

THE HOUSE OF DAVID

by

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

David	King of Israel
Bathsheba	Wife of Uriah the Hittite; wife of David
Joab	General of David's army
Hushai	Advisor to David
Nathan	Prophet
Meribaal	Son of Jonathan, the son of the former king, Saul
Amnon	Firstborn son of David and Ahinoam
Ahinoam	Wife of David
Absalom	Son of David and Maccah
Tamar	Daughter of David and Maccah; Absalom's twin sister
Maccah	Wife of David
Adonaijah	Son of David and Haggit
Yedidya	Son of David and Bathsheba
Yasmina	Daughter of Hanun, King of the Ammonites; Absalom's wife
Uriah	Lieutenant in David's army; a Hittite; blind in right eye
Yehiel	Lieutenant in Absalom's army
Itai	Lieutenant in David's army
Zadok	High Priest of Israel
Ahimaaz	Son of Zadok
Abiathar	High Priest of Israel
Farak	Soldier; a Phoenician
Simeon	Soldier; a Judean

Adrianos	Soldier, a Greek
Michael	Beggar
Raziel	Beggar
Eliyahu	Beggar; one-armed cripple
Yitzhak	Petitioner
Nabat	Petitioner
Shimshon	Servant to Absalom
Servants	

ACT I

SCENE 1

INT. INSIDE THE BARRACKS IN JERUSALEM.
TWO SOLDIERS ARE PLAYING AT DICE.

FARAK: By Ashtar, give me a six.

SIMEON: Four! Ha. Even luck flees from you, Farak.

FARAK: You blood-sucking Judean bastard. I swear, you've cast the evil eye upon me.

SIMEON: Never, my friend. It's just that the dice are more fickle and faithless than a woman, who while lying in your arms thinks only of how to better her fortune with another. Yet, if you must, keep faith with your Phoenician goddess. One day she may bend her ear towards you.

FARAK: You mock and disdain Ashtar at your peril, Simeon. Be warned, she's proud, jealous and most vengeful.

SIMEON: What else but a woman?

FARAK: Scoff all you like but the god you worship is no less vengeful. Besides, he doesn't even have a name.

SIMEON: Oh yes he does.

FARAK: Speak it then.

SIMEON: We're forbidden to utter it.

FARAK: How convenient.

SIMEON:: It's true. It's a grave sin to take His name in vain and so we're only permitted to use his title - the Lord and King of the World.

FARAK: Ha! That's a sovereign argument. But, if you can't call upon him by name or swear by him, how do you earn his favour?

SIMEON: With burnt offerings and by keeping his commandments.

FARAK: Commandments? Like what?

SIMEON: We're not allowed to steal.

FARAK: That's a waste, Simeon.

SIMEON: ...or commit adultery.

FARAK: An even fleshlier waste. Seems to me this god of yours knows nothing about the pleasures of living. How many of these godly laws are there?

SIMEON: Six hundred and thirteen.

FARAK: No wonder your race oozes oppression. You'd be better off praying to another god.

SIMEON: We're forbidden to do that, too.

FARAK: This is madness, my friend. Everyone knows, just as night follows day that each god and goddess has their own domain.

SIMEON: (SHAKES THE DICE) Enough, I'll argue no more. Let me at least enjoy the pleasures of gambling.

FARAK: I'm surprised you're allowed to dice at all.

SIMEON: (GROANS) A two!

FARAK: See! Even the dice speak out against your foolishness. May Ashtar be kind to me. Arrgh. I don't believe it. A one! It cannot be.

SIMEON: Hah! I'll continue to believe in the one god, while you, my friend, best stick to drinking.

ADRIANOS RACES IN EXCITEDLY.

ADRIANOS: Have you heard?

FARAK: Adrianos, you Greek whoremonger. Until you speak the words, how can we possibly know what's in that feeble mind of yours?

ADRIANOS: The emissaries sent to Ammon have returned.

SIMEON: What of it?

ADRIANOS: Half their beards have been shaved off and their right hands cut off at the wrist, like common thieves.

SIMEON: La!

FARAK: I swear by Baal, those Ammonites are cruel barbarians.

ADRIANOS: The king was so infuriated, he immediately gave orders to mobilise. We go to war.

FARAK: War, you say? May the gods bless you Adrianos. This is the best news possible. Those Ammonites have no stomach for fighting. We'll crack some heads and loot to boot instead of rotting here in these barren barracks. Ashtar be praised, I feel it in my bones that my luck is about to change. Come on, this calls for a drink.

ALL EXIT

ACT I SCENE 2

INT. THE KING'S PALACE IN JERUSALEM.
DAY. KING DAVID CONFERS WITH HIS
ADVISORS AND CAPTAINS.

JOAB: My lord, Rabbah is an imposing fortress. The walls are much higher than our beloved Jerusalem. I fear a frontal attack will never succeed.

DAVID: Then besiege it.

JOAB: A good plan except for the spring that runs through the city. The enemy will have an endless supply of fresh water and with it, hope.

DAVID: I don't care how long it takes. King Hanun cannot be allowed to get away with such an insult. I offer him peace and his reply is that

all Israelites shall be treated as liars and thieves until the Armband of Seth is returned. I've never even heard of this armband. What do you know, Hushai?

HUSHAI: It's said to be an ancient heirloom of Ammonite kings, sire. When King Saul defeated Hanun's father at Jabesh Gilead, Hanun was barely thirteen. But he had the courage to ride into the Israelite camp to claim his father's body.

DAVID: Foolish but brave.

HUSHAI: I agree, sire, but Saul was impressed and agreed to hand over the body on condition that Hanun swear to keep the peace for as long as Saul was king. After Hanun had sworn, Saul gave up the body but kept the dead king's armour, weapons and the Armband of Seth as the spoils of victory.

DAVID: So that's what's biting Hanun.

HUSHAI: Yes. Naturally, he would've been furious and felt cheated. But because he had already sworn, he could do nothing about it.

DAVID: What happened to the armband?

HUSHAI: Nobody knows. It was never seen or heard of again.

DAVID: It doesn't matter. After what Hanun has just done, I wouldn't give it up even if I did have it.

JOAB: Sire, why go to war over an armband?

DAVID: When I became King, Joab, I needed to show the tribes that I was more than a Judean. That's why I took Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it my capital. Then to unite the people in their worship, I brought the Ark of the Lord, here.

HUSHAI: Very wise, your Majesty.

DAVID: It's more than that Hushai. One day, I intend build a temple to the Lord. But for now, the

tribes are watching me, waiting for any sign of weakness. That's why the Ammonites must be punished and quickly. I'm putting you in charge of the campaign, Joab. Take Rabbah and bring me Hanun's head.

JOAB: Then Rabbah shall be yours, my lord. That I promise you.

JOAB EXITS

HUSHAI: My lord, Meribaal the son of Jonathan the son of Saul awaits an audience as do your children.

DAVID: Then send them in.

AMNON, ABSALOM, TAMAR, ADONAIJAH ENTER
FOLLOWED BY MERIBAAL WHO WALKS WITH A
LIMP.

DAVID: Welcome to Jerusalem and may peace be upon thee, Meribaal. You bear such resemblance to your father. It is as if his spirit had returned.

MERIBAAL: My lord, you are most kind. I bring greetings from my grandfather, Yehoshua ben Abinadab and the northern tribes.

DAVID: And how fares your grandfather?

MERIBAAL: Getting older and more frail, sire.

DAVID: Yet, he still has the strength to rule the North with an iron fist.

MERIBAAL: Even iron must bend to smith's hammer, sire. And so, he has sent me to your court as a token of the renewed trust between the north and the south.

DAVID: May all the tribes follow his example. But come now, how fares your leg after such a long journey?

MERIBAAL: (ASIDE) To be judged by appearances is a curse more burdensome than a club foot. (SMILES WEAKLY) Passingly, my lord. One learns to bear the pain and discomfort...(ASIDE) of being

usurped.

DAVID: Spoken like a true man and a prince.

MERIBAAL: I am unworthy of such praise, your Majesty, especially in such poor rags.

DAVID: Fear not, dear Meribaal. All honours and wealth that were your father's shall be restored you. His untimely death at the hands of the Philistines shall not rob you of your just due.

MERIBAAL: (ASIDE) Unlike you who keeps me from the crown. (BOW HIS HEAD) Your majesty is far too generous.

DAVID: Come now, call me uncle. For as your father was like a brother to me so you shall be as a beloved nephew and eat at my table and share in all I have.

MERIBAAL: As you wish, Uncle.

DAVID: Good. Then come and greet your cousins. This is my eldest - Amnon

AMNON: Welcome cousin.

DAVID: And the twins - Absalom and Tamar.

ABSALOM NODS WHILE TAMAR EXCITEDLY
KISSES MERIBAAL ON THE CHEEK.

TAMAR: What a joy to have you here, Meribaal.

MERIBAAL: Thank you, sweet cousin.

DAVID: And finally but not least, Adonaijah.

ADONAIJAH: (CROSSING HIS ARMS) The line to the crown seems to be growing longer, cousin. May the Lord grant you a patient life.

TAMAR: Pay Adonaijah no heed, cousin.

ADONAIJAH: Beauty and foolishness are ever inseparable, dear sister.

ABSALOM AND AMNON CLENCH THEIR FISTS

AND GLARE AT ADONAIJAH WHO RAISES HIS
HANDS IN INNOCENCE.

ADONAIJAH: Peace, my brothers. Have you no humour or wit?
 ABSALOM: Not when it's at my sister's expense.
 AMNON: Apologise to Tamar before I make you.
 ADONAIJAH: You see, Meribaal, the most peaceful and loving
of families. Yes, yes, of course I'm sorry
dearest Tamar.
 TAMAR: (GIGGLING AT ADONAIJAH'S EMBARRASSMENT) I accept.
 DAVID: Now that's settled. I'll send a servant to show
you to your quarters, Meribaal. Tonight we shall
celebrate your arrival and the war with Ammon.
 MERIBAAL: You are too kind, Uncle.

ALL EXIT EXCEPT MERIBAAL

Words and deeds, like oil and water, mix not. If
only I could rid myself of the sludge of shame
that overwhelms me in the presence of the
usurper. David's words are warm and soft but I
shall not be so easily charmed, for his heart is
as black as onyx and just as cold.

I shall match his duplicity and never show my
true face to any man or woman. Only the sunniest
of smiles shall grace my face despite the
darkness of my thoughts.

Now having seen how David's sons bear their
father's pride, my course is clear: to feed
their lust, arrogance and ambition with
flattery.

Thus shall I, the last of line of the House of
Saul exact my revenge. Nothing shall be left to
fate or chance as day by day I make them dance.

MERIBAAL EXITS

ACT I

SCENE 3

INT. THE PALACE. NIGHT. DAVID TOSSES AND TURNS, MUMBLING IN HIS SLEEP.

DAVID: No! No!

DAVID AWAKENS AND SITS UP, LOOKING DISORIENTED.

DAVID: Such an ill-fated dream. The blood of four dead lion cubs stained the claws of a proud lion. The why and the wherefore I do not understand. Perhaps it is the full moon that brings such strange portents.

HE SIGHS AND THEN SLIDES OUT OF BED AND WALKS OVER TO THE WATER BASIN TO WASH HIS FACE AND NECK. MOONLIGHT IS STREAMING IN FROM THE BALCONY. A WOMAN'S VOICE IS HEARD IN THE DISTANCE SINGING IN HEBREW.

WOMAN'S VOICE: *Ooh wah, ooh wah, ooh wah lama u madua nad haetzev ba'olam? Ooh wah, ooh wah, ooh wah, lama u madua, ut'suvim shirai koolam.*

DAVID FOLLOWS THE SINGING OUT ONTO THE BALCONY. LOOKS OUT ACROSS THE CITY.

DAVID: How strange and dreamlike. That song...my mother used to sing me to sleep with it. Hushai.

HUSHAI ENTERS, THE SINGING STOPS.

HUSHAI: My lord?

DAVID: That singing..,

HUSHAI: What singing, my lord?

DAVID: A moment ago, I heard a woman's voice. When I looked out over the city, I saw her, on the rooftop over there, washing her hair.

HUSHAI: My lord, there is no-one on the rooftop.

DAVID: She was there. I saw her. Tall with long dark hair.

HUSHAI: Majesty. I see nothing but empty rooftops, the full moon and the stars.

DAVID: I swear I saw her, Hushai.

HUSHAI: Perhaps it was a trick of the moonlight or a dream, perhaps?

DAVID: No, Hushai, she was real. Whose house is that?

HUSHAI: It belongs to Uriah the Hittite. He's a lieutenant in your army and left yesterday for the war with the Ammonites.

DAVID: (ABSENT-MINDEDLY) Uriah...

HUSHAI: You know the man, my lord?

DAVID: Yes. But that was very long ago. The woman on the rooftop must be his wife or daughter. Send for her.

HUSHAI: At this hour lord? It's almost midnight.

DAVID: I must speak with her and get to the bottom of this mystery immediately.

HUSHAI: But, my lord.

DAVID: Just do as I say, Hushai.

HUSHAI: Of course, your majesty.

HUSHAI EXITS. DAVID STARTS TO PACE UP AND DOWN THE ROOM ARGUING WITH HIMSELF.

DAVID: You're being a fool. You must have been dreaming or as Hushai says, it's merely a trick of the moonlight. Then why this pounding in my heart? And the song? (PAUSES) It reminds me of her. But my mother's been dead for many years.

STANDS BY THE BALCONY DEEP IN THOUGHT UNTIL HUSHAI ENTERS.

HUSHAI: The woman is here, your majesty.

DAVID: Send her in and leave us.

HUSHAI: Yes, my lord.

BATSHEBA ENTERS AND CURTSIES POLITELY.

DAVID: What is your name?

BATSHEBA: Batsheba, your majesty.

DAVID: I saw you on the rooftop of your house tonight, you were singing.

BATSHEBA: I have been indoors all evening, your majesty.

DAVID: But I saw you just now...washing your hair.

BATSHEBA: My hair is dry. My lord must have mistaken me for another.

DAVID: No. It was you. The moment you walked in, I knew it was you.

BATSHEBA: How could you, my lord?

DAVID: The pounding in my heart.

BATSHEBA: Your majesty is joking with me.

DAVID: (TAKES HER HAND AND PLACES IT UPON HIS HEART AND HOLDS IT THERE) Can't you feel it?

BATSHEBA: (BLUSHES) My lord.

DAVID: Do you feel what I'm feeling?

BATSHEBA: I don't understand, my lord.

DAVID: My heart is racing because of you.

BATSHEBA: No, no, your majesty. It can't be.

DAVID: It's true. I don't understand it myself. But I cannot deny what I'm feeling. You must feel it, too, you must.

BATSHEBA: What I feel or don't feel doesn't matter. I'm a

married woman. Uriah the Hittite is my husband.

DAVID: Then why do you lower your eyes like that? You do feel it. How strange, I don't know what's come over me. Although we've just met, it's as if I've known you all my life.

BATSHEBA SHAKES HER HEAD AND TRIES TO TAKE HER HAND AWAY. DAVID STOPS HER.

BATSHEBA: No, my lord, please I beg you.

DAVID: You have nothing to fear. All you have to do is tell me you don't feel the same and you'll be free to go.

BATSHEBA: I cannot lie to you.

DAVID KISSES HER EYES LIGHTLY.

