There was an almond blossom, yesterday. It had opened its pale petals on a twig of the bough that curls and twists up to my windowsill. This morning, the blossom is gone; the paleness upon the twig is snow. It does one no good, in these hills, to set store by the earth's steady warming.

My body is as bent as that bough. The cold is an ache in my bones. I am sure that this year's reaping will be the last that I see. I hope only for one more season of summer fruit, for the ease of the hot sun on my back, for ripe figs, warm from the tree, spilling their sweet nectar through these splayed fingers. I have come to love this plain house, here among the groves. I have laid my head down in many places—on greasy sheepskins at the edge of battlefields, under the black expanse of goat hair tents, on the cold stone of caves and on the scented linens of palaces. But this is the only home that has been my own.

They are at work, already, on Har Moriah. From across the wadi, I can hear the thin squeal of the planes scraping upon the logs. Hard work to get these trees here; felled in the forests of the Lebanon, lashed together into rafts, floated south on the sea, dragged up from the coast by oxen. Now the tang of cut cedar perfumes the air. Soon, the king will come, as he does every morning, to inspect the progress of the work. I know when he arrives by the cheers of the men. Even conscripted workers and slaves call out in praise of him, because he treats them fairly and honors their skill.

I close my eyes, and imagine how it will be, when the walls have risen from the foundations of dressed stone: the vast pillars carved with lilies and pomegranates, sunlight glinting on cladding of gold . . .

It is the only way I will ever see it: these pictures in my mind's eye. I will not live to make the ascent up the broad stairs, to stand within the gilded precincts as the scent of burning fat and incense rises to the sky. It is well. I would not wish to go without him. I thought, at one time, that we would go together. I can still see his eyes, bright with the joy of creation, as he chose and planned what materials, what embellishments, pacing the floor, throwing his arms up and shaping the pillars as he envisioned them, his long fingers carving the air. But that was before I had to tell him that he would never build the temple. Before I had to tell him that all his killing—the very blood that, one might say, slakes the mortar of those foundation stones—had stained him too deeply. Strange words, you might think, to come from the selfsame source that had required these killings of him.

Hard words, like blows. The blast from heaven, issuing from my mouth. Words born of thoughts I had not had, delivered with anger I did not feel, spilling out in a voice I did not even know for my own. Words whose reason no human heart could fathom. Civilization is built upon the backs of men like him, whose blood and sweat make it possible. But comes the peace, and the civil world has scant place for such men. It fell to me to tell him so.

And like all such words that have formed upon my lips, these have become true in fact. It has come to be just as the voice said it would: this one dear ambition denied him. A bequest, instead, to his heir.

In this, I am more fortunate than he. I have lived to complete my life's great work. I have rolled and tied the scrolls with my own hands, sealed them with wax, secured them in clay vessels, and seen to their placement in the high, dry caves where I played as a child. In the nights, which have become so long for me, I think of those scrolls, and I feel a measure of peace. I remember it all so clearly, that day, at the turn of the year, the month when kings go out to battle. How warily I broached the matter. It might seem odd to say so, as my whole life in his service had been bent to this purpose: the speaking of truth, welcome or no. But it is one thing to transmit the divine through a blasting storm of holy noise, another thing entirely to write a history forged from human voices, imperfect memories, self-interested accounts.

I have set it all down, first and last, the light and the dark. Because of my work, he will live. And not just as a legend lives, a safe tale for the fireside, fit for the ears of the young. Nothing about him ever was safe. Because of me, he will live in death as he did in life: a man who dwelt in the searing glance of the divine, but who sweated and stank, rutted without restraint, butchered the innocent, betrayed those most loyal to him. Who loved hugely, and was kind; who listened to brutal truth and honored the truth teller; who flayed himself for his wrongdoing; who built a nation, made music that pleased heaven and left poems in our mouths that will be spoken by people yet unborn.

I have had a great length of days, and been many things. A reluctant warrior. A servant, a counselor. Sometimes, perhaps, his friend. And this, also, have I been: a hollow reed through which the breath of truth sounded its discordant notes.

Words. Words upon the wind. What will endure, perhaps, is what I have written. If so, it is enough.

I

A man alone in a room. Not such an extraordinary thing. Yet as I stepped into the chamber I had a sense of something out of place. My eye traveled around the space, the woven pillows, the low tables set with sweating ewers of cool water . . . all was in order, yet something was not right. Then I grasped it. It had been a while since I had found him in a room by himself. For a long time, it seemed, he had moved in a press of people: members of his household, the men of his army, his sons, servants, sycophants.

He stood by the open window, his back to me. From my place by the door I could not see what he saw, but the sounds made plain enough what held his gaze: the snap of banners in the breeze, the stamp of hooves, the wince and grind of iron on stone. And woven among these, like a bright thread through homespun, the sudden excited shouts of little boys. For them, born in the years of victory, muster for war was cause for uncomplicated joy. I knew that giddy thrill. I had been such a boy myself, once. When he, little more than a youth, led the band that sacked my village.

His fists, balled tight, were planted on the wide sill of the window embrasure, his arms encircled by polished copper cuffs. His hair, the same color as the copper, was undressed, and fell in a dense mane against the fine black wool of his mantle. The cuffs glinted in the low slant of early light as his arm muscles flexed. He was clenched from head to foot.

