

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

CONNILYN  
COSSETTE

SHIELD  
*of the*  
MIGHTY



THE KING'S MEN



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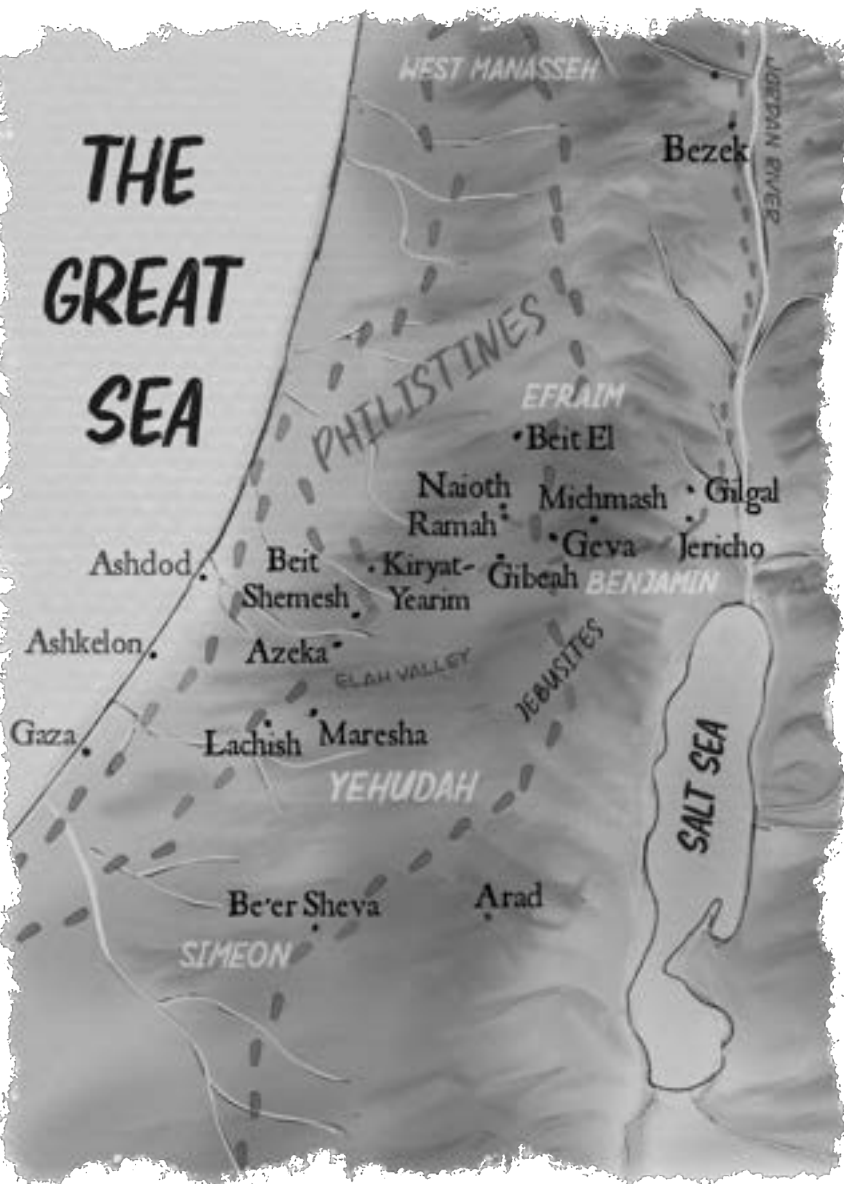
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For the people of Israel.

May the Lion of Judah give you strength as you fight for your home and your children. May you find *shalom* that surpasses all understanding as you await freedom for the captives and grieve the fallen. And may your eyes be lifted to the One who alone can rescue his treasured people.

I stand with you. *Am Yisrael Chai.*

# THE GREAT SEA



WEST MANASSEH

Bezek

JORDAN RIVER

PHILISTINES

EFRAIM

• Beit El

Naioth  
Ramah

Michmash

• Gilgal

• Kiryat-  
Yearim

• Geva

• Jericho

BENJAMIN

Ashdod

Beit  
Shemesh

Ashkelon

Azeka

ELAH VALLEY

JEHUSITES

Gaza

Lachish

Maresha

YEHUDAH

SALT SEA

Be'er Sheva

Arad

SIMEON

The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my  
God, my mountain where I seek refuge, my shield and the  
horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Psalm 18:2 HCSB

## A psalm of Ronen ben Avidan

The anointed one shall abide by the counsel of the  
Most High,  
The voice of the Ancient One to light his every step  
A shield to both the humble and the valiant,  
His mighty fortress offers refuge to all who call on the  
Name.

