

CHAPTER ONE



Dark clouds rolled across the sky as light rain began to drizzle over the lush green and rocky Vale of Terebinth. The Israelites had assembled their forces and had already set up camp in organized areas when the military council gathered. Abner's velvet cape flared out behind him as he strode through the rows of small tents, which were spattered with black mud from the Judean hills. At the center of the encampment stood the royal tent, surrounded by guards and bustling servants tending to the king of Israel. The tent was large, made from woven goat hair and layered with animal hide to withstand the elements. Two guards at the entrance, armed with spears and shields, saluted and opened the two flaps as the general approached. Without a word, Abner entered.

The interior was stately; the ceiling draped with silk and the floor layered with thick carpeting. Abner's presence seized the council's attention as he stepped inside. The general greeted the men with a nod and summoned a young servant with a flick of his hand. He moved to the king and kneeled. The general was a burly man with wrinkled sunburned skin and gray chest hair curling over his soft leather tunic, but the fire of life gleamed in his hard eyes.

"My king, I am at your service."

“Please, my dear Abner, tend to yourself. This council needs you,” Saul said. Abner took a towel from the young servant and dried his face and beard. Throwing the damp cloth on the floor, he rose and joined the council of six men sitting on folding stools.

“The Philistines will not proceed. They wait for us, my king,” Abner said in a deep voice as he looked squarely into Saul’s piercing blue eyes. A large leather map lay spread out over a low, dark wood table, arranged with small blue and red clay figures representing the forces at war. Three men stood opposite Abner—Captain Ehud, Captain Ludim, and the strategist Ozra, all focusing their attention on the general. Abner moved alongside the table as he thought about their options.

Saul remained silent, running his hand through his thin beard.

Who will it be? Saul thought. *Abner? It could be him.* He regarded the general. His eyes shifted to his captains. *Perhaps one of them,* Saul considered. He had asked himself these same questions a thousand times, but he could never be certain. He feared that he would only know the snake in his midst when it was too late, and he would die a horrible death from its poison.

The king felt listless suddenly.

One of my sons? Saul thought, narrowing his eyes, his lips trembling. *Jonathan?*

“We should also remain,” Abner said confidently after a moment’s silence.

“Insanity,” the strategist cried out, jumping to his feet. The council was shocked that a man without rank would speak to the great Abner in such a tone.

“Our provisions are vanishing with each passing day and the soldiers are getting fat from doing nothing. And it is costing Israel a fortune in gold to *wait.*” Abner turned to face the thin man, trying to hide his anger behind a plastered smile.

“It is one thing to learn about war from scrolls, but trust me, it is an entirely different thing to learn it from experience, Ozra.”

The strategist snorted.

“It is clear that the Philistines want us to move out onto open ground so their chariots can cut through our forces.”

“I have already thought of that, good general,” Ozra said. The strategist removed his hands from the heavy folds of his robe, and indicated a spot on the map. He then rearranged the red and blue clay statues, and with this gained Abner’s full attention.

“Right there we will construct wooden spikes, protruding from the ground,” he said. Swiftly he moved the red ceramic chariot and the infantry soldier simultaneously to where he had pointed. “They will be well camouflaged by the dusty winds of autumn, and at the speed that the chariots race, the charioteers will not be able to see them. All their vehicles will be destroyed.” Ozra placed the red statue on its side, his eyes brimming with excitement.

“Naturally, their infantry will follow to clear out the last of our foot soldiers, only now there are no more chariots.” Quickly he took hold of the blue archer, and slid it a short distance toward the red Philistine infantry. Abner’s face relaxed as the strategist continued. A young scribe sat on the left hand side of the king, writing on large piece of thin papyrus parchment rolled out on a small table.

“The archers take out the infantry and our foot soldiers will deal the final blow. Victory,” Ozra said.

“How can you assume that the Philistines will send out their *mêlée* troops directly after their chariots?”

“They will not expect us to be able to destroy their precious chariots,” the strategist replied. “They are too arrogant.”

“No. There are too many uncertainties. I will not risk it,” Abner said vehemently, his temper rising the more Ozra argued.

Shaking his head, the general asked himself why he was debating. He was second only to the king and princes of Israel. The strategist did not have any rank and had only been included in the council to give advice.

Ignoring the small man, he turned and faced Saul. “King Saul, it’s imperative that the army doesn’t advance. Our fortifications are well under way. If the Philistines dare come closer, our archers will destroy their troops.”

The king came out of his musing.

Ehud rose to his feet, “I agree with General Abner, my king. Their chariots are their only advantage and they cannot use them in a battle if we hold our position. Our infantry will destroy their men and we will have victory.” Ehud waited for Abner to agree.