I am not a coward. Being in his service does not allow for it. My life, at certain times, has required me to draw upon deep wells of courage, and I am glad to say that I have never yet come up dry. But as I have resolved to set down a full account here, so I must begin with an honest accounting of myself. That morning, I was afraid. I had been summoned from my bed when it was still full dark, and though my slave, when he called me, had thought to bring a tray of warm bread fresh from the ovens, I had not touched it. Now, my empty stomach churned. Sound carries, at that hour, and as I waited in the anteroom, even the heavy cedar door could not muffle the angry voices within.

When Yoav exited the room, he burst through the door so abruptly that the young guard barely had time to come to attention, the butt of his spear striking the stone floor a few seconds after his general had already swept past him. Yoav's lips were drawn thin as a sheet of linen, his skin as pallid. He paused for a moment, fiddling with a strap on his greaves. His hand, which I saw was trembling slightly, could not manage the buckle. I have known Yoav since I was a child and he a youth thinking to kill me. I have seen him outnumbered on the battlefield and watched him run a man through at close quarters. I have seen him stand accused of murder, awaiting a death sentence. But never before had I seen his hand shake. He saw that I noticed, and he scowled. "Go in," he said tersely. "He wants you." Then, as I edged past him: "Take care. He is in a rage. His mood is foul."

The guard opened the door for me, looking to neither right nor left as I passed from the anteroom to the inner chamber. I stood, just inside, waiting for acknowledgment. After a time, unsure if he knew that I was there, I cleared my throat. Still he did not turn. I held myself motionless, my gaze on the yellow shaft of sunlight widening upon the flagstones. Although it was early, the room was warming. Soon enough, it would be hot. I felt a bead of sweat forming on my brow.

Suddenly, he opened his fists, reached for the shutters, and slammed them shut. He turned, his light mantle swinging. I, who had served him for years, was used to that face, its grave beauty, the bright glance that could kindle love or fear. But the expression was not the one I had expected. Yoav was son of the king's older sister; they had become men together. He knew David as well as anyone alive. Yoav had said anger, and anger was there, but I could tell he had not read his uncle in full. Anger was there, but not anger only. The tense set of David's body showed will at work, containing wrath, but also grief. The glint in his eye was, I believe, a tear.

"What is the profit of being an anointed king, Natan, if I am to be confined here like a prisoner?"

"Your generals act only out of love for you—"

His hand spliced the air. "They act out of fear." He had never been a man for platitude. "Love?" He spat the word. "There is no love in this. This is fear and mistrust. And for what? The lapse of a moment, merely. How many wars have we made together? You have been at my side, time and again, when we fought the Plishtim. You were with me in the south when we crushed the Moavites, and in the north against the Arameans. And you know well—who better?—I was a warrior for years before that. In all those battles, when did I ever flinch? Tell me. Tell me a time I faltered." The voice had steadied now, and was rising.

That voice. So familiar to me. So familiar to all of us. *The sweet singer of Israel.* So the people called him, long before he was king. I had heard that singer's voice fill a hall, and bring tears to the cheeks of seasoned warriors. But I had heard it also on the battlefield, fierce and wild, carrying over the clash of arms and the cries of the dying.

"Never," I answered him. This was not flattery, but unburnished truth. In my mind, the visions crowded, one layered upon the other, each of them with the unnatural vividness of memories forged at moments when one's life is at risk. I could see bright hair flying from beneath the iron helmet as he sprinted before us into a clatter of arrows, the faceted muscles of his calves as he led the swarm up a siege ladder, the sinews of his back, taut with the strain of the pulled bow as he braced himself in the *merkava*. Every memory I had of him was a view from behind. Simply because, at the deadly moment, he was always in the forefront.

I had been trailing after him, as ever, at the end of that most recent campaign, of which he now spoke. We had been fighting for more than a week, the advantage now theirs, now ours. The day was hot, windless. The air was thick with lingering smoke from the night's death pyres, still smoldering. The stench of charred bone met the stink of rot and vomit, shit and sweat. I have never loved war, as some men love it. I have fought of necessity, as has every man my age with two legs, two arms and wit enough to follow a simple order. It is what the times, and the Land, have required of us.

It was nearing sunset on the eighth day. We'd fought since dawn. I had reached that point beyond exhaustion, where every muscle quivers and my mind could not hold a thought beyond the next step, and the one after, the next breath, and the one after. We went forward through sheer will—his will, that force that could goad a man to do what was beyond him. Finally, in the long shadows of the late afternoon, the Plishtim began to fall back from the plain. Their retreat was toward the foothills. Another general would have let them go and been glad of it. But he saw that if they secured that high ground they might regroup and come at us again, this time with their archers positioned to advantage. So he called us to ranks with a curdling cry. I glimpsed his face through the crowd of men. It was bloodied, dirt-streaked, avid. Then he turned, fist to the sky, and

sprinted. He set the pace for the fleetest of his runners, youths who could give him a decade. Even uphill, he seemed to fly over the loose stones that slid out from underfoot and left me skidding and swearing.

