

SAUL THE KING

by Issi Aaron

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To Jen
for the inspiration, laughter and love

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Map of Canaan
circa 1000 B.C.



PROLOGUE

There can be no turning back, thought Saul as he dug his heels into the horse's flanks. It lurched forward down the slope with Abner and Eliezer following close behind. On the opposite side of the Jezreel Valley, the campfires of the Philistines flickered like an immense swarm of fireflies in the deepening night. Saul shuddered at the thought of the impending battle.

Four days ago, word came from the northern tribes that a small Philistine force had entered the Jezreel Valley. Saul immediately gathered an army of five thousand and set out from his stronghold in the central highlands. They would be the hammer to the northern tribe's anvil and crush the enemy between them.

However, the plan turned to dust when scouts reported that the Philistine army numbered over fifteen thousand and had cut off the northern tribes.

Saul was faced with a dilemma. He could not abandon the northern tribes but he could not rely on a surprise assault or the felling of a Goliath to save the Israelites this time. David had turned traitor. This confirmed Doeg's words when David proudly held aloft the head of the Philistine giant at the battle of Elah.

"One day it could be your head in his hands," Saul's captain had warned.

Experience told Saul that the Philistines would wait until dawn to attack. He ordered his men to make camp on the hillside and prepare for battle. Night would provide a short respite but what Saul needed was a miracle.

In the past there had been Samuel. But the prophet who had anointed him was dead and the Oracle of Urim and Thumim had proven contradictory and confusing.

It seemed that throughout his life Saul had always looked to others for answers. Yet, even he could never have dreamed that one night he would be riding to consult the Witch of Ein-Dor.

On reaching the wooded fringes the three riders moved cautiously west towards Megiddo - the Canaanite fortress that guarded the entrance to the valley.

When it was clear that they had avoided any enemy patrols, they turned northwest and crossed the valley at a gallop.

By the time they arrived at the Spring of Dor, the full moon was high in the sky. Not far from the trickling water was a rocky outcrop and above that a cave. A woman stood at the entrance, silhouetted by a fire within. She listened keenly to the sound of approaching horses and shuddered. Riders in the night are not a good omen, thought Armana. Only trouble can come of this.

She spread out her arms and made a wailing sound. The horsemen halted. The air suddenly felt colder on their faces and the horses, catching the scent of the woman, reared nervously, forcing the riders to grip the reins tightly and dig in with their knees.

Armana looked down at the men and smirked with satisfaction. "Who are you? And what do you want?" she demanded.

Abner knew they had been made to look foolish. He gritted his teeth and shouted back. "We seek the Witch of Ein-Dor."

The woman let out a peal of laughter. "Then you'd best be on your way for there is no witch here."

"We have no time for lies, woman," replied Abner, drawing his sword.

Armana didn't flinch. "Neither have I. Who are you to question me?"

"We come in the king's name."

So they are not bandits, thought Armana but nonetheless she made the sign to avoid the evil eye. "There are many kings. Name him."

"We stand for Saul, King of the Israelites," declared Abner proudly.

"Then you are either fools or liars, for witchcraft and sorcery have been forbidden by him," said Armana and laughed recklessly.

We're wasting precious time on this madness, thought Abner. The only things that are going to stop the Philistines are brave hearts and weapons of iron.

Saul edged his horse forward. "We seek the knowledge of a spirit," he said, hoping the cloak was enough of a disguise.

The woman was adept at listening to voices. This one spoke truly. "Even though it goes against the King's own decree?" she said in disbelief.

"In times of peril, all paths may be walked," said Saul.

So, they have not come willingly, thought Armana. Whatever their need, I will have some assurance. She pointed a gnarled finger at Saul. "Kings make rash promises in the night that are quickly forgotten in the morning light. For the one who would do the king's bidding, what token of faith is there?"

Saul nodded to Abner, who drew out a gold armband and held it aloft. "This armband was taken from the King of the Ammonites."

"The king must be in dire need if he is willingly to part with such a treasure."