From ashes and dust shall his glory arise,  
a diadem of splendor to grace the head of the lowly.

His scepter lifted high shines justice across the Land,  
Heavenly righteousness, like a river of gladness, flows  
from his throne.

*Selah.*

# PROLOGUE

## *Zevi*

1043 BC

MITZPAH, ISRAEL

**L**ong live King Saul!”  
The shouts of the tribal leaders gathered in the valley echoed off the stony cliffs below our hiding place. A thrill buzzed in my chest as I met the wide-eyed gazes of my three cousins lying in the weeds beside me. Then, as if by silent accord, we too lifted our own voices to exalt the man who’d just been anointed the first king of Israel.

Finally there would be someone in command of the squabbling sons of Yaakov. Someone to inspire the tribes to fight under one banner. To mete out justice and make our enemies pay.

And as soon as I was old enough to join them, I would have my own vengeance as well.

For the space of five breaths, I was back in Zanoah, choking on

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ashes and shivering at the bottom of a half-full underground cistern as the feathered monsters of my nightmares stalked the streets.

“He’s *huge!*” exclaimed Gavriel, yanking me out of the gut-churning memory. “Our enemies will lose their bowels when they see him coming! I can’t wait to see them turn tail and run.” His fists clenched, jaw twitching. My cousin was nearly as hungry for battle as I but would have to wait two years longer than me to join the army.

I nudged him with an elbow. “Soon enough we’ll *both* march in the king’s ranks. Carrying weapons you’ve made.”

Gavi’s eyes flared, then took on a far-off look. “Perhaps. If I had the right tools and an actual supply of iron ore instead of scraps from old tools and broken knives.”

Avidan reached over Shalem, the youngest of us, to clap Gavi on the shoulder. “You do some pretty impressive things with those bits and pieces, cousin. Maybe one day the king himself will wield one of your swords in battle.”

When Gavi suggested he, Avidan, and I sneak onto this rocky ridge above the meeting where a new king would be chosen, I’d initially hesitated. Our families had come to Naioth to celebrate the autumn festivals a week ago and would remain until the booths we’d built for Sukkot were disassembled before the arrival of a new moon. All our fathers would have our heads if they knew we’d snuck down into the valley before dawn to meet Gavi outside Ramah and then walked an hour to Mitzpah in order to spy on the gathering of elders and tribal leaders. But the temptation to see a king selected by lots was far too enticing. So I’d agreed, with the understanding that Shalem—our spoiled younger cousin—was not to be included in the scheme.

But of course Shay had followed us, like the little sneak he was. And like usual, I got talked into letting him stay because I’d always had a soft spot for the boy.

“I wish I could go fight too,” Shay muttered.

The corners of Avi's mouth twitched down, his expression full of similar dismay. As Levites set apart for sacred service, neither of them would see battle. And truly, that was for the best. Though built like a warrior, Avi's true strengths lay with his silver tongue, not warfare. And Shalem, with his brilliant mind and tender heart, would more than likely be among the vaunted leadership of priests and prophets who lived and taught in Naioth, the community founded by Samuel the Seer just outside the city of Ramah.

I did not look forward to leaving behind the young men who'd embraced me as a cousin soon after I'd been adopted into their family, and as a friend even before that, but my path was clear. I'd spent nine years preparing for one thing: taking up a sword against the Philistines. The only thing that had changed was that instead of simply joining the tribal army of Yehudah in my twentieth year, I would now fight in the army of a united Israel under King Saul.

"I thought the king would come from Yehudah's lineage," said Shalem, his keen mind snagging on an ancient blessing bestowed on Yaakov's second-eldest son.

We'd been shocked when Samuel eliminated Yehudah from consideration. In fact, a large contingent of my fellow Yehudites had even stomped away in protest. But once the lot had fallen on the son of Kish, a Benjamite who towered above everyone around him by at least a handspan, doubts seemed to melt away.

We had a king, and an impressive one indeed. That was all that mattered.

"I don't care which line inhabits the throne," I said to Shalem, "as long as the Philistines are crushed once and for all."

It did not matter that the man I called father was a Philistine. Nor that his sister, my aunt Eliora, was the kindest of women. The rest of their kin deserved no mercy. Not after I'd been dragged off to be sold in Ashdod with the few who'd survived the slaughter in Zanoah. The screams of children being ripped from their mothers' arms still reverberated through my dreams.