I fell behind, and lost sight of him. Others—younger men, better fighters—overtook me, swarming to him, compelled by his courage. When I finally glimpsed him again, he was above me on a long, slender ridge, in the thick of fierce fighting. Trying to narrow the distance between us, I lost my footing entirely on the uncertain ground. I slipped. Metal, leather and flesh scraped against rough limestone that bit like snaggleteeth. I could not control my fall until I planted my foot into something that gave softly under my weight. The man had been attempting to crawl away, dragging himself with his remaining hand while a slime of blood pulsed from the stump of his sword arm. My boot, mashing his neck flat into stone, had put an end to that. When I lifted my foot, the man gave a wet gargle, and was still. I scraped the mess off my boot onto the nearest rock and went on.

When I reached the ridge, the king was making an end of another fighter. He was up close, eye to eye. His sword had entered just above the man's groin. He drew it upward, in a long, slow, arcing slash. As he pulled the blade back—slick, dripping—long tubes of bowel came tumbling after. I could see the dying man's eyes, wide with horror, his hands gripping for his guts, trying to push them back into the gaping hole in his belly. The king's own eyes were blank—all the warmth swallowed by the black stain of widening pupils. David reached out an arm and pushed the man hard in the chest. He fell backward off the narrow ledge and rolled down the slope, his entrails unfurling after him like a glossy ribband.

I was engaged myself then, by a bullnecked spearman who required all my flagging strength. He was bigger than me, but clumsy, and I used his size against him, so that as I feinted one way, he lunged with his spear, overbalanced and fell right onto the dagger that I held close and short at my side. I felt the metal grating against the bone of his rib, and then I mustered enough force to thrust the tip sharply upward, the blade's full length inside him, in the direction of his heart. I felt the warm wetness of his insides closing about my fist. It was intimate as a rape.

When I made an end of it and could look up, the king had advanced again, to a higher ledge, and stood atop another fleeing adversary. Legs astride the body, he raised his dagger arm. The air throbbed then, the skirl of wings. A carrion bird. Reflexively, my eye followed it. That is how I saw the spearman. The setting sun had been hidden in a purple flounce of cloud, but just then a throbbing yellow crescent of fire broke the edge, and in the beam of sudden light, I caught a glint from behind the cover of an outcrop—a spear, poised for the cast. The spear thrower was above and to the right of the king. His legs were well braced, his line perfect. The bronze shaft sailed out of his hand. It would have been a lethal throw, if Yoav's younger brother Avishai had not risked his own life to deflect it.

Avishai leaped between the king and the spear, his head back, howling. He expected to die. Every man on that ridge turned to witness it. At the deadly second, some warrior instinct caused him to adjust his stance by a hairbreadth and raise his bow. The spear tip caught on the edge of it, splintering the wood, skittering harmlessly across the rocky ledge. It was the kind of thing we'd seen David do. Now a younger man had done it for him.

We all cheered, of course. Someone slew the spearman, and then the fighting resumed in the exhilarated frenzy that comes from catastrophe averted.

But the king did not wish to hear of this from me. Not today. So I buried the image of his near death and said: "Every man who has served with you knows how you have prevailed. Every one of us knows what you are."

"'Are'? Say, rather, 'were.' That is what Yoav means: 'You *were* a mighty soldier, but now we must fight your battles for you.' I tell you, when Avishai leaped before that spear, I knew how it

would be seen. I had to laud Avishai before the men. It was his due. But the words were gall in my mouth. And even though he is my sister's son and the brother of my general, I tell you this, Natan: I wanted to strike him dead. I wanted to grasp the end of that shattered shaft and plunge it through his side. I have lived most of my life in soldiers' camps. I know what they saw. I know how they think. Their confidence sours as sudden as curdled milk."

"Not so. You may think you know the mind of the common soldier, but with respect—you are not one, and have not been for some time. The men know this, even if you do not. Times have changed, and you, King, have changed them. You are not that petty chieftain who led scattered bands of outlaws to skirmishes in the hills. Why do we not cower in the wastes, hiding amid thorns and rocks as we used to do every time a sortie out of Mitzrayim marched across our land? Why do we not huddle trapped in the highlands while the Plishtim garrison the passes to the fertile plains? It is not so long since we had to grovel to them for enough iron even to make farm tools, much less weapons. Now we push them to the coast and pursue them to the very gates of their towns. Now the very best of their fighters come and offer their sword hilts in your service. You know they would not bend the knee to any other man. Not they, nor the Hittites, nor the Yebusites, nor any other of the strangers who serve you. Do not tell me you would put all this at risk—after all it cost to bring it about—for some warrior-pride. You, who have nothing to prove to anyone about valor or skill at arms. You have taught our enemies to fear us. You are the lamp of Israel. Would you chance to quench it?"

I had thought what I said would stoke his vanity. Instead, he glared at me. His eyes, that amber gaze that I was used to feel warm with affection, had turned cold. "Spare me, Natan. I have had an earful of this womanly keening, these empty pieties. From you, at least, I expect to hear the truth. The truth is, I have made this army. It's I who drove them, I who gave them confidence. Too much, it seems. They think they can do without me, set me aside like some heathen's war-god idol, set up in a temple to bring good luck." He turned away, back to the window. He flung open one of the shutters. A few minutes, and Yoav's voice rose, giving the order to move out.