"That is not your concern, woman," snapped Abner. "Will you lead us to the witch or not?"

Although she no longer feared them, Armana could not shake off a feeling of uneasiness. Something is not right, she told herself, but the armband is tempting. Let them come into my abode. I have other means of protection. She gestured to the cave. "You will find the witch inside. But only two of you and without weapons may enter."

"So be it," said Saul.

They dismounted quickly and handed the reins and their swords to Eliezer, who despite the cold was quite relieved to guard the horses. Witches and sorcerers are not to be trusted, he told himself.

As they climbed up to the cave, Saul felt each step was like a turn of a wheel, which, after seven years, was about to come full circle.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

The sparse hills that surrounded the town of Ramah shimmered in the afternoon light as Saul and his servant, Amasa, continued the fateful search for his father's donkeys.

There are critical moments in our lives when we stand at the crossroads without knowing it. Saul was oblivious. Determination when stretched to the extreme crystallizes into a stubbornness that can no longer recognize itself. It had taken Amasa three days to persuade his master to seek out the Seer of Ramah.

On entering the town, they found it seemingly deserted.

"Where is everybody?" said Amasa, looking around bemused.

"I don't know," said Saul, with a shrug of his shoulders. This is a waste of time and Ahinoam's almost due. I should be there with her, he thought but knew that he did not have to the courage to refuse his father's orders.

A roar suddenly erupted from beyond the first row of mud brick houses.

"Now we know," grinned Amasa and headed off in the direction of the noise.

They found the marketplace abuzz with people, milling around a grey-bearded man who loomed above them on a raised altar.

Samuel the Prophet was over fifty. For the last twenty-five years, he had been the only intermediary between The Lord and His people. Without him and Judges like Moses and Joshua, the loosed confederacy of Israelite tribes would have either destroyed themselves or been overrun by the Philistines and Ammonites.

Two years earlier, he had conferred his duties as Judge over Israel upon his sons. Although wise, he succumbed to the folly of fatherhood that makes men blind to the true nature of their children. The sons, corrupted by an insatiable greed, besmirched their father's name. When the people lost faith in them, a cry

arose from the tribes, calling for a king. The Age of Judges had entered its twilight.

Samuel had tried desperately to dissuade the tribes by telling them how much worse off their lives would be with a king who would conscript their sons, take their land and make maidservants of their daughters. But human nature is covetous and perverse. The tribes had refused to listen. Even the people of his hometown had turned upon him.

“No more judges. No more judges. We want a king,” they now demanded.

Samuel glared down at the ill-tempered faces with eyes that smoldered with a fierce pride. He raised his staff to quell the crowd. “You clamor for a king but the Lord is your king. Do not abandon Him lest He forsake you.”

The people of Ramah were unmoved. “We want a king to rule us. Give us a king,” they chanted, drowning out his voice.

The afternoon sun beat down upon Samuel.

They will not heed you, a sibilant voice echoed in his head. You have failed.

But who will guide them? They are like sheep that are lost, thought Samuel.

The Lord is their shepherd. Leave them to Him.

Samuel fought against the hissing voice. He will surely punish them for their ingratitude. I can still make them understand.

And what of their ingratitude to you? Have you not sacrificed everything to be their rock against the Philistines and Ammonites?

That was the Lord's will. I am but His instrument.

Then why do you question the His will now? Is it because it no longer matches your own?

Samuel felt his chest contract and he struggled for breath. Oh Lord, how long can I deny them? What more can I do? he prayed silently.

For a brief moment all tension in his body subsided and he floated free like a leaf in a stream. Then to his shock, he heard himself say, “People of Ramah, be at peace. The Lord will hearken to your supplication and give you a king. Now go to your homes and wait on His will.”

Although his voice seemed as strong as ever, it lacked the inner conviction that had sustained him through all previous adversity. Samuel felt drained.

Although the people had been given the answer they had hoped for, they still had nothing to show for it. Their frustration needed an outlet. Saul and Amasa became the obvious targets.