BATSHEBA: Your majesty, Please don't...You mustn't...

DAVID KISSES HER LIPS LIGHTLY.

DAVID: I can't help myself. You aren't an enchantress are you?

BATSHEBA SINKS TO THE FLOOR AND BEGINS TO CRY.

I didn't mean to insult you, Batsheba. I just had an irresistible urge to kiss you. Please don't cry.

BATSHEBA: I can't help it. It hurts too much. How could you know that I have loved you from the moment you rode up to my father's house ten years ago to ask for my hand.

DAVID: Your father was Ahitophel, chief advisor to King Saul?

BATSHEBA: Yes. But instead of marrying me, you gave me to Uriah as a reward for helping you slay Goliath.

DAVID: I never saw you. If I had, I could never have done such a thing.

BATSHEBA: You had no choice because of the oath you made to Uriah. That's why I agreed to marry him, so that you would not be foresworn.

DAVID: You did that for me? I had no idea.

BATSHEBA: How could you? How could you know that you have been the only man I have ever loved. Sometimes I wished it were not so. But then I would tell myself that one day we would meet and all would be set aright. I did not think that it would take ten long, loveless and barren years.

DAVID: Your love shames me.

LIFTS HER UP, CARRIES HER TO THE BED.

BATSHEBA: No. Please. Stop.

DAVID: But why? I love you and you love me.

BATSHEBA: I will not play the harlot to your passion.

DAVID: You think so ill of me?

BATSHEBA: No, I didn't mean like that. But in the morning you will be the king and I shall remain a married woman.

DAVID: And if you were not married?

BATSHEBA: I would be free to follow my heart.

DAVID: Then I shall have Uriah divorce you.

BATSHEBA: Do not toy with me. I could not bear it.

DAVID: I do mean it. Once you're divorced, I shall marry you. I promise.

BATSHEBA: I don't believe you.

DAVID: How can I convince you?

BATSHEBA: As one oath took me away from you, then make

another to bring me back.

DAVID: So be it. On the lives and heads of my children, I, David, King of Israel, promise that once you are a free I shall marry thee.

BATSHEBA: And I promise to marry thee, my love.

THEY KISS AND FALL TOGETHER IN A
PASSIONATE EMBRACE.

[FADE OUT]

ACT I SCENE 4

EXT. COURTYARD OF DAVID'S PALACE - DAY

ABSALOM AND TAMAR STROLL ARM IN ARM
WHILE AMNON, HIDDEN BEHIND ONE OF THE
PILLARS EAVESDROPS ON THEM. UNSEEN BY
ALL OF THEM, MERIBAAL, OBSERVES
EVERYTHING, SMILING TO HIMSELF.

TAMAR: It's true, Shooli.

ABSALOM: I'm not in the mood for teasing, Tamar.

TAMAR: Don't be so grumpy? You should be pleased that Father loves you best of all.

ABSALOM: I always thought he loved you the most.

TAMAR: When we were younger, perhaps. But now that you and our brothers have grown up, he has little time for me.

ABSALOM: Perhaps it's because you're not a little girl any more.

TAMAR: Don't change the subject. We were talking about you. Don't you see the way Father's eyes light up when he looks at you?

ABSALOM: No. And anyway, if he's so proud of me, then why doesn't he say so?

TAMAR: I don't know, why. Maybe because he doesn't want to make the others angry? Joseph's brothers were so jealous of him that they sold him into slavery.

ABSALOM: I'm not a Joseph. And anyway I can look after myself.

TAMAR: I know you can. But, I don't trust Adonaijah - he thinks he's better than everyone else. And Amnon has beady eyes. The way he looks at me makes me shudder.

AMNON: (BITES HIS FIST)

ABSALOM: You worry too much. Amnon's a harmless fool and Adonaijah's only good for bullying servants. None of them have any real courage.

TAMAR: I hope you're right.

ABSALOM: When have you known me to be wrong?

TAMAR AND ABSALOM EXIT. AMNON STEPS OUT FROM BEHIND A COLUMN.

AMNON: I can't believe it. All I wanted was that she should love me.

MERIBAAL COUGHS AND STEPS OUT FROM BEHIND A COLUMM.

AMNON: What are you doing here, cousin?

MERIBAAL: The same as you, dear cousin. Keeping an eye out on those conniving twins. They're not to be trusted, you know. She's too beautiful and he's far too ambitious. If you don't watch out, she'll steal your heart and he your crown.

AMNON: I'm afraid, she's already done that. If only there was some way to have her.

MERIBAAL: Have you forgotten you're the king's firstborn and heir to the throne. One day they're both going to have to bend to your will.

AMNON: If only that day were now. We both know that my

father's not going to give up the throne anytime soon. He intends to rule for a long time. By then, it will be too late.

MERIBAAL: Hmm...I see.

AMNON: And so I skulk after her like an unwanted dog. I feel so ashamed. But I can't help myself.(GRABS MERIBAAL BY THE SHOULDERS) Promise me you won't tell anyone about this.

MERIBAAL: Don't worry, dearest cousin. Your secret is safe with me.

AMNON: Thank you Meribaal, you're a true friend and it does feel good to talk to someone and let out what's been eating away inside me.

MERIBAAL: If you let me, I'll do more than listen. Give me time to think on this...perhaps I can find a way to open the door to your heart's desire and break the spell that Tamar's cast over you.

AMNON: Do you really think she's bewitched me?

MERIBAAL: Look at how you're behaving - much worse than a love-sick servant boy.

AMNON: You're right. She must've bewitched me.

MERIBAAL: There is only one way to deal with a witch. If you do what I say, I promise that you'll be able to do whatever you want with our dear Tamar. And as for Absalom, he'll keep until you're king. And then you'll requite him tenfold for his haughtiness.

AMNON: Do that for me and I will be eternally grateful.

MERIBAAL: Speak not of gratitude, cousin. I do this to protect the throne from traitorous usurpers. Now leave me, I have some thinking to do.

AMNON EXITS

Love, lust and hate how closely entwined are the three. And how in the twinkling they change their hue. I'll lead this donkey by the nose

until his lust is sated, then nothing shall remain of love but naked hatred.

MERIBAAL EXITS.

ACT I

SCENE 5

EXT. DAVID'S PALACE. DAYTIME.

DAVID AND HUSHAI ENTER.

HUSHAI: Welcome back my lord. Your majesty's presence has been missed this past moon and a half. How fares the war with the Ammonites?

DAVID: The siege takes its toll as much of us as the Ammonites. As each sally against them flounders, their spirits rise higher despite their slowly dwindling supplies of food. It's as if the walls were protected by some unholy magic.

HUSHAI: It is said that the snake-worshippers mixed the mortar for the foundations with the sacrificial blood of children.

DAVID: I am tempted to believe it. But speaking of children how fare mine?

HUSHAI: All in good health and spirit. Shall I send for them?

DAVID: Soon. In the meantime what news of Batsheba?

HUSHAI: As you commanded, I personally delivered the message that your majesty had been unexpectedly called to the siege.

DAVID: How did she take such news?

HUSHAI: With some surprise, I might say, which she quickly covered up. Yet every day since the full moon, she has come to enquire about the siege and news of you, always with what seemed a trace

of sadness in her eyes.

BATSHEBA APPEARS AND WAITS AT A
DISTANCE.

Yet your majesty may judge for himself see here
she comes.

DAVID: I wish to speak with her alone, Hushai.

HUSHAI: Of course, my lord.

HUSHAI EXITS

DAVID: Come closer, my darling and let me bathe my eyes
in your beauty. But what is this? How pale you
look.

BATSHEBA: I have missed you my lord and feared for your
safety.

DAVID: There's nothing to worry about, I am safe.
Besides a soothsayer once foretold that I will
die in my bed mostly of old age.

BATSHEBA: I pay no heed to such prophecies.

DAVID: Don't look so peeved? I only said it to calm
your fears.

BATSHEBA: There are other qualms that are not so easily
dismissed.

DAVID: Are you ill?

BATSHEBA: I'm afraid I am with child.

DAVID: What? How so?

BATSHEBA: Two moons have passed since my last courses.

DAVID: I thought you were barren?

BATSHEBA: As I believed and so it seemed with my husband.
If Uriah should discover my state he'll surely
accuse me of adultery. I'll be stoned to death.

DAVID: Come now, my love. You place the chariot before

the horse. As a woman gets older, it's not unusual that her courses may easily be missed.

BATSHEBA: I have never missed one before in my life and then there's the morning sickness.

DAVID: I see. (LOOKS TROUBLED AS HE PACES BACK AND FORTH)

BATSHEBA: What am I to do?

DAVID: Don't panic. I will find a way...wait a moment...I have it. Of course, how simple. I shall bring Uriah back from the siege, immediately and before anyone can guess your state. You will take him to your bed then any child can rightly be claimed his.

BATSHEBA: But it will be your son who one day might be king.

DAVID: The child can never be acknowledged and so will never sit on the throne. Besides, I have three elder sons in line before any bastard.

BATSHEBA: (TAKEN ABACK) I knew it was wrong to sleep with you that night. How could I have been so stupid?

DAVID: You're not to blame. Remember I swore to marry you and I still hope to. But right now the most important thing is to have Uriah in your bed. Do you agree?

BATSHEBA: (NODS HER HEAD)

DAVID: Then leave it to me.

BATSHEBA: I felt so sick at the thought that you might cast me aside.

DAVID: Never. I love you with an abiding love. So don't let such fears make you lose your head. Everything shall right itself, I promise you.

THEY EMBRACE. UNSEEN MERIBAAL APPROACHES AND SEES THEM. HE REMAINS IN THE SHADOWS.

MERIBAAL: (ASIDE) The king and Uriah's wife? An unholy tryst for me to twist and turn it back upon him.

DAVID: Who goes there?

MERIBAAL: (STEPPING OUT OF THE SHADOWS) It is I, Meribaal, Uncle, come to welcome you home.

DAVID: Ah. Meribaal. (ASIDE TO BATHSHEBA) Go to your house and remain there for the time being. I will send for you only after your husband has come and gone.

(ALoud) Your plea has touched my heart, dear lady. Return now to your home and assured I shall bring your husband back to comfort you.

BATHSHEBA: I thank you, your majesty, for your understanding and compassion.

BATHSHEBA EXITS.

DAVID: Meribaal. It seems you have become more of a man in my absence.

MERIBAAL: (ASIDE) In your absence indeed I would be king. (ALoud) All the better to serve you, Uncle.

DAVID: Thank you, Nephew. If only my sons showed such consideration and courtesy.

MERIBAAL: I believe that in their hearts they do. Yet is it not natural for them to vie with each other for your favour and the eventual crown?

DAVID: Your wisdom outstrips your years.

MERIBAAL: I speak only what is obvious to the eye.

DAVID: Obvious or not, you are most perceptive. However, I must attend to matters of the kingdom but I expect your presence at my table tonight. We shall talk more then.

MERIBAAL: As you command, Uncle.

DAVID: Until then, farewell.

MERIBAAL: May the Lord speed you...

DAVID EXITS

...to your doom.

Is it possible that Batsheba has been unfaithful with the king? No, he could not be so foolish. Though, when a man lusts after a woman, he thinks only of the rod between his legs and the fire between hers. And until that desire is quenched he is as mad as camel that has scented water. Yet, even if she has been unfaithful, there is no proof. They would have to be caught in the act. Hmmm...while lust is highly potent, jealousy and its twin - revenge outstrip it. I wonder, if Uriah were to find out, would he be so incensed as to kill the king? And in doing so, deprive me of my sport for all the king would lose would be his life. (PAUSES TO THINK)

No, this knowledge I shall keep to myself alone, and wait for a time more prone, to prick the conscience and the heart of the king, that he come to curse his birth as he suffers the loss of everything.

(EXIT MERIBAAL)

ACT I

SCENE 6

INT. DAVID'S CHAMBER - AFTERNOON

ENTER URIAH

DAVID: Uriah, you are most welcome. What news of the siege?

URIAH: Since your departure, my lord nothing has changed. The Ammonites continue to defend stoutly against all our attacks. There seems no way to breach the walls.

DAVID: What of the gates?

URIAH: As you have seen for yourself, sire, they are the most heavily defended point. Arrows and stones rain down upon anyone who comes within range. We've lost too many good men there.

DAVID: So the city seems impregnable?

URIAH: It would appear so. General Joab wants to starve them out but they show no signs of weakening. Autumn will soon be upon us. After that, who knows what Winter will bring in those mountains.

DAVID: Something must be done before then.

URIAH: I agree, my lord. But pardon my asking; you saw all this for yourself less than seven days ago. Any messenger could have reported this. Why did you send for me?

DAVID: You are right, Lieutenant. I did not recall you for just a report. You were always loyal to Saul and to his son, Jonathan, my closest friend.

URIAH: That was before you were king, sire.

DAVID: Have no fear, I do not hold that against you - loyalty is a most admirable trait. You also took my side at Mizpeh against Yehoshua and the northern tribes when I was finally chosen king.

URIAH: I spoke the truth, my lord, nothing more nothing less. Besides, I have no love for Yehoshua and the northern tribes.

DAVID: You are far too humble, Lieutenant. Nor have I forgotten all that you did for me against Goliath.

URIAH: That debt was discharged long ago, my lord. Because of you, I have a beautiful wife.

DAVID: Of course. nonetheless, If feel I have been remiss in my thanks. Joab believes that you are an exemplary officer. I believe that you deserve to be promoted to captain.

URIAH: I am honoured, sire. But why recall me from the battle? You could have sent a messenger.

DAVID: You deserve to hear it from my lips.

URIAH: Thank you, my lord.

DAVID: Now, as an additional reward, you may go to your home. I'm sure your wife will be both surprised and delighted to see you. Return in the morning and I shall orders for the general.

URIAH: But sire, I was planning to return to the battle immediately.

DAVID: What? And not even greet your wife and share your good news?

URIAH: My lord. I have men who look to me to set an example. How can I enjoy the luxury of my bed and my wife while they remain in the field?

DAVID: I think your sentiments admirable but is it not your duty as a husband to see your wife who must be missing you?

URIAH: Seeing Batsheba would only make it more difficult to leave, sire.

DAVID: You are a strange man, Captain.

URIAH: No, my lord. Just a man who knows his limitations.

DAVID: Then you shall stay at the palace tonight and leave with orders in the morning. And this evening you shall feast at my table.

URIAH: My lord, my men are surviving on meagre rations. How could I...

DAVID: You're a difficult man to please, Captain. Since you cannot accept my hospitality perhaps you

would feel better in doing me a service?
Servant!

SERVANT ENTERS.

DAVID: Summon Meribaal.

SERVANT: Yes, your majesty.

SERVANT EXITS.

DAVID: You may recall that Jonathan had a son?

URIAH: Yes.

DAVID: Meribaal is a young man now. And except for his club foot, the very likeness of his father. But like you, he often shuns the trappings and pleasures of court.

URIAH: I do not understand, sire.

DAVID: You are one of the few to survive the Battle of Gilboa and it's said you saw how Saul and Jonathan died.

URIAH: It is something I do prefer not to talk about, my lord.

DAVID: And yet, you cannot deny that a son deserves to know how his father died. You were a loyal servant to Jonathan. I'm sure Meribaal will want to know everything about the battle. You can understand that, can't you?

URIAH: Of course, sire.