"Will you not go down? It would put heart into the troops."

"'Go down'?" He mimicked my solicitous tone in a voice oily with contempt. "To remind my men that I stay behind? That for the first time in memory I do not lead them? Are you mad? Of course I will not go down."

A great cheer rose as the runners set off. The foot soldiers first—spears, archers, slings. This was followed by a clatter of hoofbeats and the squeal of metal wheels as fifty merkavot—a full half of all we had then—pulled out behind them. Dust motes rose from the street and drifted into the room, sparkling. He turned from the window, crossed the room and laid his fingers lightly upon the neck of his harp. There was always one near to hand; every servant knew to see to that. A small one hung by the window in his bedchamber. He said that when a night wind stirred the strings, it was a welcome awakening. He would rise from his bed and pray to the Name, who had blessed him so greatly. The instrument he reached for now was one of his favorites, a fine tall harp from Mitzrayim, the slender curve of its soundboard a smooth and perfect arc such as that land's craftsmen know how to fashion. But, like all his harps, this one had been adapted to his use, the number of its strings doubled to allow for strange tunings, with half and quarter tones that gave his music its unique, complex sound.

"You know, I suppose, why Yoav sent you." I was unsure how to answer this. I did not want him to think that Yoav and I had been discussing ways to handle him, even though this was the truth. But it seemed he did not expect an answer. He snorted, and gave a smile that had no joy in it. "I know what Yoav has in his mind: he sees me sitting here with you, picking at the skein of my deeds like a woman at her weaving basket. He wants to give me occupation while he usurps my place and marches my men to war. You, I suppose, support him in this."

"No, I do not."

“No?” He looked up. “What’s this? You are at odds with Yoav?”

“I do not think a recitation of your victories is worthy of your time.” I took a breath and dived deep. “Nor mine.”

“Is that so? My victories are an unworthy subject for your talents?”

Have a care, Natan, I told myself. It is one thing to speak hard truths to a king in that strange voice that rises up unbidden from the earth and echoes with the power of the heavens. It is another thing entirely to speak frankly to him as one man to another, especially as I am a man in his service. *Eved hamalek*. The servant of the king. But, then, what service could I offer, if not this: speaking, where other men held a prudent peace. Whatever the risk, I had him now. His anger was shifting, away from Yoav and toward me. I had drawn the boar. Now I had to stick him.

“Any half-skilled graver can etch a stela that says in this or that place the king did vanquish this or that people. I am sure the great king of the Two Rivers and your neighbor the pharaoh, each of them, has a legion of gravers at work this very moment, making fine monuments.”

“And why should they not?”

“Because the rubble of a hundred such stelae lines the walls of our sheep folds. And the dust of a thousand more blows about the Land, ground down to sand.”

He gave me a glance that, if not warm, was no longer a shard of cold stone. He returned his gaze to the harp, running a finger up and down the silken grain of the wood. “Go on.”

“In our wine store at home, there was a graved stone, holding up the lintel. Basalt, I think, finely dressed. It stood out among the common limestone, so that was why I noticed it, I suppose, when I was a boy. There were just a few words of an inscription, very worn. I was excited when I found it—it is the kind of thing that fires the mind of a child—and I showed my father.” I remembered the cool dark cavern carved deep into the rock, the tall, sweating rows of pithoi, the biscuit scent of the clay, the rich aroma of fermentation. My father’s large hand, stained from many pressings, fingering the hollows etched into the stone. I remember that he turned to me, and smiled, and commended me for noticing it. “He was an unlettered man, but he guessed the writing might be in the style of the Hittites. No doubt it lauded the victory of some important leader. I would look at those words and wonder, Who was he? What manner of man? What sort of boy? Which people helped him to power? Which hindered him . . .” I paused, uncertain whether to continue. But David’s gaze was on me now, arrested. So I plowed on.

“Whoever he was, he was gone. His story, however glorious, lost, and so thoroughly forgotten that his monument had been broken up into building stones and set to use in a humble vintner’s storeroom.” Here we came to the nub of it. My own voice had risen as I spoke. I took a breath, and lowered it. “You know my first prophecy.” Even as I said the words, I felt sickness rise at my own memory of it. When one becomes a sounding brass for the voice of the unseen, there is a price to be paid: the throbbing head, the darkening vision, the rasping breath, the falling fits and spasms. And when it happens to you on a day when you have lost everything, a wicked day of death and butchery, it is hard, indeed, to revisit the moment. I had begun to breathe unevenly, just bringing it to mind.

“Of course I know. I have built all this”—he swept his arm in a wide, expansive gesture meant to encompass more than a fine room in a well-built palace—“on the foundation of those words. Every man alive knows what you said that day.”

“It was not I who said it,” I murmured, but he shrugged off my correction.

“What has that to do with this matter?”

“Your line will not fail. You know this. Yet memory surely will. Your sons—what will they remember? Or their sons, after? When all who knew you in life are but bleached bone and dust, your descendants, your people, will crave to understand what manner of man you were when you did these deeds, first and last. Not just the deeds. The man.”