"Who are these strangers?" someone cried.

"They must be spies," answered another.

Saul ignored the mindless voices and kept his eyes firmly on the old man. The rigid shoulders reminded him of his father who, as he aged, could not admit that his dreams were never going to be fulfilled.

"We're from the tribe of Benjamin," he called out. "But we're not spies. We seek the Seer of Ramah."

What can these Benjamites want from me? Samuel wondered. He was tempted to ignore them but could not abandon them to the unpredictable mob. As he stepped down from the altar, the crowd parted like the Red Sea before Moses.

The dust-laden clothes and sandals told him that the strangers had been traveling for some days. The tall one, who stood with his arms crossed and jaw thrust out, was clearly the superior. Master and servant, he thought.

"I am the seer. What do you want?" he said gruffly.

"I am Saul, son of Kish and this is my servant. We have been searching for my father's donkeys for the last three days."

So, it has come to this. You are to become a prophet for asses, the voice sneered.

"Perhaps you have been looking in the wrong place," said Samuel wryly.

"We need no seer to tell us that," Saul snapped back.

The crowd grunted its disapproval and surged forward. Disrespect from these strangers would not be tolerated.

Samuel raised his hands to calm the rabble but his thin smile masked a growing frustration. "If you're not prepared to listen to an answer, then why bother asking?"

Saul's pride was pricked. "You can choose to help us or not. Perhaps we're not rich enough."

"It's not money I desire, Saul son of Kish," said Samuel, clearly stung by the remark, "there are more pressing matters to occupy Samuel the Prophet."

Saul bit his tongue. Yet again, presumption had led him astray. He bowed his head to hide the redness in his cheeks. "Forgive us," he said quietly, "we did not know that the Seer of Ramah was the great prophet Samuel. We came in goodwill and shall trouble you no longer."

The apology was genuine and Samuel realized that his anger at the people had been misdirected at these strangers. Once again, words formed in his mouth of their own accord. "Come to my house in the morning. I shall have news for you."

He then strode off, leaving the crowd and the two strangers as bewildered as himself.

CHAPTER 2

King Hadad stood on the balcony of his palace and looked towards the distant line of snow-capped mountains that separated Phoenicia from Aram. Below the peaks lay a fertile plain, besieged from the east by an encroaching desert. Through this plain, the caravan routes converged like the spokes of a wheel towards their hub, Damesek - the flowering oasis of Aram.

"It is said that what cannot be found here in Damesek, is not to be found anywhere else," said the king, turning to his guest.

The young man nodded his agreement. His white linen turban bore the golden badge of a serpent eating its tail. It gave a semblance of authority to an innocent face.

Hadad gave him a searching look and then reminded himself not to be deceived by appearances. Nahash would never have sent a boy to face him. "And what brings you to Damesek, Prince Hanun?"

"I'm sure your spies have already informed you of my mission, sire."

"A man after my own heart," exclaimed Hadad, throwing his arms up in mock surrender. "So, tell me why should Aram seek an alliance with Ammon, hmmm?"

Hanun paused. His father had stressed that Hadad was not a man to bandy words with. "In one word, sire, trade."

"Trade can mean many things to many people."

"That is true, your majesty. But without trade, there is no future for either Aram or Ammon. Whoever governs the caravan routes controls the trade that flows along them."

Hadad yawned. "This is nothing new to me, Prince Hanun. Surely you didn't come here to tell me that Damesek is powerful because all the caravan routes meet here?"

“No, my lord. But Damesek's position is both a strength and a weakness.”

The King eyed him with a growing respect. “If you mean the Kings Way that follows the high plateau to the East of the Jordan River...”

“Yes, my lord. The Gilead highlands dominate the region. If Ammon controls them, there would be greater protection for Aram.”

“Especially if we were allies, I take it.”

“Of course, your majesty,” said Hanun and bowed his head.

The king opened the palms of his hands as if weighing up the proposal. “Then why shouldn't Aram take the Gilead herself?”

