav sat silent and shivering on his throne, while the factions supporting his more important wives bickered before him. The old soldiers, the mighty men, no longer attended him; besides, they too had aged, and their assortment of long-standing, improperly healed wounds killed them off one by one, or simply made them too infirm any longer to participate in public life, such as it was.

Being best in a position to remember the passion of which Dav had been capable, Sheva had proposed that a hot young concubine might reanimate him and improve his decision-making abilities enough to name his successor (specifically, Shelom). It was a sign of the absurdity into which we had fallen that this suggestion was taken seriously, and royal pimps roamed all over Israel and even farther afield looking for someone particularly delicious—boyish Egyptian sylphs, zaftig Philistines, sinuous, kinky Persians. At last they found Abishag, one of ours, from a remote farm on the northern border of Israel.

Abishag, Gay'l said, both looked as though she could read men's minds (and would eagerly go along with anything a man might think up), while at the same time she managed to look as though she didn't otherwise think much about anything at all, ever—a combination men found irresistible.

Night after night, she was sent in to the king, but with no result, at least insofar as quickening his political responses was concerned. Dav looked even chillier, more distant, less likely to make an official pronouncement about his successor.

And then one day something happened that no one had expected.

In an effort to warm him up, they had brought him out onto the roof of the palace: Perhaps it was in the same spot from which he'd ogled Sheva in the barely imaginable past. He could look down into the same streets, now however far more crowded than when Jerusalem had been the young capital of a green nation. His attendants said that he perked up a little. The people passing below seemed to interest him, his sharp sight being the one faculty not experiencing a decline.

Every day as the sunshine flooded his vantage point, Dav inspected his people. This had been going on for a while when one afternoon he leapt from his chair and rushed (with astonishing agility) to the edge of the roof. It looked as though he were going to throw himself over, but instead he leaned out into space intently scanning something in the street. For a moment he looked as he had as a young bandit, a predator. He turned around to say something to his entourage, but he had been so long speechless that he had first to wet his lips, and even then what he uttered was simply a croak. He swallowed, and then the word was clear.

"Joab," he said. The old general – the murderer, in Dav's eyes, of Av – walked oblivious in the street below.

In the days that followed, Dav astonished the Jews one last time. His hatred for Joab was the last bit of combustible matter in his burned-out life, and Sheva knew that she had mistaken only the means to ignite him but not his capacity to burn. She came to him and, as she had always done, offered to quench and kindle.

Dav listened to her as he had done when he still craved to be inside her. His gray face flushed, his dim eyes brightened as she exchanged Joab for Shelom.

"Bring me Natan," he said. And when Natan had come, Dav instructed him to take Shelom from Jerusalem to Gihon, and there to crown him king of the Jews.

And the day that Dav died, Shelom (it was said) himself assassinated Joab. In any case, it was Shelom who threw the old general's body from Jerusalem's ramparts to the pariah dogs below.

* * *

I'd nearly forgotten that my cottage had been Dav and Sheva's trysting place, but after Dav was gone, the two lovers seemed always on the verge of appearing. Not as ghosts exactly, but as though their memories were about to intrude on mine, specific and alien and gorgeous. I could smell the crushed lavender on her hot skin, and I glimpsed their young, royal limbs sweated and glittering inside the little walled garden. I saw the sun fill the garden until they swam beneath it like salt fishes in the Dead Sea.

I travelled farther than I'd ever travelled before, where few Jews had gone. I wanted to see how far the desert stretched, and I determined to journey southward until either the desert ran out or I did. So I went on and on, until I came to Saba, and the hot ocean, and there was no more desert to traverse.

I was saved in Saba by its queen. My youth had been given over to a king, who without wanting to, had eaten it up, and now I was to devote the rest of my life to a queen, by whom I would gladly be devoured.

Saba—empress of Arabia, Protector of the Sudan, princess of the Sixteen Nether Demes, Mother of the Sands. Her people adored her as we had once adored Dav, before we had grown disillusioned with him: But then, we're Jews, we're condemned to arousal, ecstasy, and the sadness of its aftermath. The Sabians are an older race, dwelling between their incandescent and borderless deserts and their even more limitless and sultry sea, with a dozen great ghost cities, set by wide ghostly wadis, bordered by petrified palms.

"A Jew!" she exclaimed, when I was brought before her Travellers from distant lands were interrogated at the gate and brought directly to the queen.

"A Jew from across the seas, or a Jew from the Land of the Jews?" I was a little woozy from being once again indoors, in artificial dimness, amid the ordinary clatter of human noise. And her voice was disconcertingly harmonic, so that her questions' pitch and rhythm made me think she was singing a line from a ballad her people sang about Jews, as a sort of complimentary or critical introduction. In any case, I had no idea who these Jews across the seas might be, so I said,

"A Jew from the Land of Jews, Your Highness."