DAVID: Good.

MERIBAAL AND SERVANT ENTER

DAVID: Ah, Meribaal.

MERIBAAL: How can I be of service, Uncle?

DAVID: I have a favour to ask of you.

MERIBAAL: Name it, sire, and it is yours.

DAVID: This is Captain Uriah - a man to whom I owe much. But more importantly, he served to your father faithfully.

MERIBAAL: My father? You knew my father?

URIAH: I came with him to Hazor just after you were born.

MERIBAAL: Then you know my mother and grandfather.

URIAH: Yes.

MERIBAAL: How strange that they have never mentioned you?

URIAH: Your grandfather and I did not part on the best of terms.

MERIBAAL: I see.

DAVID: The Captain doesn't care for the company of court and returns to battle in the morning. It would please me greatly if you would be his host, tonight.

MERIBAAL: Willingly. There is much I would like to ask you about my father.

URIAH: I shall do my best.

DAVID: (TO SERVANT) Take the Captain to the stables. Collect whatever gear he has and then show him to Meribaal's quarters.

SERVANT: Yes, your majesty.

DAVID: Your orders will be ready in the morning, Captain.

URIAH: Thank you, your majesty.

URIAH AND SERVANT EXIT.

DAVID: A word before you go, Nephew.

MERIBAAL: Yes, Uncle?

DAVID: The woman you saw me with the other day was Uriah's wife. She has been quite ill recently, pining for him. When I told her that he was on his way here to be promoted, she begged that I allow him to stay for a day or two. How could I refuse her such a simple request?

MERIBAAL: I see.

DAVID: Unfortunately, Uriah is a hardened soldier and refuses to indulge in the pleasures of hearth and home while his men are in the field.

MERIBAAL: An honourable man, indeed.

DAVID: He even declined to feast at my table. Yet I made a promise to his wife which I now need your help to fulfil.

MERIBAAL: What do you wish me to do, Uncle?

DAVID: I'm sure that you have much to ask Uriah about your father in general and about the Battle of Gilboa, in particular.

MERIBAAL: He was there?

DAVID: Yes, though no one knows how he managed to survive and reach Jabesh Gilead. Perhaps for your father's sake he will tell you. Wine often loosens a man's tongue. I want you to get him drunk and then at the end of the evening have some servants take him to his house. That way you find out what you want and I get to keep my word to his wife.

MERIBAAL: Watering two camels at the same well. I'll do as you wish.

DAVID: Thank you. I knew I could rely on you, Nephew.

[FADE OUT]

ACT I

SCENE 7

INT. DAVID'S PALACE. MORNING.

DAVID IS UPSET AND PACING THE ROOM AS
MERIBAAL LOOKS EMBARRASSED.

DAVID: You did as I asked?

MERIBAAL: Yes, Uncle. At first he didn't want to drink, but I asked him to at least toast my father's memory. He could not refuse and soon became lightheaded. After that, it was easy to get him drunk. He even fell asleep at the table. Then I ordered some servants to carry him to his house but on the way they stumbled and fell. He awoke and demanded to know where they were taking him. When they told him, he got very angry, drew his dagger and ordered them to take him to their quarters. They were too afraid to refuse. After that, he lay down on one of their beds and fell asleep but not before threatening to kill anyone who disturbed him again. I only learned about it this morning and came to you, immediately.

DAVID: I wonder what got into him?

MERIBAAL: Wine makes men do strange things.

DAVID: Are you sure he was drunk?

MERIBAAL: He seemed so. But if he wasn't, then why would he pretend? One thing is certain though, by the end of the day, everyone in the palace will begin to think that Uriah's far too overzealous or that something's not right between him and his wife.

DAVID: I wouldn't think so. After all, she almost begged me to send him home.

MERIBAAL: I don't know much about women, Uncle. But I've been told that what they say and what they mean are not the same thing. She might be pretending.

DAVID: That's ridiculous.

MERIBAAL: Not if she wants to cover up something she's done. Some women get lonely when their husbands are away.

DAVID: (GIVES MERIBAAL A SIDELONG LOOK) Impossible. Batsheba's not that sort of woman. You're making a flood out of a drop of water. Uriah's a dedicated soldier that's all. I don't want to hear any gossip about Uriah, is that understood? Now, I have Uriah's orders to write. I shall not forget your service, Nephew. Thank you.

MERIBAAL: Of course, Uncle.

MERIBAAL EXITS.

DAVID SITS DOWN AT HIS WRITING TABLE AND PONDERES OUT LOUD AS HE WRITES.

DAVID: Uriah, Uriah, if only you were less of soldier and more of a man. Then Batsheba might escape the accusation of adultery that would ensare us both. I must save her and in saving her, save myself and the kingdom. For if I were to confess my guilt, the clamour would rise up from the north that I am not fit to be king. Yehoshua and the northern tribes would then have the excuse they have been waiting for to rebel. That would cast the kingdom into the cauldron of a civil war and destroy all hope of peace and prosperity. All because of one overzealous soldier. This must never come to pass.

[FADE OUT]

ACT II

SCENE 1

EXT. THE GATES OF JERUSALEM - DAY -
TWO BEGGARS HOLD OUT THEIR BOWLS FOR
ALMS AS PEOPLE TRAVEL IN AND OUT THE
GATES.

RAZIEL: Alms, alms for the poor.

MICHAEL: For the sake of my starving wife and four children, spare a coin.

PEOPLE PASS BY, IGNORING THE BEGGARS.

RAZIEL: (WHISPERS)The pickings are getting slimmer, Michael. (OUTLOUD) Alms, alms for the unfortunate.

MICHAEL: You'd think that now that the war with Ammon is over, people would be more free with their money.

RAZIEL: Ha. The rich get richer by not spending their money, while the poor have none to spend. Here comes Eliyahu the Cripple to compound our misery.

ELIYAHU THE ONE-ARMED CRIPPLE ENTERS

ELIYAHU: Greetings brethren.

RAZIEL: Why so cheery? I hear your wife finally left you for a blind, deaf and dumb man. Apparently she said it was a decided improvement.

ELIYAHU: Always the joker, eh, Raziell? If only your ears were as sharp as your tongue, you might be considered a silly idiot instead of a babbling fool.

MICHAEL: Stop this nonsense both of you. If you've got something to say Eliyahu, spit it out.

ELIYAHU: As you wish. A son has been born to the king out of Batsheba.

MICHAEL: But the wedding was barely seven months ago.

ELIYAHU: A hasty marriage after the death of a husband makes tongues wag.

RAZIEL: Like your tail, you dog.

ELIYAHU: You're no better than me, Raziel. We're all cut from the same cloth. Born beggars and will die beggars.

RAZIEL: Then that's all we'll ever have in common. You've said your piece, so on your way, you're interfering with our livelihood.

ELIYAHU: Oh please forgive me. Since your trade is flourishing you obviously have no need to know that the newborn babe is gravely ill and the king has been offering sacrifices and distributing alms to the poor at the palace gates.

MICHAEL: You fornicating bastard. You came here to gloat, didn't you? Get out of here before I cut your other arm off.

ELIYAHU EXITS HURRIEDLY WITH A SMIRK

RAZIEL: I told you he was the son of a whore.

MICHAEL: Let's go. Perhaps it's not too late. There may be scraps to be found.

RAZIEL: No. The cripple would not have come here if that were so. He wants to see us dance like puppets on a string. I may be a beggar but I still have my pride. I'll remain here. Alms, alms for the poor.

[FADE OUT]

ACT II SCENE 2

INT. DAVID'S PALACE - DAY - THE KING'S CHAMBER

NATHAN THE PROPHET ENTERS

DAVID: Ah Nathan, thank you for coming. I need your help, my friend.

NATHAN: I'm at your service, my lord.

DAVID: Why so formal? We've known each other far too long.

NATHAN: Because, sire, I come not at your summons but in the name of the Lord.

DAVID: You mean in answer to my prayers and sacrifices?

NATHAN: No.

DAVID: Then for what?

NATHAN: To have you sit in judgement.

DAVID: Judgement? On whom?

NATHAN: On a rich man. You see, my lord. There were two men in Jerusalem. One rich, the other poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing, except for one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished. And it grew up together with him, and with his children. One day, there came a traveller to the rich man, who wanting to impress stranger asked him to feast with him. Now the rich man, instead of dressing a lamb from his own flock, took the poor man's lamb without compensating him for the loss. The poor the man was so bereft that soon after he died. (PAUSES) What is your judgement, great king?

DAVID: This rich man has shown no pity but only arrogance and greed. He is a thief who has stolen not only the poor man's lamb but his life. Such a man deserves to die.

NATHAN: Thou art the man. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul; And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah. Thou hast despised the commandment of the Lord and slain Uriah the Hittite by ordering Joab to place him in the vanguard at the gates of Rabbah, where he would surely die. Moreover thou has lain with his wife and taken her to be thy wife.

DAVID: I have sinned against the Lord and though I truly repent I am still guilty and deserve to die.

NATHAN: Spoken like a king. Yet, because you have acknowledged you sin and accepted you own judgement without making any excuse, the Lord shall forgive your sin and you shall not die.

DAVID: May the Lord in his mercy be praised.

NATHAN: However, because you have slain Uriah the Hittite with the sword of the Ammonites, the sword shall never depart from out your house. Moreover, because you have coveted your neighbour's wife, the Lord shall raise up evil against you out of your own house. And because you have committed adultery in the sight of the Lord, the child that is born of this sin shall surely die. This is the judgement of the Lord.

DAVID: (FALL TO HIS KNEES) Nathan. I beg you, let the sin fall on my head, I am the sinner, not the child. The child is innocent.

A WAIL OF ANGUISH IS HEARD

NATHAN: (PUTS HIS HAND ON DAVID'S HEAD) The sins of the father fall on the heads of the children. Now rise up, you have a child to bury and a wife to comfort.

DAVID: No. No.

[EXIT DAVID IN A RUSH FOLLOWED SLOWLY BY NATHAN]

ACT II SCENE 3

INT. BATSHEBA'S CHAMBER - DAY

BATSHEBA IS CRADLING THE DEAD INFANT IN HER ARMS WHILE THE MAIDSERVANTS WAIL. SHE LOOKS DISHEVELLED AND DISTRAUGHT. ONE BREAST IS UNCOVERED

AND SHE IS TRYING IN VAIN TO SUCKLE
THE CHILD.

DAVID RUSHES IN AND STOPS WHEN HE SEES
HER. THE SERVANTS SUDDENLY STOP
WAILING.

BATSHEBA: Take one suck my darling and all will be well.
One suck and you will be cured. Here open your
delicate mouth and taste your mother's milk.

DAVID: What has happened here?

HANDMAIDEN: My lord. The child began coughing and then
suddenly stopped breathing. My mistress took him
in her arms and refuses to let him go.

DAVID: Everyone. Out. Now.

EXIT SERVANTS QUICKLY.

DAVID: Batsheba, dearest. Give me the child.

BATSHEBA: No. He's mine - my one and only.

DAVID: My darling. Can't you see? He's...not breathing.

BATSHEBA: No. He's just sleeping, softly.

DAVID: Dearest. He's dead.

BATSHEBA: No. Don't say that. He can't be. I've waited so
long for him. He's only a babe, who's barely
seen a sunset and sunrise. He needs his mother.

DAVID: The Lord has taken him and given him peace. You
must let him go.

BATSHEBA: Why? Why would the Lord take him when He's just
given him to me?

DAVID: I do not know. The Lord giveth and the Lord
taketh away.

BATSHEBA: But never without reason. (SUDDENLY TURNS PALE AS THE TRUTH DAWNS ON HER) This...this can only be a punishment for my sins.

DAVID: No, my love. It is not so.

BATSHEBA: Oh yes, I see it now. All along, the Lord knew how in my heart I loved you and not my husband. And so he punished me with barrenness for the adultery of my heart.

DAVID: Please, don't do this to yourself.

BATSHEBA: And now he's punishing me for the adultery of my body. I am no better than a whore and do not deserve to be anyone's wife let alone a mother.

DAVID: (GENTLY TAKES THE CHILD FROM HER) No, my darling, it is I who must bear the responsibility. Perhaps the child died because there are those that would claim that the child was your husband's. And so, how could he rule after me?

BATSHEBA: Rule after you?

DAVID: The Lord works in mysterious ways. And as he taketh away, so he restoreth. Come, my love, we shall grieve together. And when the grieving is over, I promise you, we shall make another child as a comfort for you and if it is a son, he shall rule after me.

BATSHEBA: Above all your other sons?

DAVID: Yes, to rule after me, above all others.

BATSHEBA: Do you swear it?

DAVID: By all that I cherish in life and on my kingdom. I swear that our son will rule in my stead. Now come. Let us bury him in peace.

[DAVID AND BATSHEBA EXIT]

ACT II

SCENE 4

INT. DAVID'S PALACE - DAY

AMNON IS LYING IN BED LOOKING FEVERISH AND MUMBLING. HIS MOTHER, AHINOAM IS TENDING HIM, TRYING TO COAX HIM TO EAT SOMETHING.

AHINOAM: Amnon, my darling. You haven't eaten all day. Here, have some broth.

AMNON: No. Leave me alone, mother.

AHINOAM: My darling. If you don't eat something, you'll die. You don't want to die, do you?

AMNON: (ROLLS ON HIS SIDE TURNING HIS BACK TO HIS MOTHER) I don't care.

AHINOAM: Can't you tell me what ails you?

AMNON: Just go and leave me alone. I want to be alone. Can't you understand that?

AHINOAM: As you wish.

[EXIT AHINOAM INTO HALLWAY. MEETS MERIBAAL AND TAMAR]

AHINOAM: Have you come to visit him? He's refusing to eat and seems so angry at me. For what, I do not know. I just don't understand.

MERIBAAL: Young men are often angry at themselves when they're ill and don't know how to cure themselves. Perhaps all he needs is the soft voice of maiden to cajole him out of his petulance.

TAMAR: Meribaal asked me to make some broth for Amnon.

AHINOAM: That is so kind of you. He often speaks so admiringly of you.

MERIBAAL: Tamar has such a caring and selfless heart. I'm sure that she can nurse him back to health.

Perhaps we should let her go in alone so that he can listen to her without feeling embarrassed by our presence?

AHINOAM: You are so clever and understanding, Meribaal. Come we'll leave them in peace.

[EXIT MERIBAAL AND AHINOAM]

[TAMAR ENTERS AMNON'S ROOM]

TAMAR: Dear Amnon. I've brought you some broth.

AMNON: Go away.

TAMAR: Why so churlish? What ill have I done to you that you would treat me like a mere servant girl?

AMNON: Nothing that can't be cured by your departure.

TAMAR: Your words sting me to the core. Why, when I stand here with nothing but a caring heart. I beg you, just let your lips taste a little of the broth.

AMNON: My whole head aches. Perhaps if your lips would leave their imprint...(TAPS HIS LIPS)here.

TAMAR: You ask too much of a maiden.

AMNON: Then you and your proud maidenhead can go to hell.

TAMAR: Don't be so gruff? Can't you be reasonable and ask a more modest favour of me?

AMNON: A chaste sisterly kiss is all I ask and that you deny me. You hide a black heart under the veil of virtue.

TAMAR: That isn't true. My heart and words are true, compassionate and pure.

AMNON: If so, then let pity and compassion permit you to bestow a soft kiss upon on my brow at least.