“Because the Mesopotamian cow is almost fat enough for the slaughter, sire.”

“You are mistaken, Prince Hanun. That is one cow far too large for even Aram to consume.”

“Perhaps now, but not for long. Besides, chasing a few Israelite tribes is not worthy of the next great empire,” said Hanun, hoping a little flattery would go far with an ambitious king.

“Even if what you say is true, I am yet to be convinced.”

Hanun brought his palms together in front of his face and drew a deep breath. Everything would depend on Hadad's love of money. “Ammon will pay a yearly tribute of three thousand shekels in silver for the right to occupy the Gilead in Aram's name.”

“For that amount I can use mercenaries,” scoffed Hadad. “But then you'll have to garrison it and that will triple the cost, your majesty.”

The old snake has tutored its offspring well, thought Hadad. It knows when to bite and when to keep still. But there's no need to tear off the skin when in due time will be shed naturally. “This talk of tribute is putting the chariot before the horse. You would first have to conquer the Gilead. Ammonite kings have tried before and failed.”

“The fortress of Mahanaim is the key to the Gilead. Others failed because they tried to take it with a frontal attack. We'll lay siege to it and let it rot from within. When it falls, the other cities will quickly surrender.”

The king looked pleased. "Then you'll have secured not only the Gilead but the whole east bank of the Jordan. And all for a paltry ten thousand shekels in gold."

"Your majesty overestimates the worth of the east bank. Besides, I could not face my father for any more than five thousand shekels in silver."

Your mother must've copulated with a Moabite horse trader, Hadad swore silently. "I must have misunderstood you Prince Hanun. You've come here to jest and make me laugh. You've succeeded. Now let's be serious. Nine thousand shekels in gold, paid in advance."

Hanun stood up sharply, his face a mirror of disappointment. "My lord. Even if you gave me all Canaan, I could not contemplate such an exorbitant amount, let alone in advance."

"Then Ammon will always remain a small and petty nation. Nothing risked makes no profit. It's a pity since your plan has merit and I like your spirit."

"My father may not share your opinion if I return empty-handed, your majesty."

"You embarrass me, Prince Hanun. How can I, as your host, let you depart in such a shabby manner? My final offer - six thousand shekels in gold to be paid one year from..." Hadad paused for the final gambit, "your marriage to my niece, the princess Laila."

A thrill went through Hanun. The price was a thousand shekels less than his father had predicted. The marriage was baksheesh - a bonus.

"The house of Ammon is unworthy of such a union," he said humbly in reply.

"Don't worry, Prince Hanun. I expect you will become worthy quite quickly. We'll seal the pact with some wine and drink to your wedding, three days hence."

"But, your majesty," protested Hanun, knowing his father wanted to commence the campaign as soon as possible, "that is hardly a fitting amount of time to prepare for such an important occasion."

"I'm sure your plans have been ready for quite some time. The wedding will serve to confirm that you have Aram's blessing." He raised a golden cup. "The bride will depart tomorrow. But you, I'm sure, will want to return to Rabbah immediately with the good news."

“Your words are my command, your majesty,” said Hanun, raising his cup.

As they drank, the way the king drained his cup in one gulp left Hanun with a feeling that somehow he had come off second-best.

CHAPTER 3

Shasho the Hittite led the caravan out of the southern desert. Good food, fresh water and the attentions of the dark-eyed beauties of Gaza, who were eager to please for a price, awaited him. Camels, horses and women, he chuckled to himself; each to be ridden in their own manner; each with its moods; and each best managed by soft words and a firm hand.

Ten days in the desert were enough for any man. If one survived the dry scorching heat and managed to avoid the soft sands that could swallow a camel and its rider before either had realized the danger, then there were the scorpions and snakes. But what Shasho feared most was the Simoom. The violent sandstorm could whirl out of the southern desert without warning and drive man and beast into a frenzy, leaving the caravan scattered among the dunes.

