

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

CONNILYN
COSSETTE



SPLENDOR
of the
LAND

THE KING'S MEN



THE KING'S MEN



SPLENDOR
of the
LAND

CONNILYN
COSSETTE



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2025 by Connilyn K. Cossette

Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cossette, Connilyn, author.

Title: Splendor of the Land / Connilyn Cossette.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2025. | Series: The King's Men ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2024054825 | ISBN 9780764238932 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764244971 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493450749 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Bible fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3603.O8655 S64 2025 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20241213

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024054825>

Scripture quotations labeled HCSB are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Holman CSB®, and HCSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Author is represented by the Steve Laube Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

25 26 27 28 29 30 31 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For those who feel unseen:
The One who lit the stars aflame is calling you by name.

*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have
called you by your name; you are Mine.”*

Isaiah 43:1b HCSB



Then Saul said to the Kenites, “Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt.” So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.

1 Samuel 15:6 *ESV*

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

Gavriel

1043 BC

MITZPAH, ISRAEL

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 let the words fall hard between me and my eldest cousin, thrilling a little at the flare of indignation in his eyes. Zevi rarely reacted to my jabs, so it gave me a jolt of satisfaction to see him flinch. He was almost as arrogant as Hanan sometimes, and I knew no one as self-satisfied as my uncle.

Ever since my cousins and I had crept up onto the ridge to watch the selection of the new King of Israel early this morning, I'd been aching to get closer to the gathering. Now that I'd seen a fellow Benjamite named Saul ben Kish anointed as sovereign, no one was going to stop me from finding out what was going on in the valley below.

Splendor of the Land

I turned my back on Zevi's judgmental glare but caught sight of the frustration on Shalem's face as I did. The youngest of the four of us, Shay hated being left behind more than anything. I couldn't blame him. I'd lose my mind if Zevi and Avidan coddled me the way they did him, terrified that his parents would flay them alive if he was hurt. The boy needed to toughen up. Iyov and Hodiya couldn't wrap their precious youngest in thick wool for the rest of his days.

Perhaps I should have invited Shay, since he was the only one curious about which warriors had already offered their swords to the new king. But getting close enough to hear what the men were saying was going to be hard enough without a sniveling pup underfoot, pelting me with a thousand questions.

There was no easy path down from the granite ridge where we'd been spying on the proceedings and the underbrush was thick after the long rainy season, but I knew these hills like I knew my favorite blade, and it was easy enough to ghost barefooted through the trees and pluck my way among the boulders until I was within earshot of the group gathered around Saul. From the snatches of conversation that floated toward me, I guessed most of them to be Benjamite, but there were a few others whose subtle accents indicated they hailed from the north, perhaps Ephraim or Western Manasseh.

I'd never cared much about who might sit on the throne of Israel before now. I only wanted a leader to crush our enemies. But when it had been a man of my *own* tribe selected, pride for my lineage swept through me like never before. From the very beginning, when the youngest of Yaakov's sons were born, the other tribes had looked down on Benjamin. But not anymore.

Not only was Saul ben Kish the chosen ruler of our nation, he was nearly a head taller than anyone around him. With a thick beard and warrior-wide shoulders, he was a man to be feared, both on and off the battlefield. Our enemies would quiver in their sandals. No more laughing at our "headless" nation, mocking us

as a horde of ignorant shepherds and farmers, or stealing our land and oppressing our people. With Saul and his warriors in the lead, our enemies would water the ground beneath their feet when they saw us coming. And I'd be right there alongside my tribesman, my own weapons in hand.

I pressed my palm to the sheathed knife in my belt out of habit. It was the best one I'd made so far. Strong. Sleek. Perfectly balanced. I'd spent days carving the pommel to fit my left hand, the grooves shaped for my grip alone.

Two men stood on the periphery, one tall and dark-haired, his broad-chested form undoubtedly that of a warrior, and the other shorter with fiery red hair but no less built for battle.

"We should take back Efraim first," said the red-haired one. "Or the Philistines will push farther into our territories. We should have sent them back to the coastlands long before now."

The Philistines had captured nearly all Efraimite territory when they sacked Shiloh decades ago. Those who did not escape after the Mishkan was destroyed remained under ruthless domination by those who hated us most.

"He's been king for less than an hour, Emmet," said the taller one. "A campaign like that will take time, resources, and well-trained men—all of which we are sorely lacking right now. Besides, it will require united effort between the tribes."