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“Let’s get closer,” said Gavriel, his body nearly vibrating with anticipation.

I shook my head. “We’re already at risk of being seen.”

Although my cousin’s jaw ticked, he remained in place, just as I knew he would. The three of them had looked to me as their leader since we were boys. But there were times I wondered if their confidence in me was misplaced. They would never know the things I kept locked in the darkest places of my soul.

As the shouts acknowledging Saul’s new headship died away, the tribal elders began to chatter amongst themselves while the priests conferred in a tight group, but the insistent bleat of a *shofar* soon brought them back to quick order.

Samuel, the prophet and judge revered as the very mouthpiece of Yahweh for most of his life, stood beside Saul and lifted high a hefty scroll. “These are the words of Adonai Elohim, as recorded by our forefather Mosheh in the wilderness. Hear now and obey.”

With a practiced twist of his wrists, the seer unrolled the parchment and began to read the ancient statutes for Israel’s king in a commanding voice that rang through the valley. Not only did they include a warning for a leader who would seek to enrich and lift himself above those he governed but an admonition to transcribe a personal copy of the Torah. It ended with a promise that as long as the king listened and obeyed those commandments all the days of his life, his descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever.

Samuel gestured for the new king to kneel on the ground at his feet. “Do you hear these words, Saul ben Kish? And will you, chosen of the Most High, heed them until your final breath?”

“I will” came the answer, after the briefest of hesitations.

As the crowd looked on in hushed awe, Samuel gestured to one of the Levites and exchanged the scroll for a horn of oil, then anointed Saul as king of Israel while offering blessings to Adonai Most High. Golden oil trickled down Saul’s face and dripped from his full beard into the dirt.

I'd attended many convocations in Kiryat-Yearim where my family lived, led by my grandfather, the head of the Levites assigned to protect the Ark of the Covenant. And I had participated in sacred gatherings that Samuel himself presided over in Naioth, where Avi and Shalem lived with their own families, but never had a moment seemed so holy, so significant as this one. Even if we were caught spying today, I would never regret being witness to this assembly.

However, once the gathering began to disperse, I breathed a bit easier, grateful the thick weeds had successfully shielded us from the view of anyone below the ridge. Even though the four of us had tangled ourselves in a fair amount of mischief, I'd only allowed myself to be reckless once, and the result was the scar that sliced through Shalem's black brow—a constant reminder of my failure to keep him safe that day.

With a jolt, I forced the memory aside. "Time to go."

"Something is happening. Men are crowding around Saul," said Gavi, sliding forward to peer over the lip of the ridge. "We need to get closer."

"They are probably just offering blessings," said Avi.

"No," Gavi pressed. "Those look like warriors. I want to hear what is going on."

"We don't have time," I said. "We'll barely get back before the evening meal as it is. We'll never hear the end of it if they figure out where we were."

"I don't care. I'm going down there," Gavi said, coming to his feet.

"You are going to get us caught," said Avi, making a grab for Gavi's arm.

Gavi sidestepped Avi with an arrogant smirk. "I want to see what sort of men he chooses for his guard."

I gritted my teeth. "Not ones who disobey orders."

Heedless of the tension between us, Shalem bounced up. "I want to see the warriors too."

## *Shield of the Mighty*

“No,” Avi and I snapped at the same time. Shay’s golden eyes went wide.

“If he wants to be a fool, he can bear the consequences,” I said, placing a hand on Shay’s slender shoulder. “I doubt the king’s men will forget the boy drooling over their weapons. But the three of *us* are leaving. Now.”

Gavi sneered at me with the disdain he usually reserved for his stepfather. “You may be older than me, Zevi, but I haven’t been a boy in a long time. I can take care of myself.”

I glared at his retreating back, frustration pounding through my body. But what could I do? I may have been the unspoken leader of my cousins for almost a decade, but he was right that we were no longer children. Sooner or later, our paths would diverge. Avi and Shalem would remain in Naioth to learn their sacred duties while Gavi and I took up swords to fight for Israel and the king who’d been appointed here today.

But there was a scar at the base of my right thumb that would always remind me of the promise I’d made to my cousins, one I held just as sacred as the blood-soaked vow I’d made as I was led away in chains from Zanoah while it burned.

I would hold to both until there was no breath left in my body.