“Unlike some people, Captain Ehud thinks before he speaks,” Abner said, annoyed, and the council laughed.

Ozra lowered his head in frustration as he tried to control his temper. He knew that if he were to lash out, he would certainly lose his position. He sighed in despair.

“With a king like ours, how can we not win?” Captain Ludim spoke above the whispers.

Saul sat back in his chair, still not saying a word. His eyes scanned his council as he thought about what little he had heard.

“I think it best if we hold our position. Our best option is to wait for them to make the first move. And besides, if God blesses us with enough rain, their chariots won’t be able to ride through the mud,” Saul said calmly.

“My king, I will pray for rain,” said the priest Ahijah, sitting at Saul’s right hand side.

“It is decided then,” Abner said.

Suddenly Saul’s eyes became blank, and his breathing heavy. Now looking into Saul’s face, the general did not look into those piercing eyes he knew so well, but instead saw

something in his cousin's eyes that he had not seen for a long time. It unsettled him.

"My king, what vexes you?" Abner inquired, concerned as he moved closer to the throne.

"The council is dismissed," Saul said abruptly, holding the bridge of his nose between his thumb and finger. The men looked with amazement at Saul, frowning with uncertainty.

"But my king, we have so much more to discuss," Ehud said after a brief moment of silence.

"I said *leave*," Saul snapped, smashing his clenched fist down on the armrest of his chair. The servants and scribe bowed and hurried outside. Each council member quickly kneeled before Saul and left in silence.

Ozra irritably marched past Abner and was the last to exit, murmuring to himself as he left, "Dear and glorious Abner, one day they'll know. I'll show them, all of them." He hated them for their mockery.

Abner was the only one not to leave. Saul did not say a word, and only stared bleakly ahead of him.

"Yes, the little worm irritated me also," Abner, said with a straight face. Saul smiled at his cousin's weak attempt at a joke.

"You know Abner, this is the first time today that I have smiled," Saul said shaking his head. The king's face turned somber once again as he sighed, feeling the weight of the world pressing him down.

"My sons?" Saul asked, weak with dejection.

"They should be two days' ride from camp, sire. They will be happy to see you, especially Jonathan."

"And I them," Saul nodded in acknowledgment. "You're the only one I can speak to, cousin. I have advisors and priests that I talk to, but although they listen, they do not hear."

"I hear, my king," the general replied and knelt. Saul ran his hands through his perfumed hair.

“Something is not right, Abner. I know it. I can feel it. For the first time in my life, I wake in the mornings tired, if I’ve slept at all. I feel ...” Saul caught his words, clenching his jaw as he shut his eyes. He could not say it. *“I hate what I’ve become.”*

Saul’s face went blank. Abner could not stand to see his beloved cousin like this. In the past months, Saul had become a different person. “I shall not sit upon the throne for much longer, my dear Abner.”

“How can my lord say such a thing? I will personally smite the man that tries to take the crown from you,” Abner said passionately, angered by the king’s words. How could he be so weak? What had become of his cousin, the ruler of Israel?

“I am all alone. He left me, Abner,” Saul confessed. Looking troubled, he continued, “How could he leave? I have sinned against Jehovah.”

“Are you talking about the prophet again? Samuel is old and living in Ramah. Why does he torment you so? In all your days, will you not forget him?” Abner asked almost in a whisper, shaking his head.

“I will always think of him, Abner,” the king said.

“What happened? What did he say to you?” Abner asked, gripping the king’s hand affectionately.

Saul did not answer him. *They can never know*, he thought. He feared the rejection he would see in their eyes, and a pang of grief made his lips tighten into a thin line. He could hear Samuel’s words in his mind as clearly as if it had happened yesterday, and he drew in a sharp breath. Saul closed his eyes as if in pain and looked away. “I p-pray you, leave me to my thoughts.”

Abner rose and moved quietly to the tent flaps. He looked at Saul once more, and then left the tent.

He has taken everything, Saul thought miserably. *I have nothing left to live for. He has rent the flesh from my bones. I will never know true happiness again.*

“But who is to replace me?” he whispered with an uncontrollable surge of anger.



Heavy gates of hardwood and bronze swung open as the carriage approached, escorted by a royal retinue of twelve guards, ten attendants, and several packing asses.

Abner, gray with age, was sitting at a small writing desk with a long papyrus scroll stretched open before him. With his left hand, he was writing to his wife at Gibeah.

A partial shadow cast across the floor drew his attention to the tent entrance. A young boy hastily entered and fell to the ground before the general. He was panting and barely able to speak.