Emmet scoffed. "It's been hundreds of years since Yaakov sired our tribal fathers. When have we ever been of one accord?"

"We've also never had a king to lead us before. It'll be his first order of business to call for unity, I assure you."

Emmet moved in closer, dropping his voice. "Is he up to it? Do you think?"

The young man was quiet for so long I wondered whether I'd missed his response. I held my breath. "My father will rise to the challenge. I'm certain of it."

Shock buzzed in my veins. This was Saul's *son*? He did have

Splendor of the Land

the extreme height and warrior aspect of his father, along with the dark hair and beard.

“He’ll have no problem recruiting Benjamites,” said Emmet. “But Yehudah and Simeon . . .” He shook his head. “You saw how they reacted to the outcome of the lots.”

Saul’s son hummed in reluctant agreement. “Perhaps you can be of help in that regard. Your mother hails from the south, doesn’t she?”

“She does. Near Arad,” said Emmet. “But the Amalekites drove her family north when she was a child. I’ll have no sway over any man of Yehudah, regardless of my maternal heritage.”

“But it does give you a unique voice,” said Saul’s son.

“Perhaps,” Emmet mused. “Will he put you in charge of a unit?”

“I hope so. I plan to show him I’m worthy.”

“You know what else all of this means, don’t you, Yonatan? Someday, *you’ll* be king.”

It was at this moment that my body betrayed me. I’d been crouched in such an awkward position behind the boulder for so long that a muscle in my leg cramped. My foot skidded across the stony ground with a grating rasp and I went down, landing hard on one knee. Eyes pressed closed, I held my breath and prayed no one had heard my blunder.

Too late. A large hand came down on my shoulder, at once grabbing me by the tunic and jerking me to my feet. *Zevi will never let me forget that he was right.*

With my heartbeat thrumming at the back of my throat and dread prickling my skin, I looked up into the eyes of the heir to the throne.

“Catch a spy there, did you?” said Emmet, thick amusement in his voice.

“Indeed,” said Yonatan, his piercing gaze taking me in head to foot before he snatched the knife from its sheath. “And an armed one at that.”

Instinct battled reason. I was no slender reed, but Yonatan easily outweighed me by a third, was probably equal in height to his giant of a father, and was the son of the new King of Israel. Not to mention there were at least fifteen warriors within a few paces of what had been my hiding spot. So I held still as he examined my weapon. “Where’d you get this, boy? You steal it?”

I bristled. “I *made* it.”

Emmet barked out a laugh. “You expect us to believe that?”

My blood went hot, but I swallowed against the glut of rage in my throat. Something about the man reminded me of Hanan, and it made me want to smash my fist into his arrogant mouth. But I refused to waste this, my first impression with the heir to the throne of Israel.

I lifted my chin. “It took me three tries to get the blend of copper and tin just right. The heat had to be perfect, and I found once I added ash to the mold, it worked far better than the first try. Not only can it slice through bone with little effort, but it flies true, I assure you.”

I kept my eyes on Yonatan, hoping to prove my words sincere, but Emmet’s disbelieving stare singed the side of my face.

“How old are you?” asked Yonatan.

I knew what he saw—a young man who’d not quite grown into his feet and hands, a beard still coming into its fullness over a face that was a shade too youthful to pass for military age. But my shoulders had widened in the past few months, and I’d gained nearly a handspan of height, along with a substantial amount of bulk from laboring with my uncle’s men as they loaded and unloaded wagons—a task I relished because it bothered Hanan so much to see me sweating alongside those so far beneath his pristine sandals. But my youth had nothing to do with my skills.

“Old enough to make superior weapons to the vast majority in Hebrew hands.”

Their brows flew high at my audacity, but this was no time for

false modesty. I'd been taught by a master metalsmith. Since I'd been a boy, I'd studied every weapon I could get my hands on, taking them apart to understand the craftsmanship whenever I could. I'd even figured out how to make leather armor because I refused to give up when I wanted to learn something. The ability to hone in on a task until I'd mastered it had served me well and would continue to do so when I was a soldier. This was my opportunity to lay the groundwork for a future with Saul's army as a master of weapons-making.

After a few tense moments, Yonatan chuckled. "No lack of confidence, I see."

With a blank expression, the red-haired warrior kept his eyes on me. "Fine line between confidence and foolhardiness, if you ask me."