TAMAR: A kiss coupled with a promise to eat?

AMNON: Of course, dear sister.

TAMAR LEANS OVER TO KISS HIS FOREHEAD.
AMNON SUDDENLY WRAPS HIS ARMS AROUND
HER AND PRESSES HER DOWN AGAINST HIS
BODY. HE KISSES HER WILDLY ON THE
MOUTH AS SHE STRUGGLES TO BREAK FREE.
BUT SHE IS NO MATCH FOR HIS STRENGTH.

TAMAR: No. Amnon. You promised. Let me go.

AMNON: Not until you keep your promise and kiss me
purely.

TAMAR: No, no.

TAMAR SHAKES HER HEAD AND ACCIDENTLY
HEADBUTS AMNON. HE STRIKES HER BACK,
KNOCKING HER UNCONSCIOUS. HE ROLLS HER
OFF HIM AND KNEELS OVER HER.

AMNON: A thief never had such a fair face. You have
bewitched, pilfered and whored with my heart
without an inkling of remorse or contrition.

HE LIFTS HER DRESS AND LOOKS AT HER
NAKEDNESS. HE RUNS HIS HANDS BETWEEN
HER LEGS.

Such enchanting thighs could only belong to a
strumpet or a witch. In either case, my course
is clear. By the blood of your maidenhead, shall
all your wicked spells be shred.

[CLIMBS ON TOP OF HER - FADE]

ACT II SCENE 5

INT. DAVID'S HALL - LATER THAT DAY

DAVID SITS IN JUDGEMENT AS A
PETITIONER PLEADS HIS CASE BEFORE HIM.

YITZHAK: Sire, I am Yitzhak ben Shlomo of the tribe of
Benjamin. I stand before you a man robbed of his

only daughter, the jewel of his life, by this thief and sorcerer - Nabat ben Yiftah.

DAVID: How say you to this grievous charge?

NABAT: I am innocent, my lord.

YITZHAK: Liar. You dare to lie even before the king?

NABAT: I do not lie, your majesty. Of her own accord did his daughter, Sarit, come to me and beg me to take her away from her father's house. There is no witchcraft in wanting to be free of bondage.

YIZHAK: He lies, sire. Since my wife died, five years ago, I have sacrificed everything for my daughter. And she was most dutiful. But ever since this son of a dog poisoned her mind, she has become unruly and disobedient. It's as if some demon had possessed her mind and body.

DAVID: This is a most serious charge. Where is your daughter?

YITZHAK: At home, my lord.

DAVID: Then bring her before me so that I may more clearly judge her character.

YITZHAK: She cannot walk, my lord. Her legs and are swollen from the beating I gave her for disobeying me.

NABAT: Your majesty. Sarit has told me that her father would beat her often and most harshly.

YITZHAK: I was afraid she would run away with this man. A father has a duty to protect his daughter and teach her obedience, doesn't he? Could your majesty rule if all his subjects did whatever they wished?

DAVID: You speak truly, Yitzhak ben Shlomo; for without obedience a king would constantly be faced with rebellion. This would be intolerable.

NABAT: My lord, what of the opposition to a tyrannical

father?

DAVID: Beware, lest your naivety betray you, young man. Men are often most carefree and careless with other men's daughters until they themselves have a daughter. Then all their misdeeds return to requite them tenfold. Have you lain with the girl?

NABAT: Yes, my lord. But it was not against her will.

YITZHAK LUNGES AT NABAT AND GRABS HIM
BY THE THROAT.

YITZHAK: You bastard of bastards. You have ruined her.

GUARDS SEPARATE THE TWO MEN.

He deserves to die, my lord.

DAVID: Be not too quick to condemn this man for the fire and folly of youth. For in doing so, you may lose both a daughter and a son-in-law. Hear now my judgement: There has been no act of sorcery but in taking the daughter without her father's permission, you, Nabat ben Yiftah have dishonoured him. You shall therefore recompense him with six sheep and two sacks of wheat. As for the daughter, you shall restore her honour by marrying her without a dowry.

NABAT: I bow to my lord's judgement.

YITZHAK: Your majesty is most wise and just.

HUSHAI ENTERS.

HUSHAI: My lord, please forgive me, but I beg a word in private.

DAVID: Everyone leave us.

EXIT ALL EXCEPT FOR DAVID AND HUSHAI

DAVID: Your face is ashen, Hushai, what has happened?

HUSHAI: The herald of ill tidings is never welcome nor remembered with any fondness.

DAVID: You are my trusted advisor, speak up, I command it.

HUSHAI: Your daughter...

DAVID: Tamar?

HUSHAI: Fell from her balcony into the garden below. Alas, she broke her neck and is dead.

DAVID: Tamar? Dead? How she loved that garden. That it should now be her deathbed.

HUSHAI: Sire, I've sent news to her mother and brother.

DAVID: Thank you, Hushai. Now leave me to my grief.

HUSHAI: As you wish, my lord.

HUSHAI EXITS.

DAVID: (FALLS TO HIS KNEES) A second child taken from me. Is it that my sins are to be requited so quickly?

FADE

ACT II SCENE 6

INT. TAMAR'S CHAMBER - NIGHT

TAMAR'S BODY IS IN A SHROUD LAID OUT ON A TABLE. ABSALOM GRIEVES FOR HER.

ABSALOM: Tamar, Tamar, so young and beautiful. My better half - the fairer side of me that filled the world with such beauty and radiance. What shall I do without you? What shall I become without your love?

THROWS HIMSELF ACROSS THE BODY

Oh Lord. What did my sister do except show a kind heart to all, give alms to the poor and grace everyone with a smile? Is this how you repay goodness and righteousness? Where is your

justice and mercy?

YASMINA ENTERS.

- YASMINA: My husband and lord. I come to comfort you and share your grief.
- ABSALOM: You are kind, dear Yasmina. But I fear the sorrow within my heart shall burst forth like a flood and engulf you.
- YASMINA: I have already swum in such waters. Have you so soon forgotten that I was married to you not long after my father, the King of Ammon was killed and I brought as a hostage to Jerusalem?
- ABSALOM: No, I remember rage in your eyes.
- YASMINA: I was overcome with such a fiery fury that I thought I would scorch everyone around me. However, in time, the flames died down and my broken heart began to heal.
- ABSALOM: I fear this wound is too deep, it will never heal.
- YASMINA: That is your sorrow speaking.
- ABSALOM: Nor will I serve a god who unjustly takes the life of such a pure-hearted girl.
- YASMINA: That is your anger speaking.
- ABSALOM: Do not taunt me, wife.
- YASMINA: I have no intention in defending a god I do not worship. But what if this god of yours did no such thing.
- ABSALOM: You speak in riddles.
- YASMINA: What if your sister did not fall by accident? What if she jumped to her death?
- ABSALOM: Impossible. You're speaking nonsense.
- YASMINA: I was passing through the garden when I saw her jump.

ABSALOM: I don't believe you.

YASMINA: I didn't believe what my eyes were seeing either.

ABSALOM: But why? She was always so happy. No it can't be. It had to be an accident. You're mistaken.

YASMINA: Your love and grief blind you to the truth. I was the first one to reach her. She was lying on her back and her neck was broken. At least, she died swiftly. Her dress had ridden up and as I lent down to cover her thighs I saw something that even now, I dread to say.

ABSALOM: What more ill can you add to this horrible tale?

YASMINA: I'm afraid of your anger.

ABSALOM: I promise you that I shall be more angry if you keep silent.

YASMINA: Her inner thighs were stained with blood.

ABSALOM: What do you mean? She was bleeding?

YASMINA: No. The blood on her thighs was dry.

ABSALOM: It must have been her courses.

YASMINA: I'm sure it was not.

ABSALOM: How dare you speak so ill of her?

YASMINA: At first, I, too, thought like you. Then I recalled that less than two weeks ago you were so disappointed that Tamar could not join us for dinner because of terrible cramping from her courses. I believe the blood was from her maidenhead.

ABSALOM: Are you calling my sister a whore?

YASMINA: No, I am not.

ABSALOM: If what you say is true. Then why has no one else mentioned the blood?

YASMINA: Because I took some water from the garden well and cleaned away the blood. Only when I knew her honour was safe, did I call for help.

ABSALOM: Then all I have is your word about this?

YASMINA: I am your wife. Why would I lie to you?

ABSALOM: Because you were always jealous of my love for her.

YASMINA: You bastard. (TRIES TO SLAP HIM) How dare you. I loved Tamar like a sister.

ABSALOM: (GRABS HER WRIST WITH ONE HAND AND HER THROAT WITH THE OTHER) Perhaps. But for now, I forbid you to speak of this to anyone. I will not have my sister's name sullied. And if you ever call me a bastard again, I will make sure you regret it for the rest of your miserable life. Do you understand me?

YASMINA: Implicitly, my lord and husband.

ABSALOM: Good. Then leave me to grieve in peace.

EXIT YASMINA

FADE

ACT II SCENE 7

INT. AMNON'S ROOM - EVENING

AMNON IS DISTRAUGHT AND PACING UP AND DOWN THE ROOM. MERIBAAL WATCHES HIM WITH CONCERN.

AMNON: What shall I do? She was a witch. But who will believe me?

MERIBAAL: Calm down, you're making me dizzy.

AMNON: I know, I'll go to my father and explain it all.

MERIBAAL: Explain it all? I think not, dear cousin. Your father may be understanding but do you truly believe that Absalom will be so forgiving? What did you do to the poor girl that made her do such a stupid thing?

AMNON: Nothing other than lay with her. Then something strange happened. After it was over, I suddenly I lost all desire and could not even bear to look upon her. Her very presence made me sick.

MERIBAAL: Then the spell was broken.

AMNON: Then she clung to me and begged me to go before our father to ask for her hand. When I said, "No." She began crying again, tearing her hair and bemoaning her fate. I couldn't stand it and called for Yonah to take her to her chamber. That's the last I saw of her.

MERIBAAL: The last anyone saw of her except for Yonah. Can he be trusted?

AMNON: Yes, I think so. Besides, he knows nothing.

MERIBAAL: Other than Tamar left your room crying.

AMNON: I can claim that I was rude to her and refused to drink the broth she had brought me.

MERIBAAL: Very good. Then there's nothing for you to be accused of.

AMNON: But she's dead. I had no idea it would come to this.

MERIBAAL: Listen to me. Tamar was a witch who lost her power over you when you lay with her. Now, she is trying to use her death to strike at you. You must remain strong, do you understand? Remember, you are the heir to the throne. Remain here and pretend to be ill. I'll go to Absalom to convey my condolences. By subtle questioning I will learn if he suspects anything. Rely on me, cousin.

AMNON: Yet again, dear cousin, I am in your debt.

EXIT MERIBAAL

FADE

ACT II

SCENE 8

EXT. IN THE HILLS OF JERUSALEM - DAY.

A FUNERAL PROCESSION. DAVID AND HIS COURT ACCOMPANY THE BODY OF TAMAR TO A CAVE. HER BODY IS PLACED INSIDE.

DAVID: Close up the cave. That the dead may lie in peace.

MACCAH RUSHES FORWARD AND THROWS HERSELF IN FRONT OF THE MEN ROLLING A STONE ACROSS THE CAVE ENTRANCE.

MACCAH: Let this rock that seals my daughter's tomb, take my life as well for there is no greater curse than to outlive one's child. Would that I had never been born.

DAVID: Absalom. See to your mother.

ABSALOM STEPS FORWARD AND LIFTS HIS MOTHER UP.

ABSALOM: Mother, come please. Take my arm.

MACCAH: Leave me here. I won't leave my daughter. I won't leave my daughter.

ABSALOM: Mother, please. Tamar would not have wanted you to grieve so. She would have wanted you to live so that her memory would live on through you.

MACCAH: You ask too much of me.

ABSALOM: No more than a mother should give to her child.

MACCAH: But my heart is broken. I have no love to give.

DAVID: Dearest, do you remember when you came to me

from your father's house in Geshur?

MACCAH: It seems so long ago.

DAVID: Not so long that I can't remember how beautiful and willful you were. You refused to return to your father's house saying that you now belonged to me and I had a duty to honour you.

MACCAH: I said that?

DAVID: Oh yes. Joab here is my witness. You told me you loved me and refused to take no for an answer. Now my darling, I am telling you that I love you but you must let our daughter go. You can come here as often as you wish but now you must let Tamar rest in peace. Come with me now.

MACCAH: If you say so.

DAVID PUTS HIS ARM AROUND HER AND SLOWLY LEADS HER AWAY, THE OTHERS FOLLOW, EXCEPT FOR ABSALOM WHO REMAINS BEHIND STARING AT THE CAVE. MERIBAAL LOOKS OVER HIS SHOULDER AND SEEING ABSALOM TURNS BACK TO JOIN HIM.

MERIBAAL: Cousin, I do not wish to disturb you but want to say how sorry I am for your loss.

ABSALOM: Thank you, Meribaal. But it is my wish to be left alone.

MERIBAAL: I understand. Of course, it was inconsiderate of me. This is not the time nor the place to discuss who was the last person to see your sister alive.

ABSALOM: Who was that?

MERIBAAL: Yonah, servant of your brother, Amnon.

ABSALOM: Who told you this?

MERIBAAL: Yonah, himself

ABSALOM: Why would he do such a thing?

MERIBAAL: You know that Amnon has been quite ill lately, don't you?

ABSALOM: Yes, I heard. That's why he cannot be here to honour my sister.

MERIBAAL: That's why I went to see him not long after your sister's fall. I found him sprawled on his bed mumbling Tamar's name. Two empty wine jugs lay broken on the floor.

ABSALOM: But Amnon hardly ever drinks.

MERIBAAL: My thoughts, exactly. And then I noticed something else. There were some red stains on the goatskin blanket.

ABSALOM: Spilled wine, of course.

MERIBAAL: That's what I thought. But then I noticed that some of the stains were darker than others. They looked like blood. I thought immediately that Amnon might have hurt himself so I asked him about it. He looked puzzled until I pointed to the blood. Then he mumbled something about cutting his finger a few days ago. I told him it must have been a deep cut to bleed so much. He just nodded and then fell asleep.

ABSALOM: Why are you telling me this?

MERIBAAL: I put my finger on the stains - they were still damp.

ABSALOM: What has this got to do with Yonah?

MERIBAAL: When I left, Yonah was waiting in the corridor. He told me he was very afraid.

ABSALOM: Afraid?

MERIBAAL: For his life. You see, Tamar came to Amnon with some broth. Yonah was later summoned to take Tamar to her chamber. He said she was sobbing and that there was a bruise on her left cheek.

ABSALOM: Everyone thought that the bruise came from the fall.

MERIBAAL: It made sense at the time. But now, I don't know what to think.

ABSALOM: The bastard must've hit her.

MERIBAAL: We don't know that. Perhaps she had the bruise when she brought the broth.

ABSALOM: I'm sure of it. Oh Yasmina, how I cursed you when all you spoke was the truth.

MERIBAAL: The truth?

ABSALOM: Can you keep your counsel and not speak to anyone of what I am about to tell you.

MERIBAAL: I shall be like tomb, cousin.

ABSALOM: My wife was in the garden the day that my sister died. She claims that she saw Tamar jump to her death.

MERIBAAL: Jump? No? We all thought she fell.