She murmured, or purred, or possibly even began once again to sing. Later, once I'd gotten used to the interpolation of tones, of harmony and descant, among her words, everybody else's way of speaking was, literally, monotonous.

Best of all, this remarkable voice asked concise, intelligent questions. I couldn't help myself; I became for the first time in my life the interviewee. She wanted to know about Jews, and I was full of the chronicle, so mostly that's what I talked about, using her as a sounding board as I drafted various parts of the narrative. Saba proved to be an inspired editor.

"No, no," she'd object, say, to that part in the story of Yakov and Esav where Yakov tries to purchase the option on Esav's inheritance by offering him a golden ring. "What was that other version, where he offers him soup?"

"Pottage. They're lost in the wilderness and Esav is so hungry that Yakov offers to trade him pottage for the inheritance . . . but that's too farfetched. Who's going to trade an enormous ranch for oatmeal?"

"But that's the point, that's what makes it realistic. It's just the sort of thing people *might* do," she'd say excitedly.

Like most people who tell stories, Adonai impelled me down the path of my story, or possibly I told the story I told merely because I am who I am. I don't remember a time before there were stories or a time when a tale told was something I had any power to resist. I realized I couldn't help making them up. Then this final stage: Now I understand how stories may be used in the world—to explain a people to themselves, to unite them, to woo a lover.

Maybe I should have felt guilty when it dawned on me that my stories were making Saba love me (putting aside the vexed question of who it is she actually loves, the storyteller or the basic Yasmin, assuming there's a difference). You'd have thought that this knowledge would taint my love or my storytelling, but instead it made both bloom. Saying that the Jews'

stories of exile and ordeal, betrayal and allegiance, were proper themes for lovemaking seems laughable, but for Saba these (rather than kisses and trysts) were a kind of cosmic erotica.

My jealousy, when it came, was as jealousy usually is—of a piece with the love that generates it. I was jealous of other Jews in general and of Shelom in particular. For the more I told Saba about the Jews, the more she naturally wanted to see, touch, speak with them: alas, the storyteller's foreordained punishment, that the hearer of her story will eventually want to know (and I use this verb broadly) its heroes.

There is little more to say. She returned with me to Israel, where her arrival was greeted with a burst of lunatic exhilaration, finally amounting to a kind of Queen-of-Saba mania. Even the priests were besotted: a fringe group actually proposed that the Sabaeans were descended from a detachment of Egyptian Hebrews.

Her days are now filled with a diplomatic round of parties, levees, and vacuous meetings.

Saba will of course leave Shelom's court one day, although royal visitations (even unexpected ones) have a tendency to extend themselves through many seasons if the visitors make themselves popular and the hosts have something to gain. Saba is wildly popular, and Shelom, like every other Israeli, like me, is smitten with her. I have been readmitted to the palace in my old provisional, tolerated status of ambiguous observer. Politicians, who notice nothing irrelevant to power (which is to say they amount to a race of idiot savants), reckon that observers are little more than children, which reflects mortal ignorance of both children and observation of one's kind. Obviously, this suits me.

I am in my old room. The rooftops of Jerusalem are unchanged (except there are more of them), and the morning and evening light as it shifts on the walls is like some object from childhood, much handled, too familiar to evoke nostalgia. Outside my room is a gallery overlooking a large, open ceremonial courtyard, through which Saba processes several times a day. As she goes by, a mixture of scents billows up, like some sort of olfactory optical illusion, as though you couldn't trust your nose as it smelled this impossible olla of odors. I am delighted by the knowledge she knows I watch her. Sometimes she briefly raises her eyes upward to me, smiling to herself, but mostly she advances beautifully, a queen of an ancient people, unlike anything we've so far manufactured. I delight in the color of her skin, which like the cloud of scent is rare and unnameable—neither olive nor terra cotta nor even black (the usual hues), but the tint perhaps of gazelles or antelope, some inaccessible, fleet creature even hunters rarely see. I delight in her enormous, scarab-shaped eyes, braided ribbons of dark hair coiling around her face, down her back.

She is carrying Shelom's child, although she hasn't revealed this to him.

"When will you tell him?" I ask her as she moves idly about my room late at night, picking up my comb, inspecting a sheet of blank papyrus, fingering my old woolen cloak.

"Did Dav ever come here?" Like the consummate trader she is, Saba never answers a question without first prying from the questioner her own nugget of information.

"Not much. I've told you that. Mostly, we met in the royal bedroom." As with anyone who knows you well enough to understand which things are possible in your history and which are not, Saba knows that Dav and I were not lovers. In fact, it is as if my life history is

written in my eyes or in the lines of my hands, which she quizzes far more thoroughly than anything I might say. Sometimes this annoys me. I wish I posed more of a mystery to her, and I suppose this is why I'm jealous when she interrogates me about Dav, who puzzles her. Even Saba is in this way no different from rest of us.

"And you would sit there, a little girl and a king, and he would tell you stories about himself."