I set my jaw, determined not to snatch up the bait Emmet had laid down. If it wasn't for the red hair, I would lay that fine knife on a bet the arrogant cur was actually related to my uncle.

"This is well-made," said Yonatan, running the pad of one long finger along the edge of my blade. There were no nicks to be found there; I'd sharpened it last night as Avi blathered on with some rambling story about an altercation between two young Levites in Naioth over a woman. Why anyone would fight over one woman was beyond me. There were plenty enough to go around.

Yonatan held the weapon up to one eye and squinted the other, peering down the flat of the blade with a hum of satisfaction for its clean lines. That quiet approval echoed in my chest like a clap of thunder.

I'd spent hour after hour smoothing the metal, ignoring everything else until it was perfect. It had been time well spent, even if my mother had fussed I was ignoring my responsibilities around the house. As if it mattered. As the richest man in Ramah, Hanan employed a bevy of servants to wait hand and foot on my mother

and sisters. His efforts to force me into following his footsteps had always been destined to fail. I would never be like him—no more than I meant to be like my father, his worthless brother, who'd left my mother a widow. I would be my own man. And this moment was the first step toward that goal.

Yonatan suddenly flicked his wrist, tossing my knife into the air. With a glimmer of sunlight, the blade flipped twice before landing in the prince's left palm. He grinned. "Well balanced too."

It took every drop of effort to keep an answering grin off my face, when in truth, a shout of pure triumph was demanding to burst from my mouth. But I would not act the boy I'd been twice accused of being today. I locked my muscles tight, willed my breath to remain slow and steady, and allowed only one dip of my chin to acknowledge the praise.

"A left-handed weapon," said Emmet. "You're Benjamite, then."

I nodded. It was a trait our tribe was famous for. Those of us who were not naturally inclined to use our left hands in weaponry were trained to do so from the earliest years. And even though Hanan eschewed any such training himself and did his best to discourage me from doing so, I'd taught myself the skill of using both hands with not only a blade but with a bow and a sling.

The one thing I would not do was learn to write with either hand because it was the only skill my uncle desired me to develop. I could read the symbols of our language, which my mother had taught me before my father died, but I had refused to play the scribe and endlessly etch lines of script and numbers into ledgers like Hanan, a task he adored almost as much as he did my mother and sisters—his one and only redeeming quality in my eyes.

"And you can use this?" asked Yonatan, almost reluctantly handing me the knife by its blade.

I looked the king's son in the eye, banishing the nerves that fluttered in my stomach. "I can hit the center of a target at thirty paces," I said. "Perhaps more on a still day."

Splendor of the Land

One dark eyebrow arched. “Can you?”

“And that knife is only one of my creations. I make spearheads, arrow tips, even metal slingstones that will travel twice the speed of stone, as well as sturdy leather scale armor.”

“A man of many talents,” said Emmet, his tone entirely disbelieving.

Heat flared at the base of my neck. “I’ve been smithing since I was eleven. And studying weaponry since I could hold a blade.”

“Your father taught you these things?” asked Yonatan.

“No.” Bile sluiced over my tongue. “He’s dead.”

His brow pinched. “I’m sorry—”

“I’m not,” I interrupted before I thought better of trampling a prince’s words. “What I mean is, I learned most of it on my own and the rest from a . . . friend.”

At my vague explanation, a look passed between the two men that I could not interpret. But I was not about to explain that my drunken father had died when I was not even six, and since then I’d spent more time with servants than the man who’d stepped in and married my mother.

“It’s a good story. But he stole it, Yonatan.” Emmet let out a caustic laugh, and my body went stiff, my face burning. “He’s far too young for such skill.”

Overcome with equal parts fury and pride, I sputtered, “That’s a lie.”

Emmet shook his head, unconvinced. “Let’s get back, Yonatan. I’m sure your father will address us soon.”

My vision blurred for a moment, and if the king’s son had not been watching me, I would have plowed headlong into the red-headed fool, no matter how many years he had on me. I wanted to pummel the smugness from his face. I clenched both fists at my sides and breathed through my nose.

Someone called Yonatan’s name, and Emmet walked off in answer, not giving me another glance. But to my surprise, the king’s

son remained, his keen gaze on my face as I held on to what remained of my composure. “What is your name?”