He gazed at me for a long moment. His face was unreadable. He picked up a low carved stool then, and when I moved to take it from him, he waved me off. He carried it to the harp and settled himself to play. As an afterthought, he motioned me to sit, so I sank gratefully upon the pillows and let out the breath I had not even realized I was holding. He tilted the tall harp, settling it against his shoulder gently, as a woman settles her infant. His fingers rolled a few idle triplets, but his gaze was fixed on the distant view of hills, the olive trees silver in the sunlight.

“It is true, what you say.” All the anger was gone from his voice. “When I was a youth, learning war, I often thought of it. We hear of men like Shalmanezer or Sargon, who won great battles. Of Ramses, who built the mighty temples on the backs of our ancestors, or of Hammurabi, who, they say, ruled with wise laws. But these are names only. It would be something, to know their nature. To know them as men.” He paused, his eyes still distant. “To be known as a man.” His fingertips pressed harder against the strings. His hands were strong, but the fingers were slender, moving swiftly through the tall strings, weaving sound from the filaments.

It was as if the harp were a loom, the notes he drew from it a bright thread forming a splendid pattern. He played this way often, even interrupting meetings with his generals. He said that the music—its order and precision—helped him find the patterns in things—the way through the confusion of events and opinions to direction, to order, and beyond, to inspiration.

He played for some time. I do not know if he was improvising or playing from memory. The melody was sweet, intricate and soothing. You could read his mind through his music, always. I felt the tension in my body easing. I had been braced against his anger and his grief, but the music revealed a mellowing of his mood. Finally, he brought it to an end, in a graceful run of notes, and set the harp back upright. He turned his eyes on me. They were not cold now, but the expression remained opaque. “Catch a true likeness, see a plain reflection in the water of the well, you will not like the flaws revealed in the face that stares back at you.”

I struggled to suppress a smile. I could not imagine that his own reflection had ever given him much grief. The golden shimmer of his youth had been tempered like worked metal in his adult years so that even now, in middle age, he gleamed. Years had brought only distinction to a beauty that had proved irresistible to men and women alike. But he was serious, deep in consideration of what I had said. I thought it best to add nothing further, to let the line of his thought lead him to his own conclusions. He commenced to play again, but after a time, his fingers paused and hovered above the strings. He turned his face to me.

“Perhaps I can prove myself brave in this, at least. I will consider it. Now go.”

As the young guards’ spears hit the floor and the door closed behind me, he started to play in earnest. His large, strong hands could draw forth a breadth of sound that one did not generally associate with the gentle harp. He could make it speak with a thousand voices, soft or stormy. He did so now. And then, that other instrument over which he had full mastery—his voice. It was an old song; I recognized it. He had sung it at his coronation.

. . . in the day of thy power,

in the beauties of holiness

from the womb of the morning:

thou hast the dew of thy youth. . . .

Good, I thought. Already he has turned his mind from the gnarled present to the shimmering past.

• • •

The next day, he sent word that I might make the history if I wished to do so. I assumed he would call for me when he was ready to begin. Awaiting his summons, I busied myself with the pumice, scraping calfskin. This work I would not trust to fragile clay. I have yet to train a servant who can bring a hide to my standard, and the scrolls to record the life of a king had to be free of all blemish.

But instead of the call to audience, what came from him instead that afternoon was a clay tablet with a list of three names upon it. Seraiah, his scribe, had graven it, apparently in some haste. I had to carry the tablet to the light to make sense of his hand. At first, I did not understand what David meant by it, but then I grasped his purpose. It was very like him. He was sending me to talk to those who had known him in childhood and as a youth, before I came into his service. At the end of the short list of names, Seraiah had added a note: *The king says: after these, you know the story as well as any and may set down what you see fit.* I smiled when I saw what he intended. It seemed he did not plan to give his own account at all. The work here would fall all to me, to gather and record these testimonies, to write my own account. I ran a finger over the names. *Mikhal.* That one name, alone, showed that he did not depend upon the emergence of a flattering portrait. Mikhal, for whom his very name was bile. Well, I thought. *That* will be a challenging encounter. She had been his first wife and, in name, a wife she remained, although to my knowledge she and David had not seen each other nor exchanged words in years. But as she remained part of his household, if the king bade her speak to me she would be obliged, at least, to receive me.

For a seer, I was remarkably obtuse. I know this now; I did not know it then. Yoav and I had conspired to find some occupation that, while worthwhile in itself, would serve to distract a restless and unhappy king. Instead, he had found a way to distract *me,* to get me out of his way. A man will silence the voice of his conscience when it suits him to commit sin. But if your "conscience" walks and breathes as a living man in your service, you might have to go to some additional lengths. I did not see this. I did not see that a proud and vital man who feared his manhood waning might take any reckless step to prove to himself it wasn't so. In the service of my gift, I have had to forgo much that makes a man in full. I know now that this sacrifice has left me blind to certain things. I can see what others cannot see, but sometimes I miss what is apparent to the dimmest simpleton.