"I wasn't a little girl and they weren't stories. Not at least if you mean things he made up."

"Everything we say about ourselves is made up, even the truth."

"That sounds concocted, like something Shelom would say."

She laughed, which was always a little startling: Her laughter was hoarse, raspy, the one inelegant thing about her (and thus enormously endearing).

"He's a very sweet man. Just what your people need. Like a woman settling down and marrying a wise and gentle man after her first fling with a mad barbarian. It's time the Jews grew up."

"We're an ancient people, Saba. We date back to the Garden."

"Oh, your Garden, The once and future Paradise." She lay down beside me and yawned. "We didn't all come from the Garden, Yasmin."

"The Jews believe that all humankind began in the Garden," I said a little huffily, "with Adam and Heva, and we were cast forth for our sins." Despite my own ambivalence about the drama Jahveh had mapped out for us, I felt myself withdrawing into the stark core of my own Jewishness when outsiders dismissed it. I especially didn't like thinking of Saba as an outsider, but of course she was consummately that.

"If you sail a few days west from my kingdom," said Saba, "you come to Nubia and the Sudan, the Nether Demes, and land that stretches beyond those places. My people believe that humans first came out of a great forest somewhere in that infinite space, and they stepped onto an immense plain teeming with beasts and they fought to survive among them and were to a degree successful and in their restlessness then began to journey from the plain and fill the world."

"What about God?"

"Nothing about God. The gods didn't involve themselves. They evidently weren't interested until later."

Her people's vision of the Origin was simultaneously disquieting and seductive. It took place in vast and indifferent space, without solace or compunction, so far outside history that history itself became a diminished fiction, just another rationalization we made up under the cold desert night sky.

I wanted to be more like the Sabians. I wanted the equanimity Saba gained from facing this prospect of time without purpose, of any action holding within itself all possible consequences. In Saba's world, good acts might just as well have evil results, as evil acts might have good ones. But willing myself to believe what Saba believed was no use: in trying to, I discovered in myself a far denser antipathy to purposelessness than I could have ever imagined, and I was compelled finally and utterly to accept being a Jew, if that means that for us, for

humankind, there is a past and a time to come. From the past comes mystery and gathering unknowing, and from the the future comes sure fulfillment. Perhaps it might be otherwise for Adonai, or Her angels, or for Saba's manifold gods.

A wind swept off the Judean hills, over Jerusalem's roofs, and into my room, blowing out the candle. Saba turned on her side toward me, and I turned to her.

"I had a vision once of God," I said. Saba drew her finger softly along my cheek and chin, as though she were outlining my face for future reference. "That's probably one thing about me you *don't* know."

"I don't know a lot of things about you, Mina, and I probably understand even less."

"The vision was of time to come"

"So you can foretell the future?"

I lay back and gazed at the very new moon, thin and hard and bright, looking like a slit torn by a narrow knife in the dark blue sky. Saba took her hand away. I could feel her watching me, her sweetness and amusement and acceptance.

"God showed me that merely seeing the future doesn't do you much good. You can't possibly understand what you see." The moon shone steadily, as new moons do. "I often feel that way now about the past, too. You've seen it all right, but it's impossible to know what it meant."

We lay together for a while, until the moon rose beyond my window and out of sight.

I thought of another thing to say to Saba but she'd fallen asleep.

It was this: I am not the same person who dreamt of God— which isn't to say that my vision was false. It was true enough—I *have* tried to make sense of what I have seen, as God willed me to do.

And then I suddenly felt Dav's presence in the room. Who knows? Perhaps even in death he still had an interest in a beautiful woman showing up at his palace. Or maybe he wanted to chat with me one more time, to find out how I was getting along with the chronicle, whether it would culminate with his story, and Sol's and Jonathan's and Sheva's.

But it won't. What I've written here about him doesn't fit that austere history—for one thing, the rhythms won't allow it. The rhythms came before everything else, before I understood how to tell the stories of Adam and Noh and Moische and Yusef, and all the others, certainly well before the characters knew how to speak and act for themselves, without my help. It was as though in writing "In the beginning . . .," I released sustained reverberation, a call that always found its response, like parted lovers reunited, as if the chronicles ran like a mountain river between high walls, everything echoing—the rush of waters, the canyon wall facing down its opposite canyon wall, the meridian sun bouncing off the bright waters onto the hard rock overlooking them. Yet the story of the Jews, like the mountain cascade, flows straight on, resisting all deviation, the limits of its banks are clear and icy, and its destination is preordained.

My father was, as he usually was, right: He'd said that grasping your own time isn't easy. He'd said that maybe what we actually live through isn't even history. Someday Dav's life may be history, in that far, visionary time that is for Dav and me beyond history. I'm not certain of much, but I'm certain that the Jews will still be carrying out their heritage, even then. I know

Day

now beyond conviction and beyond experience, because of Day, that we do have a heritage,
brave and horrible and ecstatic.

And redeeming.