So far, the journey from Baluzza in the Nile delta had been uneventful. Nonetheless, Shasho remained uneasy and alert. The desert, like a woman, is never to be trusted, especially when so calm and beautiful, he reminded himself.

They kept to the trail behind the coastal dunes where the sand was firmer and could support the weight of the camels and their loads. From time to time, he would order one of the men to climb the dunes and confirm that the sea was still in sight. As long as they kept it on their left, they would be heading northwest towards their destination of Gaza - the green jewel of the Philistines.

The inhabitants of Gaza were one-eyed when it came to which city, out of the Great Five, was supreme. They had good reason. The first sight of Gaza as one came out of the sun-bleached desert was of a walled city, perched on a low hill and surrounded by lush green fields. Deep fresh water wells irrigated the rich red soil of the plain that produced an abundance of dates, vegetables and grains. A mile west of the city, was the port. Here ships from Mycenae and Phoenicia

were pulled up onto the shore to unload their cargoes of spices, iron ore, timber and slaves.

Gaza straddled two important caravan routes. The Sea Way followed the coast from Egypt before turning northeast to Damesek and then on to the kingdoms of Mesopotamia while the Incense route, which originated in India, crossed into Canaan from the deserts of Arabia.

'All roads lead to Gaza,' was a well-known boast among her merchants. Yet she had been conquered only once.

Two hundred years ago, when the Philistines invaded from the sea, they slaughtered the Canaanites with their weapons of iron, took their cities and created five city-states - Ashdod, Ekron, Ashkelon, Gaza and Gath. These became known as the Great Five with Gaza as their southern fortress.

As the dunes receded and the trail turned into a broad wadi, Anak rode up to Shasho. His wide grin displayed rotting teeth and blackened gums. "Nearly there," he shouted above the grunting of the camels that had scented water.

"There's still work to be done," replied Shasho. "When we arrive at the staging post, have the men water the camels and then unload the cargo."

Anak nodded and rode back through the caravan shouting out instructions to the camel drivers. In the desert, the camel had no equal. But now with the dunes behind them and water no longer a concern, donkeys would become the hardy backbone of the caravan, except for those who could afford a horse.

When the caravan was sighted, Yagu, the tax collector of Gaza, mounted his prize mare and rode out to the staging post. A train of donkeys, tended by his sons, was already in place. He smiled approvingly. The perfect time to assess the tax due was when a caravan was transferring its cargo to other pack animals. In his hands, the staging post now doubled as the tax station.

He wondered why nobody had thought of it before and then reminded himself that the best ideas are often overlooked because they're so simple. His wits and good fortune had enabled him retain the position of tax collector for the last five years.

As a rule, most tax collectors did not survive very long in the position. That's because Ginza, the conniving ruler of Gaza, knows how to fan a man's greed and turn it to his own advantage, Yagu told himself.

One bid for the post by offering to pay, in advance, an estimate of the tax to be collected for the year. It was a guessing game and many a trader had been ruined. That was the sting. The honey was the right to tax everything according to a rate set by Ginza that entered Gaza or passed along the caravan routes.

Success naturally depended on the flow of trade and the favor of the gods. Yagu had been fortunate. Despite the potential disasters of war, disease and flood he had become one of the richest men in the city. Money, however, had not clouded his memory and each day he blessed his father for the staging post that he had inherited along with twenty donkeys and ten camels.

His thoughts were broken by shouts from his eldest son, Talan, whose donkey labored under him as he waved his arms about excitedly.

"Shasho's leading the caravan," he exclaimed.

Excellent, thought Yagu. The first caravan of spring is always a fat one. With Shasho in charge, the profit will be even greater. "Tell him that the rate of exchange is three donkeys for two camels. We'll inspect the cargo as soon as he arrives."

As the young man rode off, Yagu sighed. Talan was good at following orders but would never have the juice to survive as a trader.