# *Zevi*

**1040 BC**

**BEIT EL, ISRAEL**

**A** spray of cold rain whipped across my face as I peered at the hills to the southwest. Just beyond them, an enemy camp lay spread over stolen terrain, mocking us with its proximity. And yet for reasons I could not comprehend, we'd done nothing. Nothing but camp here for months on end as snow and rain beat down on our tents while Saul's commanders remained silent.

My men were restless. *I* was restless. And no amount of hefting stones or hauling timber for the fortress we were building here assuaged the frustration of hundreds of soldiers who could barely recall the last time they'd raised swords against actual enemies.

I'd lost four from my squad over the coldest months, cowards who'd sneaked out of camp in the dark of night to run home, bored with the monotony and tired of waiting for the king to push back against the insidious creep of Philistines from the west.

## *Shield of the Mighty*

I did not blame them for their impatience. I deeply respected my king, but I too was more than ready for Saul to rally us to battle. However, deserters deserved no mercy. There was no room for selfishness in the ranks of Israel. We fought as one or we would fall, because the enemies that surrounded us were adept at slithering into the cracks between us.

The day my cousins and I had witnessed the anointing of King Saul, I'd naïvely assumed such divisions would have faded while fighting beneath one banner, but living in the army camp since then had disabused me of that notion. There was just as much distrust among the tribes as there ever had been. Unfortunately, the fractures that had formed between Avidan, Gavriel, and I when our young cousin Shalem disappeared had widened to chasms over the past couple of years as well.

I'd only seen Gavi a few times in those months, since he'd sworn his allegiance to Yonatan, the eldest son of Saul and high commander of the division stationed in Gibeah, while I remained in the larger division sent to Beit El in the hopes of deterring the Philistines from pushing any farther east. But the last time I'd crossed paths with my younger cousin, he barely acknowledged me, too busy charming the serving girl who diligently kept his cup full of drink while his companions shared bawdy jokes across the campfire.

As for Avi, he'd settled back in Naioth with his new wife to continue his Levitical studies, and I'd heard through my mother that they already had a child. I'd avoided Naioth since then, not because I did not miss my cousin, but because I could not shake the image of him standing before me, palm outstretched with a familiar white shell in its center. There'd been no accusation in Avi's green eyes as he'd offered up what he considered evidence of Shalem's survival from a wild animal attack, but I'd felt the indictment, nonetheless. I was the eldest. I should not have been swayed to let Shalem come in the first place. And I certainly should

not have left the boy in a cave to be torn to pieces during the battle at Yavesh-Gilead. Yet another loved one whose death weighed heavily on my soul.

And I hated the hope Avi clung to even after his fruitless search across the river. Because from time to time, I felt it welling up in my heart too, and it took concerted effort to press it back down in the darkness where it belonged.

Shay was gone for good, and it was my fault.

“Captain.” A young voice cut into my unwelcome thoughts. “He’s ready for you now.”

Turning to glance back at my commander’s tent, I found his fourteen-year-old aide holding aside the door flap in silent invitation. I’d been waiting for nearly an hour since I’d received the summons but knew better than to let my annoyance show. It was Merotai’s prerogative to keep me and any other man in his command waiting for however long he deemed necessary.

The youth kept his well-trained eyes on the ground as I stepped past him into the dimly lit interior. What I would not have done to assist a battalion commander in Israel’s army at his age. The boy would go far once he was old enough to join and would likely step into my own hard-earned position when he did. However, I was grateful for all I’d learned over the past two years as I moved from a soldier to a leader of twenty to a captain of a hundred men. They were lessons that would serve me well as I moved up the ranks.

“Zevi!” Merotai greeted me from his seat at the low table near the far end of the tent. “Come have a seat. I apologize for the wait.”

Silently, I took my place on the ground near the table. I’d have been more comfortable standing but knew better than to remain higher than the head of the battalion.

“Some wine, Tobi,” said Merotai with a wave of his palm, and the boy jumped to fill two cups.

Once we’d both taken a drink, Merotai cleared his throat. “I’ll cut to the heart of it, Zevi. We’re going to war.”

## *Shield of the Mighty*

My muscles went tight, my stomach lurching as my pulse sped, but I kept my face perfectly blank. I swallowed hard, barely able to control the shocked exclamation that pushed into my throat. “When?”

“Within weeks,” he said. “Yonatan retook Geva a few days ago.”

An irrational flare of jealousy welled up. After all these years of waiting to meet my enemies on the battlefield, it was Gavriel who’d done so under Yonatan’s command.

Merotai gestured to the east with his empty cup. “All reports say the Philistines are already on the move, preparing to retaliate.”