At the time, I was caught up in the project, and interested in the names upon the list. One was unknown to me, and yet it was the very first he had set down. Seraiah the scribe had underscored it heavily, and written a note: *The king says, This one, before all others.* The next name, *Shammah,* I knew well enough. Shammah was one of David's older brothers. There had been seven of them, but Shammah was the last still living. He had been with us in the outlaw years, when Shaul the king turned on David and sought his death. There had been little love lost between David and his brothers. But Shaul's hatred of David had spread like a stain upon his close kin. They had been obliged to go into hiding with him in those years, because the alternative was imprisonment or execution. Now Shammah kept a household on the outskirts of Beit Lehem and administered that settlement in the king's name. According to the tablet, the unfamiliar name, *Nizevet bat Adael,* was a woman who was part of Shammah's household.

It was too late that day to set out, so I sent word to the stable to bespeak a mule for the following morning, and to the kitchens for provision. I left at first light.

II

There was a time, not long since, when no man would have traveled alone on the road from Yebus, as Ir David was then named, to Beit Lehem. It is easy enough to forget how it was in the Land, now that the trade roads are in good repair, the borders mostly respected and the bandits under the foot of the king's forces. Of course, he understood very well what was necessary when he came to power because he had spent so many years himself as a bandit and a marauder, living on fines exacted from unlucky travelers and swift attacks on ill-defended villages like my own.

I was ten when I first saw him. My father hated idleness, so when the pressing was done and before the time for pruning, he would send me with the goats to find better grazing beside the streams that cut a path through the mountains rising steep above our village. I did not mind this. I liked to be off by myself, away from the eyes of adults who always had some task or errand to demand of an unoccupied child. In those sun-blasted hills, I could lie prone on a rock and scan the bright hillside, doing little but casting a stone from time to time to redirect a goat that wandered too far from the flock. A boy could let his thoughts unspool in those idle hours, dreaming of a hundred things, or of nothing. Sometimes, through the dense air that hung like mist over the Salty Sea, I would gaze across at the bare hills of Moav, and wonder if there was a boy like me lazing by a spring, and what his life was like, and what his thoughts were. But that day, the heat defeated me. I lay there and felt it press down upon me, like a great furred beast, smothering even the desire for thought. I fell into a heavy doze. The sting of a pebble roused me.

"Better wake up, little shepherd, or your flock will be halfway to Beersheva." The voice, amused, came from above and behind me. I scrambled to my feet and turned, blinking. He was on the next ridge, the sun behind him, its rays dancing like flames in his bright hair. He jumped lightly from the ledge and moved toward me. I raised my hand to shade my eyes and saw that he was a young man, perhaps twenty, and armed. Dismay must have shown in my face. My fear was not caused by his short sword or his bow. It was the thought that I might have lost the flock. To lose even one goat was a whipping offense.

He smiled, reached out a hand and tousled my hair as an affectionate older brother might have done. "Well met, little shepherd. Good thing I found you. When your flock wandered into my camp, yonder, the men started sharpening their knives. There was talk of goat stew this night."

"Please, no! My father . . ."

"Don't concern yourself. Your flock is safe. I was a shepherd myself, not so long since. I do not take without asking. You are from the village below?" I nodded. "You know the head man?"

"My father is the head man."

"Well met indeed, then. Give your father my greetings, and tell him that my band will be camped here for some days. We are armed fighters, two score of men, and some few of us have families. We would be glad of provisions. Tell your father that David, son of Yishai the Beit Lehemite, makes this request."

My eyes grew wide. "You? You are the one that killed the giant of Gath?" I fingered the side of my head where the pebble had grazed it. A stone not so much larger had turned the tide for us at the famous battle in the Wadi Elah. Every boy in the Land knew that story.

He smiled. "So they called him. He was big enough, but no giant. He was slow, I was quicker. He underestimated me. That is all. Sometimes, it is good to be small. Remember that. Use it while you still can." He eyed me, a summing look, as a buyer might cast over a lamb on the hoof. "I see from your hands and feet that you will grow to be a tall man. Is your father tall? Then you favor him. Now come and fetch your goats."

I followed him across the wadi and through the date palms into the clearing where he had made his encampment. It was a spare, well-organized and clean affair of four or five large goat hair

tents. The kind of camp a military unit might pitch, that can be hastily struck and easily transported. They had herded my goats into their own makeshift thorn break, and as I was sorting mine from theirs, I noticed one of the women regarding me. She had her mantle drawn across the lower part of her face, but her eyes were the same deep green as the balsam fir that shaded her where she sat, and I found myself returning her glance. She lifted a fold of her mantle off a slim wrist, and turned her hand. It was a subtle gesture, but clear enough. She wanted me to approach her.

As I did, she stood—she was very tall, for a woman—and stepped back, deeper into the shade, out of sight of the main encampment. I followed her, as she clearly purposed. "Did my husband charge you with a message?" Her voice was low and quick. For a moment, I was confused. I did not think that by "husband" she could mean David. This woman was very handsome, but she was some years older than the youth I had just met. In my village, a commonplace thing was for the wife to be much younger than her husband, never the reverse.