CHAPTER 4

The crowd slowly dispersed leaving the marketplace almost empty. One of the few that remained was Yochanan, the bronze smith. He watched the two Benjamites with the eye of a man used to summing up the quality of people and metal. Like most in his trade, he regarded everyone as a source of information, of which they were often unaware. Knowing they had no lodging for the night, he humbly offered them a modest meal and the shelter of his simple abode.

During the meal, he quizzed them about their tribe. It was rare that one got to speak with anyone from Benjamin. The tribe was extremely insular and rarely ventured out of their tiny territory. He listened intently to their terse replies, waiting like a vulture for any morsel he could devour to his advantage.

In the end, he was left disappointed for Saul and his servant divulged very little about their tribe and did not respond in kind when he told them about his own tribe of Ephraim. Either they are very cunning or terribly simple, thought Yochanan. Their only concern seemed to be finding some lost donkeys.

After the meal, Amasa curled up in a corner and was soon asleep. As Saul and Yochanan sat quietly drinking wine, Saul unsheathed his sword.

Yochanan's jaw dropped. "Where did you get that?"

"It was my grandfather's. He took it from a Philistine at the battle of Aphek."

Saul was proud of the Philistine long sword but it would always be tainted by the memory of a defeat. That day, on the plain of Aphek, the giant Goliath killed the sons of Eli, the High Priest, and the Ark of the Lord fell into the hands of the uncircumcised. The Israelites were utterly routed. On hearing the terrible tidings, Eli fell down dead. It signaled the rise of Samuel the Prophet.

Yochanan held the sword in his open palms like a midwife with a newborn babe. A warrior delights in the blade but a craftsman will admire how the hammer and fire have tempered the metal into a work of art. "As long as the Philistines

keep iron making a secret, our bronze weapons will never be a match for this," he sighed.

"Then we'll just have to take more weapons from them," said Saul confidently.

So there is more to you than meets the eye, thought the smith. "Few have succeeded because the tribes have never been able to remain united long enough to rid us of the Philistine plague."

"Then what was all that shouting about in the marketplace, today?"

Yochanan ran his fingertip lightly along the flat of the blade and found no imperfections. Whoever made this knew his craft well, he thought with envy. "We're begging for someone to unite us but Samuel hasn't got the stuffing any longer. If only we had a Samson who'd bring the House of Dagon down once and for all. I'm no soldier but I know that iron is stronger than flesh."

"A weapon is only as effective as the man who wields it," countered Saul.

Yochanan chewed on the thought for a moment. "If that is so, then we'll only ever be as strong as the one who can unite us."

Saul wondered if there would ever be a king over Israel. "Perhaps you're right," he conceded as a way to end the discussion. He found the tactic useful when his father and uncle would rant about making Benjamin powerful and respected among the tribes.

Yochanan decided that what little information Saul might impart was not worth another cup of wine. He handed the sword back, said goodnight and bedded down in a corner of the room.

The night was silent. Saul took out the flint stone he always carried and started to hone the sword edge with slow rhythmical strokes. The repetitive movements calmed him and gave him respite from a complicated world.

CHAPTER 5

The moment Reena entered her daughter's room that evening, she realized that rumor had preceded her. Laila had dismissed the servants and was pacing the floor. She reeked of anger.

Reena knew it would be difficult to pacify her daughter when she was in such a state but she took a deep breath and did her best to smile.

On seeing her mother, the blood rose in Laila's face. "You needn't try to cover up for the King, I've already heard about his plans for me," she hissed.

"You should be happy that your uncle has chosen you for this honor," replied Reena in her sweetest voice.

Laila gave her mother a scathing look. "The Ammonites are barbarians and worship snakes."

"I'm sure the tales they tell are exaggerated. Besides, your sons will be kings of what one day will become a part of greater Aram."

"I don't care about the future or my uncle's dreams of grandeur," huffed the girl and crossed her arms.

"You have much to learn little one. You're almost a woman and there are certain sacrifices to be made."

"I won't leave Damesek."

"One day you'll have your own family and then all of this will seem so childish. Don't you want a husband?"

"I haven't even seen this prince of Ammon. So how can I know?" pouted Laila.