I flinched at the gentle tone. I’d fully expected Yonatan to follow his rude friend without another thought for me. “Gavriel ben Elan of Ramah.”

“Well, Gavriel ben Elan of Ramah, when you are old enough to fight for Israel, I’d be honored to have you in my unit. We’ll need every weapon we can find. And those who can craft such things will be of great value. Especially if they are of such excellent quality.”

I swallowed, too shocked to speak.

“Have you made a sword?”

“No, my lord,” I said. “I have only scavenged materials or broken tools to work with.”

He folded his arms over his broad chest, frowning. “Our enemies certainly have a stranglehold on the metal trade, don’t they?”

With the Amalekites to the south blocking access to the copper mines, the Philistines and Phoenicians controlling the sea trade, and the Arameans, Moabites, and Ammonites dominating the trade roads east and north, there was little opportunity for us to obtain enough ore to make even one sword of quality, let alone the thousands we would need to overcome our enemies.

“Time will come when you’ll have plenty of material,” Yonatan said. “You’ll see. And then, I expect you to make me a sword that will put those Philistine ones to shame.” His dark eyes glimmered with amusement. I sensed it was not at my expense but that of his disbelieving friend.

I swallowed hard against the emotion that swelled in my throat as I bowed my head. “I will, my lord. I vow it.”

He clapped a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Good. Then we have a deal. Until then, keep honing those skills and seeking out new ones. We can always learn more, can’t we?”

I nodded, too overcome to respond as the king’s son turned to

Splendor of the Land

walk away. He was right, I still had much to learn and would not rest until I mastered everything about my chosen craft. But if there was one thing I knew for certain, it was that Yonatan ben Saul was a man I would gladly follow into battle, and I would do whatever it took to ensure that his belief in me was justified.



Gavriel

1033 BC

CITY OF DAN, NORTHERN ISRAEL

Yonatan was going to kill me.

But even if my commander would strip the hide from my bones later, the only thing that mattered right now was how quickly I could slam the grin off the foul mouth of the man standing opposite me. Besides, it wouldn't be the first time King Saul's son called me in for discipline, and I was certain it wouldn't be the last.

Although I was far from drunk, I'd just begun to enjoy a pleasant hum of warmth in my veins. I'd been paid my wages and had plans to spend most of it here in this inn, where I'd been told the drink was good and the cost minimal. But the sight of a woman struggling to get away from a brutish Danite in the corner of the room invoked a flash of infuriating memory that clouded my vision. And when he'd grabbed her by the waist with his meaty paw and laid a sloppy kiss on her unwilling lips, it had been too

Splendor of the Land

much. Rage burned through the buzz of drink in my body, and I'd pressed through the oblivious crowd to demand he let her go.

"She's a juicy piece," said the Danite with a curl of his lip toward the serving girl cowering at his side. "But not worth such a fuss."

"Then walk away," I said.

"I'll do as I please." He grabbed the terrified young woman by the jaw and pulled her to him, pressing his face into her hair as she trembled, but keeping his eyes pinned on me in defiance.

I widened my stance. "Only a coward forces a woman's interest."

The Danite's eyes flared at the insult. But instead of releasing the serving girl, he pulled her into his chest. She trembled, begging me with watery eyes to rescue her. Why the innkeeper would even have such a timid little thing in a room full of wolves was beyond my comprehension. Most of the women I'd come across in taverns or inns over the past few years, especially those who worked around soldiers, were nearly as thick-skinned as some of the men I fought beside. This one far too closely resembled my younger sisters, who might as well be made of feathers for all the three of them together weighed. The thought of any one of them caught in such a situation hardened my resolve.

"Release her," I said in a bored tone. "Now."

"Or what?" snapped the Danite. "You'll make me?"

I shrugged lazily. "Can't be all that hard when you have to hide behind a girl."

As I predicted, he puffed up like an adder and pushed the woman to the side. Surprised, she stumbled into the bench along the wall but wisely did not hesitate to dart off and disappear into the crowd. I had no time to be relieved she was safe as the snarling Danite came at me with a curse. My first instinct was to go for the knife at my belt, but this was a fellow Hebrew, not one of my enemies. I could not defend myself by fatal force or I'd end up on trial for murder.

Thankfully, my uncle Natan had taught my cousins and me a

few things from his time as a bare-knuckle fighter, so I pivoted, easily dodging the furious Danite. He slammed into a group of men behind me, their drinks spilling in a cascade of foul words and crashing pottery.