ABSALOM: Yasmina immediately ran to her but found she was dead. Then she noticed something strange. There was blood on Tamar's thighs. Fortunately, she cleaned it away before calling for help.

MERIBAAL: You have a very wise wife, cousin. So no one knows or suspects that Tamar may have taken her own life.

ABSALOM: No one. Except you, me and Yasmina. And no one should come to know of this, do you understand?

MERIBAAL: You have my word. None of this will pass my lips. But what will you do?

ABSALOM: I shall speak to Yonah myself and make up my mind. But, I swear, if Amnon has indeed defiled my sister, he will not live long.

SHIMSHON - ABSALOM'S SERVANT ENTERS.

SHIMSHON: Master.

ABSALOM: What is it, Shimshon?

SHIMSHON: Master, I fear the evil eye has turned once more upon the King's house.

ABSALOM: What do you mean?

SHIMSHON: Another death, on the heels of your sister. A man found hanging from your sister's balcony.

ABSALOM: My sister's balcony? Who was it?

SHIMSHON: Yonah, servant to your brother, Amnon.

MERIBAAL: The only witness.

ABSALOM: Where is my brother, Amnon?

SHIMSHON: He remains in his bed.

ABSALOM: Then I shall go to him and question him and by his face I shall know the truth.

ALL EXIT.

ACT II SCENE 9

THE KING'S CHAMBER. DAVID AND BATSHEBA TOGETHER. SERVANT ENTERS.

SERVANT: Your majesty, the High Priest awaits your pleasure.

DAVID: Show him in.

ZADOK THE HIGH PRIEST ENTERS

ZADOK: Blessed be the Lord of the World for his judgement is everlasting and true. You summoned me, your Highness.

DAVID: Indeed, Zadok. I have great need of you.

ZADOK: I am your servant, sire.

DAVID: My wife, Batsheba believes she is pregnant.

ZADOK: This is indeed happy news in times of woe. As it

is said, one joy cancels many griefs.

DAVID: Yet, my heart remains full of foreboding. I want you to cast the Thumim and tell me if it is a boy.

ZADOK: Your wish is my command.

ZADOK TAKES OUT TWO SMALL DISC HOLDS THEM BETWEEN HIS THUMBS AS HE TOUCHES THEM TO HIS FOREHEAD. HIS LIPS MOVE AS HE PRAYS SILENTLY AND BEGINS TO ROCK FORWARD AND BACK. AFTER SOME TIME HE PLACES THEM BACK IN THE POUCH.

Blessed be the Lord of the World who in his infinite wisdom gives us true judgement.

Lord of Hosts, if it be thy will that the child of the King and Batsheba be a male, let the Thumim give *emet* - truth. But if it be thy will that the child of the King and Batsheba be female, then give *met* - death.

ZADOK SHAKES THE POUCH AND PLUCKS OUT A DISC AND HOLDS IT UP TO READ THE WRITING.

DAVID: What does it say?

ZADOK: *Emet.*

BATSHEBA SIGHS AND TURNS TO DAVID

BATSHEBA: I knew it.

DAVID: She told me it was a boy but I wanted to be sure before I made my decision.

BATSHEBA: Decision?

DAVID: I'm sending you to Hiram, King of Tyre, before anyone even suspects your condition.

BATSHEBA: But why? Why are you doing this after all that we've been through?

DAVID: To protect you and our unborn son from the

calamities of court. Too many sons and one throne can only breed jealousy and discontent. No. I am not blind to Amnon's greed, Absalom's vanity or Adonaijah's ambition but they are still my sons. And they will not not welcome another rival for the crown.

BATSHEBA: They would not dare...

DAVID: No. They wouldn't. But nonetheless, I will not dangle a lamb before the jaws of a leopard.

ZADOK: Sire, what would you have me do?

DAVID: Firstly, you shall be my witness that the son of Batsheba shall rule after me for the word of the High Priest is beyond all denial or reproach. Second you shall arrange for the safe passage of Batsheba to Hiram. I shall furnish a letter of introduction.

ZADOK: When shall I make the arrangements?

DAVID: Immediately and in the highest secrecy. No one may know of this outside the three of us until I deem it appropriate. Now go and may the Lord be with you.

ZADOK: Yes, your Majesty.

ZADOK EXITS

BATSHEBA: I still don't understand...

DAVID: Nathan came to me and gave prophecy that the sword would not depart from my house. First our baby and now Tamar, I fear his words are giving birth to misshapen offspring. I fear for the life of our unborn son.

BATSHEBA: What will become of me in Tyre?

DAVID: Hiram is an old and trusted friend. You will be treated as a queen and never lack for anything.

BATSHEBA: Except your love and affection.

DAVID: My love will always be with you and when our son

is grown, by the grace of the Lord, he shall return and be acknowledged as my heir. Until then I beg you, no matter how difficult the path that lies ahead, you must be strong. May the Lord watch over thee and protect thee and our son.

BATSHEBA: Then I shall name him Yedidiya - beloved of the Lord.

[FADE]

ACT II

SCENE 10

INT. MERIBAAL'S CHAMBER - NIGHT

MERIBAAL IS SLEEPING. A KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

MERIBAAL: Who is it?

YASMINA: Yasmina, wife to Absalom. I beg you, please open up.

MERIBAAL GETS UP AND OPENS THE DOOR TO FIND YASMINA LOOKING VERY WORRIED.

MERIBAAL: What warrants you coming to my chamber alone and at this hour, dear lady?

YASMINA: My husband bid me come.

MERIBAAL:: What has happened?

YASMINA: Alas, too much has happened and a great woe has come upon us. Let me come in.

YASMINA ENTERS MERIBAAL'S CHAMBER

Absalom returned home this night with the blood of his brother, Amnon, on his hands.

MERIBAAL: Impossible.

YASMINA: But true. I fear I am at fault.

MERIBAAL: Because of what you divulged about Tamar's death?

YASMINA: He told you?

MERIBAAL: Like you lady, I wear many faces that people find appealing.

YASMINA: You insult me, sir.

MERIBAAL: No offence is intended. Yet, if I have offended you, I ask your pardon. Nonetheless, if we are to negotiate this peril you must lay your trust in me.

YASMINA:: I trust no man, especially an Israelite.

MERIBAAL: Then trust me not. Yet for your husband's sake at least listen to my reasoning. 'Tis true I am an Israelite but my blood is not of the King's house. And though I sit at the his table and share his food and drink, I bear the king no love for my heart rankles that he has stolen my birthright.

YASMINA: Your words reek of treason. Why are you telling me this?

MERIBAAL: Treason to a traitor is his life blood. Furthermore, who do think urged the witless Amnon to ravish Tamar, knowing full well that her brother's vengeance would strike him down.

YASMINA: So, it was you all along.

MERIBAAL: Of course, who else but the ever-obliging Meribaal - the crippled one to be pitied by all, at your service.

YASMINA: Did you also contrive Tamar's death, too?

MERIBAAL: That, dear lady was an unforeseen consequence but one that worked sweetly to my advantage, especially after you had primed your husband.

YASMINA: So you are cunning. But you have yet to answer my question. Why are you telling me this, Meribaal?

MERIBAAL:: I see more clearly with traitorous eyes than those, who blinded by their foolish ambition and pride, fall hopelessly in love with their own reflection. I know myself for what I am and hold no hopes for my redemption. Indeed, I would rather drag down the high and mighty so that they know what it is to creep, crawl and slither through the world as I have done. Do you not see, dear Yasmina, you and I have been riding the same camel to the same well, without realising it? You, the alluring beauty and I the wounded beast. We lust after the same end. Join with me and together we will forge a blade so keen that it will deal a fatal blow to this cankerous kingdom.

YASMINA: Your words are filled with spite and deviousness. How do I know that I can trust you?

MERIBAAL: What would give for the Armband of Seth?

YASMINA: The armband? What do you know of the armband?

MERIBAAL: More than you can imagine. But suffice to say that your father went to war over it, lost his kingdom and his life for it and you are now a hostage, that seeks it.

YASMINA: You speak of the heirloom of every Ammonite king from the very beginning time.

MERIBAAL: Yes, that was until your grandfather was defeated at the battle of Jabesh Gilead and the armband fell into Israelite hands.

YASMINA: Where it was never heard of again.

MERIBAAL: Until now. What would you give to restore the Armband to your family?

YASMINA: Everything.

MERIBAAL: Your life? Your husband's life?

YASMINA: Where is the Armband?

MERIBAAL: In my safe keeping.

YASMINA: I don't believe you.

MERIBAAL: Well then perhaps this will change your mind.

TAKES OUT THE ARMBAND

YASMINA: (GASPS) How...

MERIBAAL: That's my secret and perhaps one day I will tell you. But for now I want...

YASMINA: I know what you want...I've seen the way you look at me.

MERIBAAL: That is true. But I want more than your body, my beauty. You are going to help me bring down the House of David.

YASMINA: What if I say no.

MERIBAAL: Then you'll never reclaim the armband or see your home ever again. You will rot here until you die.

YASMINA: You leave me little choice.

MERIBAAL: Precisely. Now I want you to return to your husband with this counsel. Tell him his life is forfeit if he remains here. He must flee to his grandfather - the King of Geshur - where he shall be safe. Tell him to remain there until I convince his father to pardon him and return him from exile.

YASMINA: I thought you wanted my husband dead? What good will sending him away do?

MERIBAAL: It will give me greater currency with both the father and the son. For I intend to wield Absalom in such a manner that his hand will destroy both his father and himself. Once Absalom is dead, I shall marry you, give you the Armband of Seth and arrange for you to return home.

YASMINA: You are a such wicked man, Meribaal. You wouldn't lie to me would you?

MERIBAAL: Even the wicked have their honour. You have my pledge. Do I have yours?

YASMINA: Let my body and lips be my pledge.

THEY KISS

[FADE OUT]

ACT III SCENE 1

INT. DAVID'S PALACE. DAY.

DAVID SITS ON THE THRONE DISPENSING JUSTICE.

HUSHAI: Are there no others who require the king's wisdom?

MERIBAAL: If it pleases your majesty, I would ask for his judgement.

DAVID: Speak your mind, Nephew.

MERIBAAL: Sire, it concerns, your son, Absalom.

DAVID: I've told you before. That name is not be mentioned in my presence.

MERIBAAL: Forgive me, sire. It has been three years since he was banished.

DAVID: Had you not prevailed upon me and begged for mercy in his stead, his life would have been forfeit.

MERIBAAL: With all respect your majesty, a petitioner has the right to be heard even if the King does not like what he hears.

DAVID: You test my patience, Nephew. Speak your mind freely but quickly.

MERIBAAL: My lord, as I've said before - I believe that Absalom killed Amnon in a fit of madness and grief over the death of his sister.

DAVID: That is no excuse.

MERIBAAL: Indeed, sire. But does not every man have it in his heart to kill, lie, covet, steal...(PAUSES) even commit adultery? None of us are so pure that we have not sinned in our hearts if not in our bodies. Yet every man is also capable of love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness. I beg you, Uncle, let your pity and forgiveness shine up your son and grant him pardon. Let him return and redeem himself.

DAVID: You speak passionately, Nephew. What do you my advisors say?

HUSHAI: My lord, Meribaal's words come from the heart. I do believe Absalom has been punished enough and will return a chastened man.

JOAB: Sire, I totally disagree. Amnon was your firstborn. Absalom killed him because he coveted the throne.

HUSHAI: Then why did he do such a vile thing so openly, knowing he would have to flee?

JOAB: I do not know the subtleties of Absalom's heart; only that it burns with bloody-mindedness and pride. If Absalom returns to Jerusalem, I fear he will only bring more death and destruction.

MERIBAAL: My lord. Three long years in exile is time enough for a man to contemplate his deeds and to repent. You've already lost a daughter and a son. Do not let your anger cut yourself off from another you love.

DAVID: (HANGS HIS HEAD) Not a day has passed without me mourning for Tamar and Amnon and my heart is torn by the love I bear Absalom.

MERIBAAL: Then listen to your heart, my lord. And in forgiving Absalom, do so for all others who have

sinned.

- JOAB: My lord, the Law of Moses says, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." There cannot be one law for your son and another for the people.
- DAVID: Joab speaks truly. The law must prevail even over a father's love for his son.
- MERIBAAL: Then your majesty, let the law bring back your son.
- DAVID: How so?
- MERIBAAL: Does not the law say: that a man who has killed another, is permitted to seek sanctuary in a city of refuge?
- JOAB: Absalom murdered his brother in cold blood there is nothing accidental about that.
- MERIBAAL: All we know is that Absalom killed Amnon. Until we hear Absalom's testimony we cannot judge if it was accidental or premeditated. May I continue, sire?
- DAVID: Continue.
- MERIBAAL: Is it now so, that as long as the fugitive remains in a city of refuge, he is protected from the blood vengeance of the slain person's kin.
- DAVID: It is so.
- MERIBAAL: When Joshua conquered Canaan, six cities were appointed as cities of refuge - Golan, Ramot, Bosor on the east of the Jordan River and Kedesh, Shechem and Hebron on the west side. They all share one thing in common - they are cities of priests, in other words holy cities. Don't you see, sire, when you brought the Ark of the Lord - the Holy of Holies - here, you made Jerusalem the most holy city in the land? And as such it must be regarded as a city of refuge. Therefore your son may seek refuge here without

breaking the law.

HUSHAI: Sire, Meribaal's argument has merit.

JOAB: My lord, Meribaal would twist the law to his own ends. By it is not only the law that troubles me. If Absalom returns to Jerusalem, it will be as if you have restored him as your heir.

DAVID: Not necessarily so, Joab. Meribaal, I command you to go to Geshur and tell Absalom to return in peace. However, convey to him that although he is granted refuge here, as a kinslayer, he shall never rule after me or ever grace my table again.

MERIBAAL: You are most wise and just, your majesty.

JOAB: My lord, I fear you will come to regret this.

DAVID: My decision is made and I will face the consequences.

[FADE OUT]

ACT III SCENE 2

EXT. PALACE GARDEN. JOAB IS WALKING PENSIVELY. ADONAIJAH APPROACHES.

ADONAIJAH: General, I beg a word with you.

JOAB: Forgive me, Prince, but I would rather be left alone.

ADONAIJAH: As you wish. But I think it a great calamity that Meribaal and Hushai prevailed in the Great Hall today.

JOAB: I spoke my mind and have no inclination to discuss this matter any further.

ADONAIJAH: A pity, dear Joab, for I believe that you alone of the king's advisors hold the interests of the kingdom above your own.

JOAB: I do not seek to be flattered.

ADONAIJAH: Nor, I. Though it pains me that you have no particular love for me.

JOAB: I favour all the sons of David equally.

ADONAIJAH: Then perhaps you will allow me to bridge any misunderstanding between us.

JOAB: May I speak plainly?

ADONAIJAH: I have never known you not to.

JOAB: I do not like you. Nor do I wish be like or liked by you.

ADONAIJAH: You don't temper your words, General. However, we are more similar than you might think. We're both protective of the kingdom and faithful to the king - long may he reign. Yet, no one can reign forever. What will happen then? Who will succeed him?

JOAB: I'll ford that crossing when I come to it.

ADONAIJAH: If Absalom returns from exile that day may come sooner than you think. I make no pretence of what I am or that I want to rule after my father. But I swear, I will never raise my hand to hasten that outcome. I cannot say the same of Absalom.