“Blessed be our great general,” the young herald gasped, and took a deep breath before he continued.

“The princes have arrived at the gates.”

“Ah, blessed news,” Abner said. Placing the reed pen in the inkwell, he rose and patted the child on the shoulders. He had instructed the herald to wait at the gates and inform him immediately when the royal carriage arrived.

“You did well, lad.” Smiling, the herald bowed and quickly exited. Abner leaned over the papyrus scroll and blowing quickly, dried the thick black ink. Carefully he rolled it up and put it away. He belted his sheathed kidon to his side and, resting his hand on his bronze sickle sword, left the warmth of his tent.

Abner entered Jonathan’s tent to find the young prince lying on his bed, exhausted from his journey. Servants worked about the large tent as they brought in Jonathan’s personal belongings. Jonathan had closed his eyes only for a minute, desiring a long sleep, but knowing that there was too much to do. When he opened his eyes, he found the general standing at his bedside, looking at him amiably. Jonathan was a slender

man, his body toned from training with the spear and kidon. From a young age, the prince had been fascinated with the bow and arrow, and was now one of the most skilled archers in all of Israel. Saul had taken personal interest in his son's mêlée training, and forced Jonathan to practice with his instructor daily.

"Morning, my prince," Abner said. Jonathan smiled and then closed his eyes again.

"Not a moment's peace," he muttered.

"Happy to see you also, prince," the old man snorted.

"Abner, if I had to see your ugly face in the middle of the night, I would certainly die of fright. Thankfully, the sun is shining brightly."

"Yes, I know it doesn't take much to scare a simple woman like you."

Jonathan gasped and jumped up from his bed, "I'll show you what this *woman* can do."

Abner stepped back and lifted his fists in front of his face. Skilfully moving his feet, the general spoke with a forced frown, "It has been a long time since I taught you a lesson—or two."

"Come here, you fat old Benjamite." Grinning, Jonathan embraced the general warmly with a slap on the back. "It is truly good to see you again, uncle."

"And you also, my boy. There are so many things that I want to talk to you about."

"I am sure that there are, uncle, but I pray you, let me at least bathe and have a good meal," Jonathan said.

"I will order the cook to prepare something for our breakfast. Freshen yourself, and I'll arrange for us to be served in my quarters." Abner moved to the door, turned, and said, "Should I have the servant bring some lavender for your bath, or perhaps some myrrh ointment, m'lady?" Smirking, he left without waiting for a reply.

The day had grown hot by the time the two men had finished their meal of pomegranates, dates, nuts, goat cheese, and some fig cakes with honey, and were sitting back and enjoying a goblet of wine. Abner belched as he loosened his belt.

“How is my wife?” Abner asked softly.

“She misses you a great deal. She cried when I left. I have a letter for you,” Jonathan said with a sympathetic smile. He understood the emotions he saw in the general. He missed his own wife already. It was always those first few weeks that were the hardest. He thought of her then, her whisper on his skin, the smell of rosemary in her hair, and the love he adored seeing in her eyes. The weeks he had been with Achsa were worth more than gold to him. They both sat in silent thought.

“And Achsa, and your mother and sisters?” Abner said finally, bringing Jonathan from his musing.

“They’re well, and they send all their love. Where are my brothers?” Jonathan asked when he suddenly remembered them.

“I left them with your father. Will they stay long this time?” Abner asked gulping his wine, hoping for something he knew would not happen.

“No, I don’t believe they will. They only came with me at my mother’s request, and they will be gone again tomorrow. I know them.” Jonathan said distantly, clenching his fists. “They always do this, and they’re hurting my father more than they realize. I wish they wouldn’t come.”

Abner looked into his cup in mute empathy.

“Since my lord left, your father has become estranged from his council. He doesn’t sleep at night, and he has again become violent at times,” he said, sitting up straight. A servant handed him a clay drinking bowl with some coriander oil for his indigestion. He drank from the vessel, pressing his fingers into his uncomfortable gut. Abner belched softly into his fist.

“Yes, I realized when I went to greet him,” Jonathan replied. “I didn’t see my father this morning, but someone else. His eyes have become dull and his hair is nearly fully gray.”

“The only thing that seems to help is his armor-bearer’s music. He plays the kinnor and sings to him. The young man that’s so good with the sling, what’s his name?” Abner murmured as he thought, taking another sip from his cup.

“David. His name is David ben Jesse. He has been serving my father for nearly three years, and still you don’t know his name,” Jonathan said, teasing him. “And yes, he’s especially skilled with that leather slingshot of his. He amazes me sometimes.” Abner did not reply.