The Danite swiftly righted himself and swung around to plow into me. My jaw hit his huge shoulder, and I bit my tongue, the tang of metallic blood filling my mouth, but I grabbed the back of his tunic with both hands and yanked hard to the right, setting him off-balance. He buckled sideways like an ax-notched sapling.

I let out a mocking laugh. “Perhaps you ought to stick to man-handling girls after all, my friend.”

He barreled toward me like a bull, spewing some of the filthiest curses I’d ever heard—and I spent the entirety of my time with soldiers. It took only one breath to realize that not only had I pushed too far but I was still a little drink-addled. I tripped back, trying to firm my stance, and he slammed a fist into my eye. Pain spiked through my head, and my vision split into three foggy scenes, all of which contained a murderous Danite. I swung back, but my aim was off, and I merely clipped him on the cheekbone at the same time he punched me hard in the side. Before I could retaliate, a set of arms looped around my neck, pulling tight until I choked.

Disoriented, I staggered back as two large men came between me and the Danite, one I recognized as the innkeeper himself. “Get out of my inn,” he said, then jerked his chin toward the tall man at his side. “Toss him out.”

With my breath cut off by whichever of his brutes had me by the throat, I could say nothing as I was dragged toward the door, accompanied by the sound of curses and shouts from the other patrons. Someone even threw their drink on me, which stung my eyes as it sluiced down my face.

I tried to bring the world back into focus, but my head was still faintly ringing from the hit the Danite had gotten in. Perhaps I shouldn’t have had more than a couple of drinks tonight, after all.

Splendor of the Land

The men stopped at the threshold, and with all their strength, tossed me into the street, which was surprisingly busy for such a gray afternoon. Tumbling forward into the center of a small herd of pigs being driven by the inn, my knees hit the stones. Pain jolted up my thighs as the swine squealed and scattered. This earned me more curses from their herder, who kicked me in the side with a leather boot inset with what felt like a sharp bone in the toe, the point of which was likely to prod his unruly animals along.

Two of the pigs trampled over me as I lay on the ground, my vision spinning and head muddled, adding a few more bruises to match those already throbbing on my face and torso.

“Don’t come back!” bawled the innkeeper from the doorway. “None of you worthless Benjamites are welcome here.”

It was doubtful the rest of the soldiers in the small unit I’d traveled here with would bother entering such an inn in the first place, especially since Yonatan had told us to keep to the other side of Dan, where there were a few businesses more friendly to outsiders. But I’d made my choice of establishment for the cheap drinks, not for the welcome.

The door slammed behind me, and I slumped to the ground with a groan. At least the young woman was safe. For now. I doubted the innkeeper cared that she was so vulnerable, only that his purse was full.

“And here he is,” said a voice above me. I did not have to raise my head to know that the words came from the mouth of a soldier named Petak. Nor was I surprised when the answer came from his brother, Abenar. They were inseparable, like two halves of a whole.

“Right where Yonatan said we’d find you,” said Abenar, “wallowing in filth with the other swine.”

With the eye that wasn’t already swollen shut, I peered up at the two men I’d fought beside for nearly nine years. Men whose wounds I’d tended after battle. Who’d served with me under Yonatan since before I’d even technically been of military age.

The disgust on both of their faces made it clear they had seen the tail end of my altercation with the innkeeper and his guards, and that they were not pleased to have been sent to haul me back to camp.

Yes, Yonatan was indeed going to murder me, and these men, whom I'd once called friends, would more than likely hand him the first stones.



“I have no time for this,” Yonatan bit out. “I have another meeting in the morning with the Danite elders.” He paced in front of me, arms folded across his chest. Disappointment hung in the air of the tent like a dark cloud, suffocating whatever remained of my welcome inebriation earlier in the afternoon. The moment I'd stood before my commander and felt the weight of his stare, I'd gone dreadfully sober.

This was not the first time Saul's son had chastised me, but before it had been with the hint of amusement in his eye, as if my slipups with discipline had been tolerable, given my record as a soldier in his command. I'd been with him from nearly the beginning, having petitioned to be in his regiment shortly after the battle of Yavesh, and I could not imagine serving under anyone else. But in all the years I'd been subject to his leadership, I'd never seen him so agitated. At least, not since he'd very nearly been executed by his own father at Michmash.