The reclamation of the fortress at Geva was no small thing. The Philistines had been entrenched there for decades, within a stone’s throw of Saul’s home in Gibeah just to the south. But the weather had been brutal these past weeks, so I was surprised Saul had sent Yonatan to battle this early in the season. And yet it was not my place to question the decisions of my king.

“When do we march?”

“Not yet. We have some time. The rains will keep the Philistines from building up their forces. Those iron-wheeled chariots cannot slog easily through the mud. For now, I have a task for you.”

“Anything.” Not only was Merotai my direct commander, but he’d also been instrumental in my promotion to captain a few months ago. He’d taken me aside soon after Yavesh-Gilead and drawn a clear path for me to succeed him in leadership one day—a surprise, since his own son, Kyrum, was of a similar age. But the commander, a distant cousin of Saul himself, had been impressed with my performance in battle, untried as it had been, and said he saw great promise in me. Since then, Kyrum and I had become friends, and he served as one of my two squad lieutenants.

“It may take the Philistines a few weeks to stage their retaliation, but they will strike back. Hard. So, within the month, Saul expects us to not only be at double our numbers but also be ready

to push the enemy back to their nests on the coastlands. Perhaps even into the sea itself.”

Heady anticipation rushed in my blood, but I locked down the instinct to surge to my feet, allowing only one rebellious finger to tap against my leg under the table and release the tension in my muscles. Finally, *finally* I'd face my enemy. “My men are ready.”

“I know. Which is why I have every confidence that you'll return with fully trained recruits.”

“Return?”

“You and the other captains will sound the call to arms among your tribesmen. You are charged with bringing back at least one hundred men to add to your command—but not just any volunteers. Saul wants the best. You'll be seeking out those who require very little training to meet the Philistines on the battlefield, and those whose skills are already lauded among their own.”

Not only had Merotai just given me a promotion to captain of two hundred in one stroke, doubling my command, but I would hand-select those I would lead into battle. Elation surged through my veins, but I kept my expression bland, even if one more finger joined the increasing tattoo against my thigh.

“You'll be given documentation for town elders to prove you come in Saul's name, along with necessary provisions. Chose five of your best to accompany you.”

Names came to mind without much thought. Asher and Kyrum, who'd been the first to be added to my numbers, and whom I trusted implicitly. Lemek, who, like the rest of his Zebulonite brethren, was extraordinarily skilled with any type of weapon. In that, he reminded me much of Gavriel, but with less tendency toward recklessness. Mahir and Shimi, cousins who were built similar to my own father, once known as the bare-knuckle Champion of Ashdod.

My mind swirled with plans. Merotai may want me to recruit men already prepared for battle, but I'd developed a training

## *Shield of the Mighty*

program for myself years ago, a relentless combination of exercises learned from my father that had honed my squad into a force to be reckoned with. With the help of my trusted men, we'd return with a hundred soldiers at the same level of preparation. A month was not very long, but it could be done, I was certain.

"However . . . this will not be your only mission," Merotai said, dragging my attention back to himself. "I have a special task for you. One that I am entrusting only to a few."

"I am honored, my lord."

"As you know, Saul is determined to not only drive our enemies from the Land but to raise Israel to a place of prominence." He swept a hand toward the south. "Our king is determined to build a powerful and influential nation, one visibly blessed by the hand of the Most High. For the past few months, Saul has been seeking skilled artisans to reside in and around the new fortress in Gibeah, men and women whose talents will aid in his efforts to transform Israel from a hodgepodge of shepherds and farmers to a kingdom that shines like a beacon to the world."

Realizing I was frowning, I pressed my mouth into a straight line as Merotai continued.

"Therefore, as you recruit soldiers, you'll also be on the lookout for metalworkers, weavers, perfumers, those who know horse breeding, who are talented with wood carving or making jewelry, and any other useful skill that might benefit Saul's efforts. Bring them to Gibeah when you return."

I blinked at the man I'd revered for the past two years, wondering if I'd misheard him. "You want me to talk craftsmen into leaving their homes and families?"

"They'll be well compensated. And given places of honor within Saul's court."

"I'm but a soldier, my lord . . ."

"And one of my best," he said. "Which is why it is so imperative you take this mission seriously. The reward for returning with

not only well-trained soldiers but talented men and women—and tribute from the towns you visit—will be promotion to higher command.”

Although I quickly wiped the disbelief from my face, Merotai must have seen my confusion.

“Our king is committed to building Israel into a nation to be respected among the nations,” he said. “But to do so will require a great deal of resources.”