JOAB: The king has declared against him ever succeeding to the throne.

ADONAIJAH: For the moment, that may be the case. But Absalom has always been my father's favourite and old men, on their deathbeds do contrary and foolish things. Would you take that risk?

JOAB: Are there others who share your conviction?

ADONAIJAH: Yes. The highest among them is Abiathar, the High Priest.

JOAB: Abiathar, you say? He has always been loyal to the king.

ADONAIJAH: And remains so. Though unlike you he foresees a time when my father no longer has the strength to rule and someone must take up the crown.

JOAB: And what of the other High Priest, Zadok?

ADONAIJAH: Zadok's nose is too large to see beyond his own importance. He is over-haughty for my liking or my trust.

JOAB: I see. With the priesthood divided, you need the backing of the army; so, when the time comes, your claim to the throne will not be seen as rebellion.

ADONAIJAH: We understand each other...perfectly. Let me remind you that a prince in need makes a most grateful king. I would appoint you my chief advisor. Be assured that, unlike my father, I know the worth of your counsel. No, do not answer me yet, take time to ponder my words. For though the truth may not be sweet or to your taste, nonetheless in the end, you shall have to choose between Absalom and me. Farewell for now.

ADONAIJAH EXITS

JOAB: Adonaijah is clever and cunning and woos with ardour. Is he to be believed and trusted? I think not. Princely promises made in the dead of night are oft forsworn in a more kingly light.

JOAB EXITS

ACT III SCENE 3

THE PALACE IN JERUSALEM - NIGHT

YASMINA AND SERVANTS IN HER CHAMBER.

ENTER MERIBAAL

YASMINA: Welcome home, Meribaal. It is a blessing that you grace my house with your presence.

MERIBAAL: Dear lady, your graciousness far out strips any graces I bear. However, I do bring tidings from Geshur and your husband.

YASMINA: How can I ever repay you for your kindness in persuading the king to end my husband's exile?

DISMISSES THE SERVANTS WITH A WAVE OF HER HAND. MERIBAAL SIDLES UP TO HER AND WHISPERS IN HER EAR.

MERIBAAL: That is a debt I would hold you to, madam.

YASMINA: One I would gladly requite against all that's pressed against me.

MERIBAAL: My lips included in the balance?

KISSES HER SOFTLY

YASMINA: I feel your interest growing.

MERIBAAL: It shall soon outpace the principal but before we engorge your debt any further, answer me this: why do you love me?

YASMINA: Handsomeness in any other man but in my eyes it is your utter villainy.

MERIBAAL: An eye for eye then, since my lust for you is similarly matched.

THEY KISS PASSIONATELY.

YASMINA: Tell me, what new mischief do you intend to set upon my husband on his return.

MERIBAAL: Nothing that any mortal man could not do in my stead.

YASMINA: I doubt that.

MERIBAAL:: I have your husband's trust and so he did not doubt me when I feigned gratitude that his father had deigned to pardon him and curtail his

disheartening exile.

YASMINA: How did he respond?

MERIBAAL: With a sigh of great relief...until I pricked him with the King's conditions.

YASMINA: That would have burst his bladder.

MERIBAAL: Indeed. He was so overwrought that he should bear the trappings of a prince but be denied the crown that I feared he would explode with bile. Of course, I devoured such effect with great relish and then served it back to him to further ferment his unappetising fall from fortune.

YASMINA: How so?

MERIBAAL: I let drop that on the very day that his father had charged me to bring him back to Jerusalem, I spied Joab and Adonaijah huddled in a corner of the palace garden where none could overhear their words.

YASMINA: Oh you, cunning fox. That deserves a kiss at least.

MERIBAAL: And at the most?

YASMINA: That my other lips part as sweetly as soon as you conclude your tale.

MERIBAAL: Then I shall make haste to the climax. I told your husband that Joab and Adonaijah appeared to have put aside their long-standing enmity.

YASMINA: Did he rise to the bait?

MERIBAAL: Of course. How could he have resisted? To which he replied that his antipathy for Joab was matched only by his hatred for Adonaijah.

YASMINA: Then the fish was hooked.

MERIBAAL: But not yet landed. I pointed out that while Adonaijah was ambitious, he nonetheless feared the king. However, Joab, had no such qualms and would willingly execute Adonaijah's wishes.

YASMINA: A man after my own heartlessness. How I adore thee.

MERIBAAL: Thus, as one footstep follows he finally came to the conclusion that he could never safely return to Jerusalem while his enemies had the ear of the king. And yet exile had become intolerable. Alas, he was in a quandary.

YASMINA: I'm sure could not bear to let him stew too long.

MERIBAAL: Long enough for the heat of humiliation to stoke the lust to requite his father by raising a rebellion in Hebron.

YASMINA: Masterful.

MERIBAAL: Finally, and this is the sweetest boon of all: he made me swear to watch over and protect you in the troubled days to come and also make known his deep love and affection for you.

YASMINA: I see.

MERIBAAL: Naturally, I gave him my word.

YASMINA: How noble and generous of you my lord. And being a man of your word, tell me how do you mean to fulfil such a charge?

MERIBAAL: With total dedication and utter devotion with kisses and thrusts until I have utterly discharged my duty.

THEY EMBRACE PASSIONATELY

[FADE OUT]

ACT III SCENE 4

DAVID'S PALACE. DAY.

HUSHAI AND JOAB ENTER

HUSHAI: My lord, evil tidings. Your son, Absalom, has

not returned to Jerusalem. Instead, he went secretly to Hebron and raised a rebellion, claiming that you had abandoned Judah in favour of the northern tribes.

DAVID: Why would he spurn my pardon?

HUSHAI: I don't know my lord. Yet it seems that Joab was right, your son is bent on destruction of either himself or the kingdom.

DAVID: Even so, why would Hebron rise up against me?

HUSHAI: Discontent makes people think not with their heads, sire, but with their hearts and stomachs and in doing so become easy prey to flattery and poisoned falsehoods. Apparently, Absalom has sworn to restore Judah to the glory of former days and make Hebron the capital of the kingdom

DAVID: He would destroy everything by going back to the days of petty tribal jealousies. Never. He must be stopped. Have him arrested and brought to me.

HUSHAI: I fear it is too late for that, my lord. All of Judah has rallied to his words and even now, he rides to Jerusalem at the head of an army of fifteen thousand men.

DAVID: Then there is no time to lose. Joab, prepare to defend the city.

JOAB: My lord, the city garrison numbers only two thousand men. I do not doubt they will defend you and Jerusalem to their last breath. However, my fear lies with the people within the city walls. Besieged by such a formidable host their courage will surely shrink. Then the temptation to save their skins by surrendering you up could prove overwhelming. Then we would have to deal with an enemy more dangerous than the one camped at our gates.

DAVID: Then what would you have me do?

JOAB: A tactical retreat.

DAVID: Abandon the city? It would be seen as weakness or even worse... cowardice.

JOAB: It is not cowardice to know your enemy, sire. Absalom wants to make Jerusalem the battleground because the majority of people living here are Judeans. He wants to turn their hearts away from you as he did in Hebron. This is a fight you cannot win at the moment.

DAVID: I have never stood down from a battle before.

JOAB: Is it not foolish to be drawn into a fight on the enemy's terms? My lord, I swear we shall destroy this rebellion but today is not that day and Jerusalem is not that place. I beg you, sire, we must flee before it's too late. We can take refuge on the East Bank of the Jordan at Mahanaim. There you can gather the tribes to your standard and fight the decisive battle at a time and place of your choosing.

HUSHAI: Sire, Joab is right. You cannot let the city or the people be destroyed by war.

DAVID: What of our women and children?

JOAB: This is war. Those unable to fight must remain behind.

DAVID: I cannot leave those I love without protection.

HUSHAI: My lord. I shall remain behind to comfort your wives and concubines. Absalom would not dare hurt them. It will also provide a way for me to report on any information I might glean.

DAVID: How noble of you, Hushai. Yet, I fear Absalom would reek vengeance on your head for your part in my escape.

HUSHAI: Not when I convince him that you and Joab abandoned me because I spoke in his favour. Let Meribaal remain here to attest to that. In any case, my allegiance now turns towards his rising sun.

DAVID: Will he believe you?

HUSHAI: I will make him.

DAVID: How can I ever repay you for such bravery.

HUSHAI: Let us hope it succeeds.

JOAB: Sire, may I suggest that Meribaal be told nothing of Hushai's mission.

DAVID: I'm sure my nephew will feel abandoned. What say you Hushai?

HUSHAI: A temporary inconvenience that will be smoothed over when you are restored. Absalom, knowing your fondness for Meribaal, will believe that you have truly fled in panic, taking only those who can fight with you.

DAVID: Good. Then it's decided. Joab, prepare the men. We leave the city by midday and shall regroup in Jericho. Hushai, go and convey the news to my wives and Meribaal. And may the Lord be with thee.

JOAB/HUSHAI: Yes, my lord.

JOAB AND HUSHAI EXIT

DAVID: Oh beloved Absalom. Why do the ones we love strike at our hearts most deeply? Betrayal and insurrection. Is this the lot of all kings? Alas, it is too late. The sands of time are running out far too quickly. They favour neither pauper nor king but bury both in a shroud of faithlessness, loss and suffering.

[FADE OUT]

ACT III SCENE 5

INT. THE PALACE IN JERUSALEM. ABSALOM ENTERS ACCOMPANIED BY SOLDIERS.

YEHIEL: My lord, Jerusalem is ours without a fight.

ABSALOM: Where are my father, Joab and Adonaijah?

YEHIEL: It is said that they have fled my lord, towards Jericho. An immediate pursuit and they are ours.

ABSALOM: I do not trust in rumours, especially those spread by my father. Search the palace to make sure they have indeed fled and are not lurking in ambush.

YEHIEL: At once, my lord.

YEHIEL DISPATCHES A FEW SOLDIERS.
VOICES OUTSIDE IN THE CORRIDORS

MERIBAAL: Unhand me, I am known to Absalom.

SOLDIERS ENTER, DRAGGING MERIBAAL AND
HUSHAI BETWEEN THEM

SOLDIER: Forgive us, my lord. These men say they must speak with you.

ABSALOM: Release them immediately. Meribaal, I am delighted but surprised to find you still here.

MERIBAAL: The king took only those who could fight. Everybody else - his wives, concubines and servants were all left behind. Besides, if you recall, I gave you my word to watch over your wife.

ABSALOM: Then my father has truly abandoned the city.

MERIBAAL: Yes.

ABSALOM: And you, Hushai? Have you remained behind to spy on me?

HUSHAI: I had no choice. The great general, Joab, convinced the king to reward my years of loyal service by leaving me behind to face your wrath.

ABSALOM: It seems a most harsh and undeserved fate.

HUSHAI: I could not agree more, sire. I believe I

angered him and your father much more than I had anticipated when I supported Meribaal's plea to have your exile ended.

ABSALOM: So typical of Joab - no one can gainsay him. But what of my father, you were a trusted advisor.

HUSHAI: Since I spoke in your favour, your subsequent actions fell on my head. In the king's eyes your insurrection outweighed any previous loyalty of mine.

ABSALOM: Previous loyalty?

HUSHAI: Only a fool or a madman would follow a waning moon when the sun rises so brightly.

YEHIEL: Sire, he speaks too smoothly for my liking. I fear the king has left him behind in order to confound us.

HUSHAI: No, my lord. It is not so.

ABSALOM: If indeed you have renounced the service of my father, then I count it a blessing. But tell me first, how many men has my father with him?

HUSHAI: The whole city garrison - just over two thousand men.

ABSALOM: Is that all?

HUSHAI: The swiftness of your assault gave him no time to gather reinforcements from the other tribes. Joab believed they would be trapped if they remained in the city.

ABSALOM: Is this true Meribaal?

MERIBAAL: I believe so.

ABSALOM: Then there's no time to waste. We have them. They must not be allowed to get away.

HUSHAI: Sire, may I say that one underestimates Joab at his peril.

ABSALOM: What do you mean?

HUSHAI: Joab is cunning man. With one hand he gives up the city but lures you away from Jerusalem before you can be proclaimed king; while with the other he prepares to ambush you near the Great Sea of Salt.

ABSALOM: With two thousand men?

HUSHAI: My lord forgets. The city garrison comprises battle-hardened soldiers who have fought for many years beside your father. Your army is much larger but your men are inexperienced. Moreover, you know your father is famous for feigning to be the underdog then overcoming superior numbers with a lesser force. You have gained Jerusalem and the crown without a fight. Why risk both? Let your father taste what it's like to be in exile as the tribes flock to you. Take your time, my lord, build an even stronger army and then defeat your father once and for all time.

ABSALOM: Joab is a fox, indeed. But I believe he has made a grave error in leaving you behind. We shall protect what we have gained and remain here in Jerusalem. You have proven your worth, Hushai.

HUSHAI: Thank you, my lord. I have a small request. Your father's wives and concubines are much distressed - may I have your leave to reassure and comfort them?

ABSALOM: As you wish.

HUSHAI: Thank you, your majesty.

HUSHAI EXITS

MERIBAAL: My lord, since you are not going to pursue your father, then may I suggest that you demonstrate that the bond between you and he is severed forever.

ABSALOM: What do you advise?

MERIBAAL: (WHISPERS INTO ABSALOM'S EAR)

ABSALOM: Yes... Yes...brilliant. As he fathered my

humiliation so shall I revisit him with the mother of humiliations.

[FADE OUT]

ACT IV

SCENE 1

INT. THE FORTRESS OF MAHANAIM IN THE GILEAD MOUNTAINS. THE MAIN HALL.

JOAB: Sire, a messenger has arrived from Jerusalem.

AHIMAAZ ENTERS

AHIMAAZ: Your Highness, I bring greetings from my father, Zadok, the High Priest.

DAVID: A son of Zadok is most welcome. What is your name lad?

AHIMAAZ: Ahimaaz, my lord. But I fear the tidings I bear will not be so welcome.

DAVID: Fear not. Deliver your message faithfully.

AHIMAAZ: Sire, it grieves me to say but your faithful servant, Hushai, is...dead.

DAVID: Dead? How is this possible?

AHIMAAZ: When your son, Absalom, discovered you had fled Jerusalem, he was going to pursue you.

DAVID: Had he done so, he might have put an end to our escape and our kingship.

AHIMAAZ: However, Hushai convinced him that it was a trap set by Joab. He advised your son to consolidate his position and gather more men before venturing out to fight you.

DAVID: May the Lord bless Hushai. He earned us the time to cross the Jordan to the safety of Mahanaim, where we have regathered our strength.

AHIMAAZ: Indeed your majesty.

DAVID: Then how is it that Hushai is dead. Was it sickness?

AHIMAAZ: No, your majesty. (HESITATES)

DAVID: Go on, I command you.

AHIMAAZ: I fear your wrath, my lord.

DAVID: I have given my word, no harm shall come to you. Out with it, now.

AHIMAAZ: My lord, Hushai was slain when he tried to prevent your son from laying with your concubines.

DAVID: No. Absalom could never be so base or wretched.

AHIMAAZ: Alas, it is true, my lord. When Meribaal told Hushai about what your son intended to do. Hushai blocked the entrance to the harem that night and refused to let anyone pass. Your son became wild with rage for he realised then that Hushai had tricked him into letting you escape. When soldiers finally overwhelmed Hushai, your son slit his throat and ordered his body thrown to the dogs. He then went into the harem with Hushai's blood still fresh on his hands.