“We have a mission here, Gavriel. An important one. And I have to go into the meeting with the elders tomorrow with some sort of explanation about why one of my men—one of my handpicked elite—can't keep himself out of drunken brawls.”

My stomach wrenched at the bitterness in his tone, but I kept my mouth closed and my chin down. This was no time to talk back. And what could I say anyhow? I'd done just as he said. The

fact that it had been in defense of a woman was beside the point. Yonatan was a fair commander, one whose leadership was without rival among Saul's army. But that also meant he took his position seriously and suffered little foolishness. Excuses were not welcome, only unquestionable loyalty and decisive action on behalf of Israel—things Yonatan himself took to heart.

If only the same could be said of his father.

Not that I would dare speak aloud such a treasonous thing. But the entire reason we were here, at the far northern reaches of Hebrew territory on a fairly futile mission to foster goodwill with the men of Dan, was because Saul could not bear to give Yonatan the credit he was due for his part in the victory at Michmash. It was because of Yonatan's boldness that we'd pushed the Philistines back to their coastal cities after decades of oppression and encroachment on Hebrew land.

And yet instead of honoring his son for such courage, Saul had taken most of the credit for the Philistine retreat and even for the presence of the Ark of the Covenant at the battle, which led to the shaking of the ground and the terror among the enemy that handed us the ultimate victory that day.

In the guise of bestowing him the honor of representing the throne, Saul had sent Yonatan as an emissary to the northern tribes for the purposes of garnering support, recruiting skilled soldiers, and keeping a close eye on tribes that had been under their own autonomy for so long they sometimes forgot that Saul was king over *all* Israel.

It was a mission that should have taken only a few months but instead had stretched over the past two years, while in the south other units, under the leadership of lesser men, had the privilege of dealing with our enemies. This northern area was under no immediate threat. The Hittites had left us alone for many years, the Arameans hadn't bothered to face us head-on for decades, and the Phoenicians were far more interested in expanding their

seafaring horizons to turn their ambitions southward. I knew this mission for what it was, a punishment for not only showing Saul up on the battlefield but for the events of the following day, when the king nearly slaughtered his heir for a foolish vow.

Yonatan was far more patient than I would have been. I respected Saul as sovereign over Israel, acknowledged he had been chosen by Yahweh himself, and was honored to fight under his banner. But privately, I anticipated the day Yonatan would inhabit the throne. There was no doubt in my mind he would reign with integrity and fairness, the same way he led his men.

Therefore, I would remain silent and take my well-deserved discipline now like a man.

“We are here as representatives for the king. It will be hard enough convincing Dan to send men south to fight with us should another major conflict arise.” Yonatan shook his head. “Israel must remain united, throw off the last vestiges of our insular ways and tribal prejudices. I cannot afford to raise their hackles over one fool.”

Dread rose as I began to suspect this was no simple disciplinary meeting.

“You are a good soldier, Gavriel. You fight with ferocity like I’ve rarely seen and are one of my best spies. And of course, your skill in weapon-making is extraordinary. But you are also reckless. Arrogant. And you lack a consistency and focus that would take you from good to great.”

All the blood seemed to drain from my head into my mud-covered boots.

“You’ve been caught twice sleeping during your watch. Both times you were saved because there was no danger in the area but regardless you put this unit at risk.”

The back of my neck prickled with shame. He was right. The first time I’d accidentally dozed off was a couple of years ago, when we’d marched almost nonstop for two days from Gibeah to Galilee.

Splendor of the Land

But the second time, I was drunk. We'd been welcomed into one of the towns in Naftali with great fanfare and a generous flow of exceptional wine—not to mention a few lovely girls who served that wine with enticing smiles for the brave soldiers of Israel. I'd forgotten all about my turn at watch while occupied with one of the more accommodating young women and hadn't given myself time to sober up before I was called to stand guard over our camp. That was the first time I'd been the recipient of a dressing-down by Yonatan. In truth, I'd been so sick the next morning I barely remembered what punishment he'd given me.

"I've had more than a few accounts of your hard drinking, Gavriel. Far be it from me to deny a soldier a bit of pleasure when not on duty, a necessary escape from reminders of things we've seen and done, but you've become increasingly irresponsible and less diligent in your work. That last batch of bronze arrowheads you made were so brittle they crumbled the moment they were knocked on bowstrings."