I knew this firsthand. I’d been in the grand palace of a foreign king, and even as a boy in chains, I’d been impressed by the vastness of the Philistine fortress, the countless rooms and brightly painted murals on nearly every wall. I’d seen finely crafted clothing on well-fed royal bodies and the glitter of jewels around necks and fingers. It was true that in order to be counted among the wealthy nations around us, Saul would need a large amount of silver and gold. But did that mean I had to be a tax collector as well as a soldier?

“I see such potential in you, Zevi. Always have. It’s why I have little doubt you’ll one day take my position. And if you are successful in this mission, I guarantee that day will come sooner rather than later.”

I was at a loss for words. Merotai was commander over the three thousand of us in the division encamped at Beit El and he held a position of great influence with his own superior, Eyal, and Abner, Saul’s cousin and the High Commander of Israel’s army.

I could not deny that such a future was enticing. But the idea of trying to convince others to understand the importance of such things was a daunting prospect, especially when words did not come easy to me. Thankfully, Asher was almost as skilled as my cousin Avidan in that respect. If I was to persuade town elders to not only send their young men to war but also to offer up both their artisans *and* their silver, I’d have need of his honey-coated tongue.

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“What if they refuse?”

His brows arched high, as if the thought had never occurred to him. “The artisans? Or your tribesmen?”

“Either. Both.”

“You’ll convince them. I’m certain of it. After all, towns that refuse to support Saul will likely not be among the first to be defended by his army.” There was an edge in his voice I’d never heard before. “Loyalty matters, as you know. I chose you for this position for a reason—even above my own son. Do whatever you must, because I expect Saul himself will be pleased that I chose so well when you return with plenty of recruits, artisans, and tribute.”

It was both a promise and a warning. If this mission went well, then he and I both would reap the rewards. But if I failed, I would be letting down both my mentor *and* my king.

I lifted my chin and looked him in the eye. “You can count on me, my lord.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” He grinned, then slid a clay tablet across the table to me. “Here is proof that you come in the name of the king, with his royal seal, along with an explanation of Saul’s requests. And these”—he handed over a scrap of papyrus—“are the towns you’ve been assigned.”

My eyes swept over the first few names on the list. “These are Yehudite towns.”

“Indeed,” said Merotai. “You are a son of Yehudah, are you not?”

I nodded. Regardless of my adoption by Natan and Shoshana, and the ten years I’d spent in the Levitical community of Kiryat-Yearim, I was Yehudite by birth.

“And you hail from the *shephelah*?”

I swallowed hard as I nodded again. It was true I’d been born in the hilly region that bordered Philistine territory.

“Then you are the perfect man for this assignment.”

Arguments sprang to my tongue. Not only had I been nowhere near that area since I was a boy, but many of the Yehudites were less than thrilled with a Benjamite on the throne—my task to convince them would be that much harder.

But I was a soldier. We obeyed orders without question. So instead of giving voice to such thoughts, I pressed them into a corner of my mind. “I understand, my lord.”

“I knew you would,” he said. “Send my son to me, will you? I haven’t seen the boy for days.”

Kyrum was no boy—he was almost two years older than I was, even if no one was aware of that fact since I’d entered the army under vaguely false pretenses. But I supposed all fathers had difficulty thinking of their children as grown. My own still ribbed me for foolish decisions I’d made as a youth—albeit with a twinkle in his eye that clearly expressed his affection for me. And although my father had made a firm vow not to shed blood except in direct defense of his family, the day I’d left to join Saul’s army, he’d told me how proud he was of my firm convictions and my unwavering loyalty to Israel. As much as I wished I’d never endured the destruction of Zanoah, I could not regret crossing paths with the fearsome Philistine who would eventually adopt me as his own son.

“I’ll send Kyrum directly,” I said. “And of course, I mean to take him with me. He too has an eye for potential that will be advantageous in this mission.”

Busy examining another tablet imprinted with Saul’s insignia, Merotai hummed acknowledgment. “I’ll see you back here in three weeks, Captain.”

Dismissed, I stood and gave my commander a bow. When young Tobi pulled back the tent flap to allow my exit, I took a closer look at the scrap of papyrus in my hand. My attention snagged on the final name on the list as my stomach lurched and bile surged into my throat.

*Shield of the Mighty*

*Maresha.*

I was not only assigned the exact region where I'd spent my early years, but the town in which I'd been born. The town that banished me when I was nine years old, within days of my entire family dying around me.