DAVID: Oh, what monster have I given life to?

JOAB: Sire, by this evil act, Absalom has cut himself off forever from your family. He can no longer be considered your son. He is your enemy and this rebellion must be crushed without pity. There can be no compassion.

DAVID: I fear you are right. Absalom must be stopped. Send urgent word to the tribes. The time has come to match deeds to their promises of allegiance. Tell them to gather at the Woods of Ephraim, ten days from now. There we shall put an end to my son's rebellion but I want him taken alive to answer for the evil he has done. Do you understand?

JOAB: Yes, my lord.

DAVID AND OTHERS EXIT EXCEPT FOR JOAB
AND ADONAIJAH

ADONAIJAH: Hold Joab, a word with you.

JOAB: I know your mind. You would claim that Absalom is acting as you foretold.

ADONAIJAH: The obvious makes prophets of us all.

JOAB: Yet, while it takes only one lie to make a liar, one truth does not necessarily make an honest man. My suspicions of you will not thaw so quickly.

ADONAIJAH: So be it. Yet my concern is less for me and more for my half-brother. I only wish that we may strike an accord.

JOAB: An accord?

ADONAIJAH: Let me put it this way: if during the ensuing battle, either of us should encounter Absalom then do you not agree that it would be in both our interests to make sure he does not live long enough to beg the King's pardon and reek more destruction on us?

JOAB: Absalom has been a thorn in this kingdom's side for too long. This is a pledge I give you willingly.

ADONAIJAH: In turn, receive my promise to remember with grace and gratitude such service when I am king. Farewell.

ADONAIJAH EXITS

JOAB: There's naught to trust in Adonaijah, except his naked ambition that runs before him like a wild horse, unbroken to the chariot. Yet, his design and willing countenance I shall not quickly spurn, until his opportunity no longer serves my turn.

JOAB EXITS

ACT IV

SCENE 2

EXT. THE WOOD OF EPHRAIM. ABSALOM,
YEHIEL AND MERIBAAL CONFER.

YEHIEL: Good news, my lord. Your father's forces have gathered to the north and east of the wood. It appears that the northern tribes are not with him. The enemy numbers less than seven thousand.

ABSALOM: It is as I hoped and suspected. The northern tribes hold back, waiting like vultures for a carcass to pick at.

YEHIEL: Then our advantage and course is clear. The enemy is outnumbered three to one. An attack from the south will cut them two. This time, I promise you, my lord, none shall escape.

ABSALOM: All except my father. He is not to be harmed.

YEHIEL: As you command, sire.

YEHIEL EXITS

MERIBAAL: Is that wise?

ABSALOM: With Adonaijah dead, I remain my father's only son and the legitimate heir to the throne. My father will have no choice but to endorse my claim unless...

MERIBAAL: Unless he wishes to see his house severed from the kingship. I'm certain his pride would never let that happen.

ABSALOM: You catch my thoughts exactly. But come dear cousin, I don't want you be engulfed by the battle. Remain here on this hillock, where you shall be safe. I shall send word soon enough of our victory, then we shall celebrate together. Farewell, until we meet again.

MERIBAAL: Farewell, cousin.

ABSALOM AND HIS CAPTAINS EXIT

'Tis the harvest of my hate that brother strives against brother and the usurper forsakes all for weaning ambition and pride. Never content save in contention. Am I a villain that would spit my spite upon the King's house? Yea, indeed. Yet all my plots and schemes would turn to dust, if within their hearts lay no trace of jealousy, fear or lust.

SOUNDS OF BATTLE GROWING LOUDER. ITAI WITH DAVID'S SOLDIERS ENTER

MERIBAAL: What ho! Who goes there?

ITAI: Soldiers of the king. Are you friend or foe?

MERIBAAL: The Lord be praised. I am Meribaal, the king's nephew, come from Jerusalem to warn the king of Absalom's plans. But ill luck turned my horse as lame as me. I've come too late, the battle has begun. I fear, I have failed the king.

ITAI: Well met, Meribaal. I am Itai, lieutenant to the King. Though it would be more to my liking that our paths had crossed in less contentious circumstances.

MERIBAAL: What brings you here? I thought the battle lay further off.

ITAI: My mission is to block any retreat by the rebels. Look there. See how they charge rashly after the king's outnumbered troops, who feigning terror, flee deeper into the wood.

MERIBAAL: Your men will be slaughtered.

ITAI: I think not for they are the bait that lures the unsuspecting enemy into the jaws of a merciless ambush.

MERIBAAL: I thought the king was the one who was trapped.

ITAI: A ruse to feed Absalom's pride and urge him on recklessly to his destruction.

MERIBAAL: Ah, I am so relieved. Does the king enter the

fray?

ITAI: No. Joab leads our troops while the king awaits in Mahanaim for news of the battle.

MERIBAAL: I beg you, Itai. Please lend me a horse that I may ride to the king. My unexpected coming and tidings of victory will surely gladden his heart.

ITAI: Soldier, give this man your horse. Follow me men, we'll take up position on the north side. Farewell, Meribaal, may the Lord be with you.

MERIBAAL: My heart-filled thanks.

EXIT ITAI AND SOLDIERS

Much more than thanks, unsuspecting Itai, for you shall furnish evidence to bedeck my loyalty to the king so that none living shall proclaim my villainy. 'Tis music to my ears the cries of war like rolling thunder rumbles, as the usurping House of David undercut and undermined piecemeal crumbles.

EXIT MERIBAAL

ACT IV SCENE 3

THE WOOD OF EPHRAIM. ABSALOM & YEHIEL AND SOLDIERS ENTER AMID SOUNDS OF BATTLE.

ABSALOM: Oh curse my arrogance and pride that led me blindly me to this pass. Take note, Yehiel, how quickly the wheel of fortune turns, making a mockery of all our ambitions.

YEHIEL: The battle is lost, my lord, but not all hope. You may still escape.

ABSALOM: To what end? To live the life of a renegade - exiled, despised and spat upon like a common dog, when in truth, I should be king? Or would you have me fawn obligingly while Adonaijah is

crowned? That would gut me more deeply than any dagger. No, save yourself and leave me to my fate.

YEHIEL: It is not sealed, my lord. For as you yourself declared: the wheel turns and so by reason must one day turn against Adonaijah.

ABSALOM: If only that day were dawning but I see clearly that my sun is setting. Darkness waits to engulf me.

YEHIEL: Then you are resolved to die here.

ABSALOM: As worthy a place as any other.

YEHIEL: Is there nothing I can do or say to make you change your mind?

ABSALOM: My course is clear.

YEHIEL: Then I shall stand here by you and together we shall make an end that will cost our foes most bloody.

ABSALOM: I do not deserve such loyalty.

YEHIEL: A more honourable brother in deathly arms I could not wish for.

ABSALOM: Save yourself and leave me here to die.

YEHIEL: Never.

SOLDIER: My lord. The enemy approaches.

JOAB ENTERS WITH SOLDIERS.

JOAB: At last. Absalom delivered into my hands. Stand and surrender.

ABSALOM: You bark like a dog beset by fear. You command nothing here.

JOAB: Your haughtiness and pride are only exceeded by your traitorous heart. I speak not in my name but in that of the king. Now, lay down your arms.

ABSALOM: So that you may poke my eyes out and drag me chained through the streets of Jerusalem?

JOAB: It's the very least you deserve.

ABSALOM: And the most you could dream of, Joab.

JOAB: Do not provoke me, Absalom. For as these men are my witness, the king has commanded us not to harm a hair of your treasonous head.

ABSALOM: And what of my neck? Is it to be judged as precious? Your oaths do not fool me. I fight to the death.

STRIKES OUT AT ABSALOM. A MELEE
ENSUES. ABSALOM FIGHTS BRAVELY BUT
FINALLY IS STRUCK BY JOAB.

ABSALOM: I am slain.

YEHIEL: My lord. I shall avenge you.

ABSALOM: No. Put up your sword. My death is all Joab sought. Do not compound your grief with foolishness.

JOAB: Surrender and you shall all be spared.

YEHIEL: Never.

ABSALOM: Yehiel, I command you - you must not die for my sake. Live to bear witness as to how I died.

YEHIEL: My lord, you ask too much of me.

ABSALOM: Yet you must do this and suffer bravely so that my death will not be in vain or quietly forgotten.

YEHIEL: As you command, my lord.

ABSALOM: Then I die more peacefully than I ever lived.

[ABSALOM DIES]

JOAB: Put up your swords and do honour to the dead. Take up the body and bear it to Mahanaim.

ALL EXIT.

ACT IV

SCENE 4

INT. THE FORTRESS AT MAHANAIM.

JOAB RETURNS VICTORIOUS, BRINGING THE
BODY OF ABSALOM.

JOAB: My lord, word spreads throughout the kingdom
that David is King of all Israel once more.

DAVID: Ah Joab, if only I could rejoice at such a
victory and dance before the Lord in heart-
filled thanks. Yet I am shackled, a prisoner of
an unrelenting grief that tortures my heart and
starves me of all joy. (EMBRACES THE CORPSE) Ah,
my beloved Absalom, would that I had died in
your stead.

JOAB: Your pardon, sire, you cannot mean such words;
they dishonour those that fought and died so
valiantly for you.

DAVID: Had I the means to restore the dead then
honouring the living would follow naturally.

JOAB: I implore your majesty, stand before to your
loyal soldiers not as a grieving father who has
lost a son but as a grateful king who has
reclaimed his throne.

DAVID: I no longer have the heart for it. Did I not
command you to spare Absalom's life?

JOAB: These men will bear witness that I ordered
Absalom to surrender up his arms as you
commanded. Yet in his haughtiness he merely
sneered at my words and called me an oath-
breaker. He drew his sword and swore he would
not be taken alive.

DAVID: Was there no other remedy or cure?

JOAB: No, my lord. Your son's men fought like mad
animals whose only aim was to kill as many of us

as possible before they died. Only when he was fatally wounded, did Absalom order his men to surrender. I believe that he had lust only for his own death.

DAVID: Your words assault my fatherly senses and gives me just cause to put out my own eyes so that they weep no more. (HANGS HIS HEAD AND SOBS. WAVES EVERYONE AWAY)

Out, out, all out and away, and draw a dark veil that I see not the gentle light of day.

JOAB AND SOLDIERS EXIT

[FADE OUT]

ACT V SCENE 1

INT. THE BARRACKS IN JERUSALEM. SIMEON AND ADRIANOS PLAY AT DICE. FARAK STANDS APART LOOKING ON.

SIMEON: Farak, why so forlorn, my friend? Come dice with us.

FARAK: This famine has eaten up all my mirth. How is it that the years have flown by so swiftly? It all seems a dream except for the greying of my beard.

ADRIANOS: Perhaps there's also, how shall I put it? An inability to rise to the occasion?

FARAK: Such things are nothing to joke about.

ADRIANOS: Has it retreated so much?

FARAK: Age makes turncoats of our youth and lust shrinks and cowers where once it danced and played.

SIMEON: Enough of such morbid brooding. Be content that you have friends that stand by you with their love.

FARAK: What is there to love but this skin, this flesh, these bones that for ten years since Absalom's rebellion have borne this famine. We are but doomed to rot and become fodder for worms.

SIMEON: There is enough to plague us without such grave pronouncements.

FARAK: You can't deny it. It's not how you're born but how you end. It's the fate of all men.

SIMEON: True. But that day has not dawned yet. And while you rail, there is hope. For at least this I know - the dead do not complain .

ADRIANOS: With all your prattle, Farak. It seems to me that you've caught the mourning sickness.

FARAK: I am a pregnant woman that you taunt me so?

ADRIANOS: Prick up your ears. I speak of mourning as in death, like that which afflicts our king. I've heard it said that since the death of Absalom, the king lives on only stale bread and water and barely sleeps at night.

SIMEON: I don't believe it.

ADRIANOS: Then think, when was the last time you saw the King?

SIMEON: I can't remember.

ADRIANOS: You see. Moreover, to ward off such an all-consuming grief he distracts himself with writing.

FARAK: Writing?

ADRIANOS: Sacred songs that shall never be sung.

FARAK: Why not?

ADRIANOS: Such songs are dedicated to the Lord. They are for His ears alone.

SIMEON: It's not natural that the king should neglect the kingdom, especially while we endure such

hunger.

ADRIANOS: He grieves for his son.

FARAK: Ten years of famine, ten years of sorrow for us all.

ADRIANOS: The king and the land are one. It grieves with him.

FARAK: Then he should abdicate in favour of Adonaijah and let us have a more flourishing kingdom.

SIMEON: Shut your treasonous mouth before it condemns us all by association.

FARAK: I say only what is heard openly in the streets of Jerusalem.

SIMEON: So, now you mimic the fickle rabble.

FARAK: Why not? Especially, when the solution rings true.

SIMEON: I wonder, if you were called to judgement, that this same rabble would rush to exchange their necks for yours? How stupid of me. Of course they would.

FARAK: All right, your point is taken. I'll keep my counsel tighter than a whore's arse. But at least acknowledge that what I said was true.

SIMEON: I lean more towards the fact that Adonaijah's servants are buying voices of discontent in order to force his father to confer the crown upon him.

ADRIANOS: What of it? He is the heir after all and it wouldn't cause any more strife than we endure, now, would it?

FARAK: If a man is judged by those that stand behind him then Adonaijah is well served by Joab and the High Priest, Abiathar.

SIMEON: The heir, the army and the priesthood - a most unholy trinity.

ADRIANOS: Do you think he'd dare to take the kingdom by force?

SIMEON: No. The people may be dismayed but they would not tolerate another rebellion by a son of David.

FARAK: Then we are all a buzz for naught, like foolish flies, and must abide the king's grief until he dies.

[FADE OUT]

ACT V SCENE 2

INT. THE PALACE DAY. ADONIAJAH'S CHAMBER.

ADONAIJAH: For ten years I have borne the humiliation of my father's unrelenting grief for my rebellious brother. It is such a scandal that none, except for Joab, are brave enough to speak against, fearing the king's wrath. Yet I must suffer in the name of familial loyalty, those that fawn upon me as the King's heir, yet no sooner is my back turned, then like fickle hyenas they snigger and strut and mock me as a child afraid of his father's shadow. What ill fate decreed that I be born a prince yet remain a beggar that scrambles for some paltry crumbs of entitlement? I thought such mortification would have ended with Absalom's death; but no; it persists and with a most perverse conviction that the better son had died.

JOAB AND ABIATHAR ENTER

ABIATHAR: You summoned us, my lord.

ADONAIJAH: The king lies withering away in his bed. The time has come to claim my birthright and confirm you, Abaithar, as the sole High Priest, and you, most loyal Joab, as commander of my army.

ABIATHAR: My lord is too gracious.

ADONAIJAH: No less than you warrant. But Joab, why are you so downcast? Have you nothing to say to your new king.

JOAB: It is natural that as the only surviving son of David, you are the rightful heir. And so I need no prodding or incentive to do that which I have always done for the kingdom.

ADONAIJAH: You are far too modest. Why everyone, except the king, it seems, knows that if not for your courage and devotion, the kingdom would have fallen to Absalom.

JOAB: Be that as it may. Nonetheless, my loyalty remains first to the king and then his son.