My insides roiled. I could argue that the ingots we'd procured from a load of tribute from the southern tribes was of an inferior grade. There'd been so much impurity mixed into the copper it was nearly impossible to burn it all out. But I suspected nothing I said right now would assuage Yonatan's ire. Besides, he was right that there was little excuse for producing inferior weapons.

"It will never happen again, I v—"

Yonatan threw up a palm to stop my vow, and I was too well-trained to speak over him. "I've put up with far too much as it is. This unit must be cohesive, and the rest of the men have lost trust in you."

My knees nearly buckled. If Yonatan had thrust his sword all the way through my body, it would have hurt less. These men, whom I'd fought alongside for years, whom I considered brothers in many ways, no longer trusted me?

"Therefore, you are released from duty."

Fiery nausea swam up my throat. “But I—”

“Go home, Gavriel. Your sword will undoubtedly be needed in further conflicts. Straighten yourself out so you’ll be ready when the time comes.”

My mind spun, thoughts crashing around in my skull like rocks in a barrel. He was cutting me from this unit? No. That could not be. I was made to be a warrior. Made to one day stand at Yonatan’s side as one of his honored armor-bearers. It was what I’d been working toward since I was sixteen years of age. How could I have so completely ruined everything?

For the first time since I was a boy, I felt my eyes burning with tears. I blinked hard, desperate for my fear not to come flooding out. “*Quit sniveling like a little girl*” spat a ghostly memory. I flinched but quickly got a hold on my composure, determined to cling to the position I’d earned among his elite unit of warriors.

“Please, Commander. Do not send me away. I vow with everything in me that I will do better. This is . . . this is who I am, my lord. I am . . .” I paused to clear my throat of the stupid emotion that had its claws wrapped around my neck. “I am nothing if I am not a soldier.”

“I’m sorry, Gavriel. I truly am. I saw your potential from the very first day I met you, but unfortunately, you’ve squandered it.”

Shame crawled up my neck, burning my face like a furnace. Surely this was only a horrible nightmare, I’d only drunk too much and would wake to find myself still in good graces with a man I’d practically worshiped for the past few years. Dizzy, I scrubbed at my face, pressing my fingers into my eye sockets as I tried to drag myself back from whatever hellish dream I’d fallen into.

But Yonatan’s tall form still stood before me as the blur began to clear from my sight, the frown on his face hard and unyielding. “Go home.”

Dazedly, I muttered, “I don’t have one.”

The statement was as much a truth as it was a lie. I had been

Splendor of the Land

born in Ramah. My mother lived there with my three younger sisters and, of course, the uncle who'd snatched up his brother's wife the moment the fool who'd sired me had landed himself under the wheels of an ox-drawn wagon. I'd grown up with every luxury in a villa near the center of the city that had only grown larger as Hanan's business had flourished. But it wasn't my home anymore. Hadn't been since I'd walked out the door to go fight for Saul at the Battle of Yavesh when I was nearly three years from military age.

Even if my mother and sisters would be thrilled to welcome me back, I had no desire to return to a house whose master considered me the disgraceful spawn of his worthless brother. Besides, even if I wanted to, I was fairly certain I'd destroyed whatever had remained of my welcome the last time I stepped foot in Hanan's house a few years ago.

The look of pity on Yonatan's face gouged into my chest like a rusty knife. I did not want his pity. I wanted to prove he was wrong about me. That I wasn't the sum total of a few foolhardy decisions. I'd worked too hard to watch every plan I'd made crumble into dust. I refused to give up so easily.

I stood straighter, looking him in the eye to display the fullness of my sincerity. "Please, my lord. I know I have let you down. Let everyone down. But give me a chance to redeem myself. If you will not have me with this unit, place me with another. I will give my all. Prove my worth to Israel and to my king."

Yonatan did not respond to my plea, only dropped his eyes to the floor and shook his head. My heart sank into the pit of my stomach. Surely this could not be over. Where would I even go?

Now that he'd chosen to make a life as a timberman instead of a soldier, Zevi and his wife, Yochana, lived in Kiryat-Yearim, among the clan of relatives who inhabited our grandfather's household compound. He still served Saul from time to time training men, but he'd chosen to follow his father's footsteps and stay out of conflict whenever he could, for the sake of his family. He and Yo-

chana would welcome me, I was sure, but as much as I respected Zevi, I had no interest in cutting down trees with my cousin and his father for the rest of my life.