“I just realized I haven’t seen David yet. Where is he? And why hasn’t he been playing to my father?” Jonathan continued.

“He was sent home for the winter,” Abner said. “I think your father still mourns for the prophet. Samuel’s words struck him deeper than we thought.”

“Abner, it’s been close to four years since he left. How can he still long for that prophet? There are other prophets. If only we knew what Samuel had said to him.”

“He doesn’t speak about it. And God knows I’ve tried to get it out of him,” the general said with a sigh. “Something will have to happen soon. We’ll have to think of a way to lighten his spirits.”

“My dear Abner, I think you are making too much of this. My father is stressed and tired. What he needs is a good rest. The coming winter break will do him good,” Jonathan said with a slight frown.

Abner glared at the young prince, making him feel slightly uncomfortable. “Well then, only time will tell, won’t it, my dear Jonathan?” Feeling offended, Abner downed the contents of his goblet and rose from his seat of cushions on the floor.



The swaying pale green grass scratched at David's legs as he stood taking in the crisp morning air. He loved the early hours of dawn, and as he did every day, he walked through the endless hills of Bethlehem and sang a prayer. He was almost never without his kinnor, and he played the crude harp with skill, perfected through the years. It had been his music that had brought him to Saul's court more than three years before.

He thought of the royal family every day, wondering what they were doing and if the king were well, if Saul needed his music to calm his troubled mind. He smiled as he thought of Jonathan, and was still amazed that he and the prince had such camaraderie, despite the age difference. He knew that Jonathan saw him as the son he and Achsa could not have. The prince and his wife had been trying to have a child throughout their marriage, but with all the tonics the physicians gave her to drink, and the balms and ointments they put on her belly, she remained barren. David wondered if she would ever be pregnant.

His legs were cold and wet from the dew, and he climbed on a large boulder. Before him, the highlands bristled with black sheep grazing on the shimmering grasslands.

David was a handsome young man with wild red hair and green eyes, which showed through patches of dark filth that smeared his skin after weeks of herding his father's sheep. He watched the sunrise, remembering the battles he had fought beside the king, carrying his shield for him, protecting him. He had never killed a man; though he had seen men die by Saul's hand many times. He had watched his three eldest brothers, Eliab, Abinadab, and Shammah ride out to the battle in the Elah Valley, and he hoped Saul would send for him.

Nethaneel, Raddai, and Ozem were still too young to be called out to war. Both his sisters were married and had strong healthy sons nearly his age. David was the youngest of eight

siblings. If he had not played for Saul at his court, and if his father had not permitted it, he would never have become the king's armor-bearer so young.

He hated the sudden cold winds that would blow over the highlands in winter. It prevented him from practicing his aim with the sling and even though he tried to ignore the cold, he would tightly wrap himself in a soft leather blanket, and sit miserably with only his thoughts to entertain him as the piercing gusts bit at his exposed skin.

He recalled how the prophet Samuel had anointed him, and he often thought how it would all play out. He was torn between emotions. He loved the time spent with the royal family, but also feared how it all would end. It was something that had to happen.

There's nothing I can do, David thought simply.

"God's will be done," he told himself, shrugging delicately.

When it was light enough, David slid from the boulder and searched the waving grass for small stones he could shoot with his sling. After filling his shepherd's bag with the white rocks, he scratched a circle on the boulder as a target. Easily he loosened the long braided flax straps dangling from his belt, pressed a rock into the small leather pouch, and spun the weapon, clenching his teeth as he launched it with a grunt. David chuckled proudly when the soft limestone smashed into white powder in the middle of the circle.

He didn't notice the dark clouds sweeping across the steel blue sky, and only after his bag was empty, did he notice the change in weather. The sky echoed with thunder.

The herd seemed nervous and he assumed it was the lightning that scared them. He searched the fields with his eyes, though he knew that the swaying grasses would make it impossible to spot a stalking predator.

Suddenly, a lion raced from its cover. The hunter chased a young ram and even before David could load his sling, the

predator pounced. The sturdy sheep kicked violently as claws cut into his flesh. It spun around and tried to defend itself, but the lion locked its jaw around the ram's neck, suffocating it.

A stone struck the beast between the eyes, and blood spurted from the wound as the animal roared in pain and dropped its prey. David came to the dazed hunter, lurching in circles. He grabbed the beast by its mane and struck it with his rod, cracking the lion's skull with a heavy blow. The animal dropped into the grass. David removed a small blade from his belt, and cut its throat. With terrible sounds the creature jerked in spasms as it died.

David waited for the predator to stop moving. After some time, he trotted home to call servants to help him, knowing the skin would soon spoil if he waited too long. The hide would make fine leather.