ADONAIJAH: Even though he has repaid you with a disdain that must rankle even the most loyal and faithful servant? My father judges with his heart, which too often has led him astray.

JOAB: It is true that the king's heart and mine never beat in time.

ADONAIJAH: So why this obstinate faith to a master who burdened with regret and remorse, neglects not only you but the kingdom and his people? It said that faith is proven by adversity but surely you cannot bear him such a deep love.

JOAB: I love honour above all else.

ADONAIJAH: As do I. Do not mistake me. I have given you my word that I shall never take the throne by force. But now I will gently ask my father to abdicate and thereby receive the crown from him with warm hands and a kingly blessing.

JOAB: Then swear it again and lead on for I shall surely follow.

ADONAIJAH: I swear by all that I honour and hold dear. Come now. The wind is changing, let the heavens sing, the time is ripe for me to finally be king.

ALL EXIT

ACT V

SCENE 3

INT. DAVID'S CHAMBER. DAVID IS LYING
IN BED.

NATHAN THE PROPHET ENTERS.

DAVID: My friend, you've come at last. I thought you had forsaken me.

NATHAN: Never. These eyes have always been turned towards Jerusalem and you.

DAVID: And what of the Lord? His hand has fallen heavier upon my house than ever you foretold or I forebode. Must all my children die for the iniquity of my sin? Oh, cruel Amnon, innocent Tamar and reckless Absalom. Shall I never know peace again?

NATHAN: If you were but a lesser man, perhaps. Do not forget that Saul, too, sinned and suffered. Yet he lusted not after so many wives.

DAVID: Nor had so many rebellious children. Only now can I see how my youthful pride drew me to this doom.

NATHAN: Wisdom is not the province of young men. Though, when death darkens one's doorway, a man will often fall prey to the follies of youth.

DAVID: Folly?

NATHAN: That which sits upon your head. Beware the madness of Saul who, in clutching to the crown, not only destroyed his house but brought untimely death upon all his sons.

DAVID: The Lord has taken away all that I loved, what else is there for me to lose? Adonijah? The haughtiest of my children. You must know that I cannot bring myself to leave the crown to him.

NATHAN: I do not speak of Adonijah. You have another

son.

DAVID: Ah Yedidya. He abides in Tyre for safe-keeping and is barely fourteen summers old.

NATHAN: You were not much older when you faced Goliath.

DAVID: In those days, I had your counsel to guide me.

NATHAN: You have my counsel, still.

MERIBAAL ENTERS CLEARLY AGITATED

MERIBAAL: Uncle, forgive me, but urgency must prevail over courtesy.

DAVID: What's the matter, Nephew?

MERIBAAL: Adonaijah's men ride through the city, proclaiming God Save King Adonaijah.

DAVID: He would not dare.

MERIBAAL: I wish it wasn't true.

NATHAN: What will you do?

DAVID: What any father must do to a rebellious son - I shall chastise him.

NATHAN: I fear he is past such admonishments.

DAVID: Then your coming here is no mere coincidence.

NATHAN: The Lord revealed that you were in need and commanded me to apply a cure.

DAVID: A cure? In what form?

NATHAN: Someone that has waited far too long to see you.

ENTER BATSHEBA AND YEDIDYA.

BATSHEBA: My lord.

DAVID: Beloved Batsheba. After all these years. I see that Tyre has barely aged you.

BATSHEBA: You flatter me, my husband. It has been Hiram's kindness and his respect for you that have made my stay most comfortable.

DAVID: Then this must be Yedidya. Come here lad, give me your hand. Ah...so strong and firm. You know the meaning of your name, don't you?

YEDIDYA: Beloved of the Lord, sire.

DAVID: Yes. And you know who I am.

YEDIDYA: You are the king, and also, I have been told, my father.

DAVID: Then tell me Yedidya, how should a son honour his father?

YEDIDYA: With an obedient heart, sire.

DAVID: And what of love?

YEDIDYA: How can one love someone unknown to them? How could I profess to love you other than as a loyal subject?

DAVID: And what if your brother, Adonaijah, were king?

YEDIDYA: I would offer him the same allegiance.

DAVID: You would not challenge his right to be king?

YEDIDYA: No, your majesty.

DAVID: Why not? You are of equal lineage. Perhaps you do not wish to be king?

YEDIDYA: It would be a lie to deny such ambition. However, to fight Adonaijah for the crown would bring war upon the kingdom and in doing so, destroy all that you have built. No, sire. If I am to be king, it shall not be by the sword but by the Lord's will.

DAVID: Is it possible that at last that the sword shall finally depart from my house?

NATHAN: The time for talking is over, sire. If you do

not act now, Adonaijah will surely usurp the throne.

DAVID: What would the Lord have me do?

NATHAN: Command Zadok, the High Priest to put Yedidya on your own mule and bring him down to Gihom. There I shall declare him your son and heir before the people and anoint him as King over Israel.

SOUND OF SHOUTING OUTSIDE THE DOOR.
ADONAIJAH SUDDENLY BURSTS INTO DAVID'S
CHAMBER ALONG WITH JOAB AND ABIATHAR.

NATHAN: Adonaijah, how dare you draw your sword in the king's presence?

ADONAIJAH: So the cur has returned to his master's side. Be gone, old man, before I strike you down for having brought nothing but suffering to our house.

DAVID: Put down your sword. I command it.

ADONAIJAH: I'm sorry father but your days of making me grovel are over, too.

DAVID: Is this how you would repay my loyalty and love?

ADONAIJAH: Loyalty? All my life you have spurned me for others who repaid you with rape, murder and rebellion. Where's the loyalty in that? The kingship is mine by birthright. You know that. And I have waited long enough, father. You must abdicate.

DAVID: And you, gracious Abiathar, where do you stand in this rebellious company?

ABIATHAR: My lord, the kingdom languishes and suffers from the lack of a strong and virile king. Adonaijah is your son and rightful heir. You must think of the future of the kingdom.

DAVID: Then I shall abdicate...

ADONAIJAH: You will?

DAVID: ...in favour of he who stands with an equal right. My son, Yedidya from Batsheba.

ADONAIJAH: What? Another brother to contend with? How typical of you father to spring such a surprise upon us. Where have you hidden this treasure for so long?

DAVID: He has been raised in the house of Hiram of Tyre.

ADONAIJAH: How convenient that he returns now.

ABIATHAR: With all respect, your majesty, he's just a boy. The tribes need a strong and experienced hand to guide them. A mere stripling will become fodder for their ambition.

ADONAIJAH: Enough of this nonsense. Do I have your blessing, father, or not?

DAVID: At the point of a sword? Do you think that will make you a true king?

ADONAIJAH: I would never touch a hair of your aged head. But...Joab, take hold of Yedidya.

JOAB: Adonaijah. You declared you would never take the throne by force.

ADONAIJAH: That was before Nathan sought to supplant me with this boy.

JOAB: You cannot kill your brother.

ADONAIJAH: Why not? Absalom slew Amnon and was no less loved by my father or the people.

JOAB: He's just an innocent boy.

ADONAIJAH: No son of David can be called innocent and boys grow into men all too quickly. There is room for only one heir in this chamber.

DAVID: Adonaijah. You must not do this.

ADONAIJAH: The solution lies in your hands, father. Proclaim me king and I swear to spare Yedidya's

life.

- DAVID: What vexing spirit has beset you, my son, to even contemplate such malevolence?
- ADONAIJAH: Do not speak to me of vile deeds father. Your lust has brought more calamity upon your house than anything I could ever do. This boy is born out of the blood of Uriah the Hittite.
- BATSHEBA: Liar. Yedidya is the true son of the king. Uriah was long dead before he was born.
- ADONAIJAH: Yes, of course, your husband was dead. Yet to commit adultery with his killer, dear lady, does that not rake your conscience?
- BATSHEBA: Uriah was killed in battle with the Ammonites.
- ADONAIJAH: So you do not know, then?
- BATSHEBA: Know what?
- ADONAIJAH: That it was my father's hand that wrote the command to put Uriah in the most dangerous part of battle so that he should be killed.
- BATSHEBA: Liar. Where's your proof? If you would kill for the throne, you would surely lie. Where's your proof?
- MERIBAAL: I am witness.
- DAVID: (SHOCKED)Meribaal?
- MERIBAAL: I, too, would've called it a lie, Uncle, if it had not come from the very person who received the order and confessed it to me one night in a drunken state.
- DAVID: Joab?
- MERIBAAL: Indeed. Commander of your army during the Seige of Rabbah.
- DAVID: How could you do this to me, Joab? Do you hate me so much?

JOAB: My lord, I have never been drunk in Meribaal's company. He lies.

ADONAIJAH: The circumstances matter not. Your very accusation confirms your guilt. Do you deny it, father?

DAVID CANNOT ANSWER BUT SHAKES HIS HEAD

BATSHEBA: Oh woe is me. Tell me it is not true. To think that all these years I carried the guilt for the death of our first son.

DAVID: I only wished to protect you.

BATSHEBA: And hide your sin.

DAVID: For that I have been requited a hundredfold.

BATSHEBA: And I a lifetime.

ADONAIJAH: Father, it's not too late to make true repentance and lift the burden from your shoulders. Appoint me king.

DAVID: My son, it grieves me more than you know to admit that though I love you, I cannot leave the kingdom in your hands. You are too cruel and have no compassion.

ADONAIJAH: Cruel? You say? Then these hands shall live out your words and destroy that which you love.

(STRIKES OUT AT YEDIDYA BUT IS BLOCKED BY JOAB'S SWORD. BATSHEBA TRIES TO GRAB ADONAIJAH'S ARM AND IS KNOCKED TO THE GROUND. SHE FAINTS.)

You dare oppose me?

JOAB: To save the kingdom, I would give my life.

ADONAIJAH: (DRAWS A DAGGER AND STABS JOAB IN THE HEART)
Then die, like a traitorous dog.

JOAB: Forgive me, my lord, for failing you.

AS ADONAIJAH STANDS OVER THE CORPSE,
MERIBAAL LEAPS AT HIM FROM BEHIND AND
STABS ADONAIJAH IN THE BACK. ADONAIJAH
DIES.

DAVID: How cursed am I to see another son die before my eyes.

MERIBAAL: Forgive me, Uncle. I only wanted to save you.

MERIBAAL GOES DOWN ON BENDED KNEE IN
FRONT OF YEDIDYA.

Give me your blessing, Yedidya, that I may
pledge my faith to you and serve you loyally.

YEDIDYA: I don't know what to say. Rise up.

MERIBAAL GRABS HIS OUTSTRETCHED HAND
AND PULLS YEDIDYA OFF BALANCE, SPINS
HIM AROUND AND GRABS HIM FROM BEHIND,
HOLDING A DAGGER TO HIS THROAT.

DAVID: What is the meaning of this? Meribaal, have you gone mad?

MERIBAAL: I have never been more clearheaded than when I came to your court so many years ago.

ABIATHAR AND NATHAN MOVE TOWARDS
MERIBAAL

Stay. Don't move or Yedidya dies.

NATHAN: Put away your dagger and beg the King's pardon. You cannot hope to escape.

MERIBAAL: I do not intend to escape or live beyond this day just as long as I witness the end of the House of David.

DAVID: Why are you doing this? Have I not treated you like a son?

MERIBAAL: Do you think it such a blessing to be counted a son of David?

DAVID: But why? What ill have I done you?

MERIBAAL: You betrayed my grandfather King Saul and served the Philistines who killed my father.

DAVID: It's true I served the Philistines in exile but never against Saul and as for your father, I loved him more than any man.

MERIBAAL: It would appear that the love of David is a dark and perilous thing that leads only to death. You love only yourself. As you destroyed my house, it is only right that I destroy yours.

DAVID: The Lord preserve us from such a thing.

MERIBAAL: A false prayer. The Lord does not care for you or anyone else. Otherwise he would've stopped me before I incited Amnon to rape the innocent Tamar. Then when the time was ripe I told Absalom what Amnon had done. He was so blind with grief and anger that he slew his own brother and then listened to my advice to flee into exile. In his absence, I seduced his wife, Yasmina. Then at my behest you pardoned him. But his doom was sealed the moment you sent me to him in Geshur for I told him about Joab and Adonaijah's plot to slay him if he returned to Jerusalem. What choice did he have but to go to Hebron and rebel? As for Adonaijah, his burning ambition was always going to be his downfall. Which leaves us, dear Uncle, with the last of your seed in my hands.

DAVID: Meribaal, I beg you, whatever wrongs I have done you, I truly repent and will make amends.

MERIBAAL: I do not want or need your repentance or your pity. From the day I was born with a club foot, I have been despised by those who thought themselves above me. They clothed themselves in righteousness and hid their vices, like you, behind good deeds. But we both know, that The House of David is rotten to the core.

DAVID: Then cut out this heart that has caused you so much grief. This heart that you hate - strike me down and be done with your revenge.

MERIBAAL: And make a martyr of you, so that you can go to God with your piety restored and sins forgiven? No, that would be too light and brief a punishment. You shall live to suffer the fruits of your arrogance, pride and lust, knowing that have caused the downfall of your own House. Farewell Yedidya.

SUDDENLY MERIBAAL GASPS, DROPS THE KNIFE. YEDIDYA MOVES AWAY AS MERIBAAL FALLS FACE FIRST TO THE GROUND. BATSHEBA STEPS FORWARD WITH JOAB'S SWORD IN HER HAND.

DAVID: Batsheba!

BATSHEBA: (STANDS OVER MERIBAAL'S CORPSE) Too clever for your own cunning, you snake. You forgot that a lioness is most dangerous when her cub's life is at stake.

YEDIDYA: (EMBRACES HER) Mother.

DAVID TRIES TO GET UP BUT COLLAPSES

BATSHEBA: Look to your father.

BATSHEBA, NATHAN, YEDIDYA GATHER ROUND DAVID

YEDIDYA: (WITH TEARS IN HIS EYES) Father.

DAVID: How strange that after all the tears I have shed that a son of mine should cry for me.

BATSHEBA: Here, my lord, some water for your parched lips.

DAVID: Ever true and loving, dearest Batsheba. Would that I was worthy of such love.

BATSHEBA: Hush, do not speak of such things. Save your strength.

DAVID: This one battle, I shall not survive nor do I wish to. My heart and spirit have been broken and cannot be mended. It is time to relinquish the mantle of this world. I have but one request. Yedidya, promise me that you shall be a

better king than me and one worthy of building a temple to the Lord.

YEDIDYA: Yes, father.

DAVID: Then Take my hand and place it on your head.
(BLESSES YEDIDYA IN HEBREW)

Yevarechech adonai ve'yishmeraycha - May the Lord bless and keep thee;

Ya'air adonai panav eleycha vi hoonekka - May the Lord shine His face upon thee and sanctify thee;

Yissa adonai panav uleycha ve yasem lecha shalom
- May the Lord turn his face towards thee and grant thee peace.

As you have granted me peace from now on you shall be known as Solomon.

(DAVID'S HAND SLIPS OFF YEDIDYA'S HEAD)

NATHAN: Now the mighty heart is still as if it never beat at all. In all things, larger than life with a spirit far too loyal, generous and forgiving. Some may say that vainglory and ambition governed him and that his sins marred all merit he had achieved. Yet, to my mind, there never was a greater king who made his mark upon the world despite a fate etched in suffering.

[FADE OUT]

THE END.