Neither could I find a place with Avidan, since he and his wife had moved their family across the river a couple of years ago to go live with Keziah's people. Avi held some notion of spreading Torah knowledge among the Hebrews who'd been separated from the rest of the tribes for hundreds of years, as well as the idol worshippers who lived among them.

And of course Shalem . . . the youngest of the four of us had been missing for nearly nine years now. Both Avi and Zevi had found clues that he was, against all odds, still alive—or at least had been a few years ago when Zevi insisted he'd crossed Shay's trail on the borders of Philistine territory. But the boy had been traveling with traders, Phoenicians by all accounts, and he could be anywhere at all. Or perhaps he was truly dead by now. We would never know.

For some inexplicable reason, I still carried his little stone knife with me, though it was nothing more than another reminder of the destruction I left in my wake. In truth, I didn't really blame Yonatan for losing faith in me. Even so, I found myself silently pleading with the God I'd not bothered to address directly in over twenty years to soften his resolve.

"All right," Yonatan said.

I sucked in a startled breath, wondering if I'd misheard. But I did not speak for fear of crushing the small crust of hope he'd suddenly dangled in front of me.

"You'll go south," he said. "I've received word that my father means to take on the Amalekites within the next month. He's amassing troops in preparation. We've been summoned to return and prepare the ranks."

We were finally going to war with the Amalekites? They'd been chewing away at our southern borders for decades now, emboldened

Splendor of the Land

by the Philistine sacking of Shiloh and the chaos among a loose federation of fractious tribes before Saul had taken the throne. Regardless that we were distant cousins, the bloodthirsty descendants of Esau had been our enemies since Mosheh's day, when they set out to destroy those who'd fled Egypt through the Red Sea, attacking the sick and lame at the outskirts of the procession through the wilderness. From the very start, they'd tried to destroy us when we were at our weakest, but we'd prevailed again and again. Perhaps Saul had finally decided to finish what Yehoshua had begun centuries ago and remove them from the Land of Promise for good.

My hands itched for my weapons at the thought of standing shoulder to shoulder with my brethren on a battlefield once again. Thankfully, Yonatan understood that no matter my faults, I was first and foremost a warrior.

My chest swelled with a potent mix of relief and anticipation. "Of course I will go. It will be an honor to fight for my people against such an ancient enemy."

"You'll not be going to war."

I blinked at my commander. "But you said . . ."

"There is a large tribe of Kenites living among the Amalekites at the eastern edge of the Aravah Valley near the copper mines of Punon. They've been intermingled for some time now—decades, most likely. My father is offering them mercy to repay an ancient debt. You'll go with one of the groups in charge of moving the Kenites to where they will be safe from the forthcoming assault."

I gaped at Yonatan. He wanted me to shepherd a horde of nomads through the wilderness? "I would be of far more use in battle, my lord—"

Yonatan trampled over my words with a half-snarled, "I will decide where you are of use, Gavriel. You've wasted your favor with me and are fortunate to have even this chance to redeem yourself."

My breaths came short and shallow as my formidable commander glared down at me, his usually affable expression like

stone. I'd truly set fire to the regard he'd once had for me. I had no choice but to submit or be expelled from the army of Israel, perhaps for good. Yonatan may be at odds with King Saul right now, but he was still the man's firstborn son and heir, as well as one of his highest commanders. If Yonatan banned me from fighting in his own ranks, I would not be welcome in others, that was certain.

Swallowing what remained of my pride, I dropped my chin. "Forgive me, my lord. I will go wherever you send me. It is my honor to serve Israel in whatever capacity I am needed."

"I thought as much. Pack your things. You'll be departing in the morning for Gibeah. Move quickly because your new unit is departing in four days' time."

"If I may ask, to whom will I be reporting?"

"Emmet ben Nahvesh."

Shocked, my eyes flew to his. Yonatan's former head armor-bearer, and best friend, hated me nearly as much as the Amalekites hated Israel.

My commander stared back, a hint of challenge in his steady gaze. He was well aware of the sour blood between Emmet and me, but if I wanted to prove myself loyal and trustworthy again, I must submit to his every command.

So I dropped to one knee and bowed low before the man who would one day rule over the kingdom of Israel. "I am grateful for your mercy, my lord. I will not fail you again."

"I know you won't, Gavriel, because you have only this one final chance. Make it count."