She seemed to understand my confusion. She dropped her veil so that I could see her face. A slight smile played about her lips, which were very full, but already scored with the fine lines of her maturity. Her skin, a pale olive, was gently weathered like my mother's from many summers in the unforgiving dryness of the Land. But her wide green eyes had a level, intelligent gaze, and the lines that framed them seemed to me more likely etched by amusement than by hardship. "I am Avigail of Carmel, third wife of our leader, David. I am his wife because my first husband, Navaal, who was a drunkard and a fool, refused to send supplies for David's men when he requested them of us. We could afford it—we had three thousand sheep. I knew what the cost of that denial would be to us, so I saw to it myself, and met David on the road with the supplies before he and his band reached our village. Tell your father this: David is no ordinary outlaw, no ordinary man. When my husband died, I came to be his wife, even though I left behind a rich household to live as you see me here, among outlaws, begging for supplies. Boy, tell your father this is no small thing. Don't let him make the same mistake my foolish husband made. If he does, you—"

But she did not finish the message I was to bring, for David called for her then, and she cast her veil across her shoulder and left me alone in the shadows. I waited there a moment or so, and then made quick work of sorting and gathering my goats. I almost ran them down the hill to home, bursting with my news. By the time I reached the house, I had shaped the story so as to omit any mention of my putting the flock at risk. Still, when my father heard what I had to say, his brow creased.

That night, all the important men of the village gathered at our house. My mother sent me to pour the wine for them. One must not think ours was an insular community, distant though we were from other settlements. Because of the balsam resin we produced, and the sought-after fragrances we knew how to make from it, our village was well-known in the Land, and prosperous, too; the trade route was well traveled by all classes and kinds of men. So when our leaders gathered to deliberate, they were well informed. Our neighbor Shem, a resin maker, and therefore an important man, was speaking. "I say we pay him what he asks. His men do some service when they are camped in the wadi. They are a wall to us, and keep the young herders, such as your own boy there, safe from wild beasts or passing brigands. They are disciplined; they have not stolen livestock or plundered the date trees—"

"They are debtors and malcontents and troublemakers." My father, usually civil, cut Shem off in midsentence. "He that leads them has set himself against our king, who has made it plain enough that he wishes the man dead. If we pay him, we are abetting an outlaw, a condemned man. Do you want to incur the anger of Shaul?"

"I would risk that before I risk angering *him*, camped upon our dooryard." It was my uncle Barack who spoke, tossing his head in the direction of the hills. "The king is far away in Geba. What will

he know of a dozen wineskins and a few bushels from our grain store? It was a good harvest, a good vintage. We can spare these things."

"And if we spare them to the outlaw son of Yishai the Beit Lehemite, what rabble next will we have at our door, demanding the food from our children's mouths and the fruits earned by our laborers' hands? Slaves run away from their masters every day, but we are not obliged to abet them. This brigand is no better than they. Worse, I say. There are rumors he serves the Plishtim *seren*, Achish of Gath. You would help him, and abet our worst enemy? I say we send him nothing."

"This 'brigand,' as you call him—when he was a mere boy he put the Plishtim to flight at the battle of Wadi Elah. The king did not think him a brigand then. Nor when he took him on as armor bearer, or married him to his daughter, or raised him up as leader of his fighters. You know how he fought in those days. How we all thought he had the blessing of the Name upon him, so many victories he won. Kings are fickle. You know that, brother. They say Shaul threw a spear at the boy, in his own hall, at meat, for no reason. Who would not flee, in such a case?"

"Who would not flee? A man who is innocent. A man who is honorable. It is not for us to question the judgments of our king. You would have us put food in a traitor's mouth?"

"I would put it there, yes. Rather than have him bring his men to take it."

"If that traitor and his rabble come here, we will fight them. Some few of us know how to fight." My father did not often speak of it, but he and his brother had borne arms against the Ammonites in their youth.

I loved my father, and I believe he loved me in his turn. I do not think it entered his mind that the denial of goods would put lives at risk. But when I left the room to replenish the emptied wine jug, I bumped into my mother, listening an ear in the passageway. I saw her face, before she had the chance to arrange it. There was dread in her expression, and also anger. She turned on her heel and led the way to the wine store. As she lifted the lid from the pithos, her hands were trembling.

"What is it?" I whispered. She shook her head and compressed her lips and would not speak. I reached for the dipper and took it from her. Her hands were too unsteady to fill the jug without spilling the wine. "You think Father errs in denying these outlaws?"

"It is not my place to say he errs," she hissed tersely. "Neither is it yours to think it. Go, serve and be silent."

"But I met a woman in his camp. One of his wives. She warned me that it would be risky to refuse him. Her husband did, she said, and she defied him, and brought the goods herself. That is how she—"

"Shhh." My mother raised her hand and laid her fingers on my lips. They were rough fingers, work worn from the hundred tasks she knew how to perform. But they were gentle fingers, too, always ready with a caress. "Your father heads this household. Leads this village. It is not for us to doubt him. I am no slut like this woman, who threw herself at the feet of a stranger and defied her husband's will."

"But she did it to save—"

"Hush, I said. You will obey me, and you will obey your father. Go now. They are waiting for their wine. Serve and be silent as I bid you."