"Patience, child. Everything unfolds in good time. You'll meet Prince Hanun soon enough when the betrothal is formally announced."

A knock on Laila's door interrupted them.

"Enter," said Laila.

Arkan, the king's vizier, bowed to them. "I bring congratulations on your forthcoming wedding, Princess Laila."

Laila ignored the man who used to be her father's chief advisor. Arkan smiled to himself, remembering King Hadad's delight after the meeting with the upstart from Ammon.

"Six thousands shekels and Laila out of Damesek, forever," the king had gloated.

Arkan had reservations. "My lord, what about the Gilead?"

"The boy was right. There are much fatter lambs to roast than Canaan."

"But sire, how can we trust the Ammonites?"

"We don't have to. As my father used to say, an enemy that comes out into the open is far less dangerous than one that remains hidden. We'll keep an eye on this young prince of Ammon and the old serpent his father. Let them taste a few small victories and then they'll show us their underbellies."

A look of concern had passed over Arkan's face. "What if they don't pay, my lord?"

"Then I'll have every excuse to take back what was given with interest, except of course for Laila who will remain exiled in Ammon. I would've gladly paid them to take her off my hands. This way is even more profitable as I won't have to offer a dowry."

"Masterful, your majesty," Arkan had replied with unconcealed admiration.

"Now for the final cut, I want you to deliver it in my name and make sure there are no knives around," the king had chuckled before whispering his instructions.

Not wishing the princess and her mother to notice his smirk, Arkan bowed again. When he rose, his face was a mask of inscrutability.

"Princess Laila. Due to an unforeseen necessity, Prince Hanun has returned home. However, knowing how impatient you must be to join your betrothed, the king has ordered that you leave for Rabbah, tomorrow. Your wedding will take place there in three days."

"What? By all the gods, this is intolerable," exclaimed Laila.

“Calm yourself, Laila,” said Reena, stroking her daughter's shoulder. The girl recoiled at the touch.

“I will not be calm and I will not be bartered around like a sack of barley. Where's the king?” she demanded, glaring at Arkan.

The vizier remained unmoved. The King's right, he thought. The sooner this firebrand's gone the better. “His majesty is in the throne room and cannot be disturbed,” he replied, relishing Laila's loss of control.

“That's why he sends a cur like you to bear his messages. Well, we'll see if he can be disturbed or not,” said Laila and rushed out of the room.

Arkan bowed to the former queen and slowly turned on his heel.

By the time Laila stormed into the throne room unannounced, her heart was thumping. “You can tell that pig from Ammon that I would rather marry one of the beggars at the city gates than become his wife,” she shouted recklessly.

The advisors discretely backed away as she strode towards the throne. King Hadad looked up for a moment and then continued to peruse the clay tablet in his hand.

Laila stopped at the foot of the throne steps and glared up at her uncle. “Well, what have you got to say?” she challenged.

Hadad's mouth suddenly contorted and his wolfish nose twitched as if scenting a kill. He stood up and threw the tablet to the ground. When it shattered into a hundred pieces at Laila's feet, she realized that she had overstepped the mark. However, she was determined that no man, not even her uncle, would force her to submit to anything against her will. She held her breath as the king rose to his full height and his shadow fell upon her.

“So this is how you show respect to your uncle and your king?” his voice boomed in the hall. “Would you have all my subjects question my authority thus? Never. You shall go to Ammon tomorrow and marry Prince Hanun or be sent naked to serve the lepers. Now take her away and confine her to her room,” he ordered and turned his back on her.

Laila tried to utter a reply but her voice deserted her and the incoherent sounds only added to her humiliation. Her mother entered the room and was

immediately confronted with a look of such betrayal from her daughter that she turned and ran sobbing from the hall.

Four guards marched Laila to her room where she slammed the door in their faces and threw herself on the bed, sobbing uncontrollably. Torn by conflicting emotions, she cried until fatigue finally overwhelmed her and she tumbled into a dreamless sleep.