A dozen wineskins and a few bushels of dates. It would have been a small price, and I might have lived a different life. I might have stayed in that village lit by the glare of the Salty Sea. Grown to manhood the beloved son of a prosperous house, learning to become a winemaker at my father's side. Feeling the weight of the warm grapes fall into my hands as each long summer ripened, plying the pruning knife with skill till the long rows of old vines held their balled fists up to the winter sky. By now, the vineyards would be mine to tend, and I would be teaching my sons in their turn. Or so I like to think. But perhaps this other destiny could not have been gainsaid. I do not know. All I do know is that no supplies were delivered, and I was instructed to take the goats by the southern wadi rather than the stream that ran to the north. Two days later, David sent to ask again. One of his men—a youth, really, no older than David himself—presented himself in the village asking for my father. He was received, and put his requests—or I should say, demands—rather more urgently than David had put them to me. My father became angry. I heard him say hard words: "traitor," "brigand," "thief." The young man became angry then in his turn. He raised his voice even louder than my father's, so that I could hear every word he said as if I were in the room.

"You dare to speak so of a man whose spittle you are not fit to wipe. David son of Yishai is the rightful leader of our people, the best leader—the best man—any of us has ever served. The king in Geba knew that, once. Did he not make David his son-in-law before madness seized him? Now he hates David for his very qualities, which are a reproach to his own failures. You should ask Shaul's son Yonatan, if you doubt me. It is well-known where *his* heart lies. Were it not for the command to honor the father he would be with us now, not propping up a demented, drooling . . ."

My father cut in then—loud, angry—saying that he would not have such disloyal words uttered in his house. He was not a stupid man: he could see the danger by then, I am sure. Yet he did have a stubborn streak, and a regard for his own opinions. Small flaws, maybe, to cost such a price as he paid for them. But he could not unbreak the eggshell. A few moments later, the tall young stranger pushed past me, thrusting me against the wall so hard that the stone bit into the bare skin of my upper arm. When he looked me in the face, I saw naked anger. For perhaps a thousand men, that look has been the last thing they ever saw. David's messenger to my father was Yoav, who would become our mighty general, though on that day I did not yet know his name.

At dawn I walked through my father's blood and stood face-to-face with his killer. David had come in the dark, swift and silent. He slew my father and my uncle Barack with the dispatch of a slaughter man attending to his trade. As I approached David, I could hear my mother screaming. Her voice was horrible—a ragged rasp. Stay back, she cried. Run. Hide yourself.

But I had done with obeying. I could no more heed her than stop my own heartbeat. I walked up to David. He looked down at me, puzzled. I imagine he saw a tear-streaked child, too touched or stupid to fear the blood-flecked murderer who stood before him.

"Did you not hear me, little shepherd? Did I not say I would kill all of his kin that can piss against a wall?"

Yoav lifted his spear, but I just stood there. David raised his hand wearily. "The boy's simple," he muttered. "Let him be." He shrugged and turned aside.

Then I spoke. Later, others had to tell me what I said. I knew that my lips and tongue were moving, but I could not hear my own words because my head was ringing like a stone under the blows of an iron mallet, blows that beat the blood behind my eyes. I stood there, in the crimson-misted ruins of my own life, and the words poured out. Through the red blur, I saw the faces of his fighters distort with wonder. Yoav lowered his weapon and gaped. David's own face creased, confused. Then it changed. His look became greedy. He spoke, but I could not make out his words through the thunder in my head. I saw him reach out to me, and then I fell.

When I came to myself, I was in his tent. The woman Avigail was leaning over me, swabbing my forehead with a cool cloth. David himself was sitting on the edge of my pallet. When he saw my eyes flicker, he nodded to Avigail, who went to the water jar and filled a cup. He reached and took it from her, caressing her hand as he did so, and offering her thanks even for so small a task. Even in my pain, I noted it. My father had never treated my mother with such distinction. David helped me into a sitting position, and then raised the cup to my lips. At first, I recoiled from his touch, but he clasped my shoulder with a gentle authority. "Drink," he said. When the water touched my lips, I realized I was parched. "Slowly," he cautioned, taking back the cup and setting it down.

He had washed off my father's blood and was wearing a fresh tunic of fine wool. To my complete astonishment, he grasped the neck of that tunic and rent it. He stood then and walked to the fire pit, stooped for a handful of cold ashes, and rubbed them into his bright hair. "I want you to understand. I regret these deaths. I mourn your kin. But what I did was necessary. These men—my fighters and their families—have put their trust in me. I have to do whatever it takes to sustain them. Know that I did not kill your father and your uncle for a few bushels of dates. I killed your father because if his refusal of my request had been allowed to stand, word of it would have spread, and I would not be able to feed my people—people who have risked everything for me. I can't allow that. It's the bargain I have made. They would die for me, so I must live for them. And kill for them, when I have to. Your uncle I had to kill to forestall blood vengeance. For that reason I should have killed you, too. You know that. But here you are. You will see how it is, now that you are one of us."

And I did see. And heard, and smelled. In my dreams, even now, I hear the screams of the enemy's stumbling warhorses, after he ordered their tendons cut. I smell the reek from the leaking bowels of the terrified Moavite captives, lined up in rows upon the ground as David's men ran the measuring cord alongside their squirming bodies, measuring life as one might measure out cloth, marking out a quantity to live and sentencing those beyond the cord's end to be butchered where they lay.

Whatever it takes. What was necessary.