

Dark Messiah

by

Tony Price

A Novel for NaNoWriMo, November 2005

© Tony Price, 2005.

You may read and save this on your own computer and share it with other people free of charge, but you're not allowed to edit or amend it, copy it into your own documents without my prior written consent, or make any money out of it without cutting me in.

Contents

1. A King Like Other Nations	4
2. The Lost Asses	8
3. The King-Making	13
4. A Prince of Israel	16
5. Saul and Sons At War	21
6. Rejected	32
7. For the Love of David	40
8. The Idol Under The Blanket	50
9. Massacre of the Priests	59
10. David in the Wilderness	65
11. The Witch of Endor	76
12. The Battle of Mount Gilboa	84

It would be interesting if we had a historical narrative written in a circle sympathetic to Saul - for instance, an account written by a member of Saul's own tribe of Benjamin.

Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament*, page 215

Now that the stories told about my prince, are the stories that favour and flatter the man who supplanted him, that David, the man after Yahweh's own heart, the man whom everyone loved, the sweet psalmist of Israel, the bloody man who caused the deaths of so many good men - though he made sure never to have their blood on his own hands - now more than ever it is time for the other stories to be told. The stories of those who loved Saul, and wished him well. Who loved his courage, his passion, his zeal for his people, his love of Yahweh. And who knew the shock of loss that never left him, when Yahweh turned against him and rejected him. None of us ever knew why. And for Saul himself, it was as if the heart was torn, still beating, from his breast; as if the love of his life betrayed him. From that day until he fell on Mount Gilboa, it seemed that he was never fully alive.

Here are some of those other stories.

1. A King Like Other Nations

My seed.

Until a man can look at his own grown sons, and say those words, "My seed", he does not feel fully a man, cannot rest in the knowledge that his name will live in Israel. I, Samuel, should know. My own mother was barren for many years, unable to bring forth the fruit of my father's seed. For years she cried to Yahweh, pleading and weeping bitter tears. And HE heard her prayers, and opened her womb. As she gave thanks to him in Shiloh, she named me Samuel, saying, "I have asked him of Yahweh," and dedicated me to the life-long service of our God.

So it was that from a boy of four I lived with Eli the judge and seer, serving before Yahweh in His house at Shiloh. And when Eli died, there was no one but me to succeed him as judge of Israel, for his sons had fallen in battle on that terrible day when the Philistines defeated our armies and seized the Ark of Yahweh. It was His punishment for our turning aside from his commandments, and Eli never recovered from the bitter shock of the news that Hophni and Phinehas were dead.

It is not an easy thing to judge the people of Yahweh: they have ever been a stubborn, self-willed confederation of tribes, arguing among themselves and with their neighbours. It saps a man's best strength and energies, the constant strain of hearing one Israelite's complaints against his neighbour, and the neighbour's complaints against him. Most times the judge can simply use his wisdom and discretion, the result of so many years of experience. But sometimes there are the hard cases where he must look to the words of the Torah, and when these provide no clear answer, then to seek the face of Yahweh himself. That is what exacts the greatest cost of all. To enter the awesome Presence, and endure the Silence and the Darkness that surround the One who hides himself as much as He reveals. And then perhaps to have no answer, and to wait and wait until He chooses to speak, and then to endure His speaking.

Like Moses in the stories of old, I could not bear this burden alone. I appointed my sons, my seed, Joel and Abijah, to be judges in Beersheba.

Shall I say, it was the bitterest blow in my life, to learn that my sons did not follow in my ways, but turned aside after gain? More bitter than the death of my wife, for every man expects that grief and knows that one day will bring it. But to find that my sons were taking bribes, and perverting justice in favour of those who paid them more, and against those who would not or could not pay. It was as if they did not know Yahweh; for how could it be that they really knew that Presence and Darkness, and that Silence and that Voice, and yet turned aside from his ways?

For months and years I tried to hide my eyes from it, tried to deny the truth that faced me, and that accused me in the eyes of all the Israelites who came to me. It was

worse than it had been for Eli, who in like manner suffered the defection of his two sons, when they extorted the best portions from the people's sacrifices for their own and their friends' tables, or forced the serving maids to submit to their lusts. Those are the appetites of men, at least. But for my two sons to pervert justice for mere gold and silver, was more than I could bear.

What I tried to hide from my own eyes, was not hidden from the eyes of the people. There came a day when the elders of the tribes gathered to me at Ramah. The twelve chief men of the tribes, sent word that they would speak to me on an important matter; would I receive them? Already I had some foreboding, a sense that this was not any ordinary request for an audience. For the door of my house had always been open to the people, even when I had thought it closed. At all hours of the day and night, they imagined I was ready to receive their requests, their pleas, their complaints. This was something different.

The twelve came into my room, where I sat bowed down with pain and weakness: the days previously had been heavy with duties. They looked from one to another nervously, whispering urgently in voices that my deaf ears could not understand. They had not agreed among themselves who was to be the spokesman on their behalf. I almost smiled at their awkwardness and embarrassment, yet my heart went out to them too in their discomfort, and I waited for them to speak.

At length one of them was pushed to the front, by those behind. He tugged at his beard, muttering behind his fingers till my questioning glance forced him to speak loud enough for me to hear.

He coughed, and began, "It is not I who would trouble you with this, abba," (using the familiar form of address that some of them had recently adopted, in deference to my age and many years of leading them.) "You must understand that I speak for the people. You are old, abba, and we would not wear you out with these matters, yet we know that at some time (may it be many years yet) Yahweh will call you to walk with your fathers. And your sons do not walk in your ways, but they pervert justice for the sake of gain. We would ask you; that is, we believe it would be best for the people; that is ..."

But one of the elders pushed himself forward at this point, elbowing the first aside. "Out with it man, for God's sake," he spluttered. "This is what we ask, Samuel: appoint for us a king, like other nations."

There was a kind of gasp at his temerity and directness, or perhaps it was that they thought I would fall headlong as the blood rushed in my head, and the room swam before my eyes. Then I grasped my staff tighter, and mastered the roaring in my ears, and spoke quietly and firmly: "Give me a day. Let me seek His Face, and hear what he will say to your request."

In a rush of relief and dismay, like naughty boys who have somehow, against all expectation, escaped the predictable wrath of their teacher, they left the room in a murmuring crush. I sank onto the chair, breathing deeply to still the beating of my heart.

Seldom had I felt such anger, and yet it was different from the righteous rages I had

often known, when cases were brought to me for judgement and I saw again the unaccountable perversity and mischievousness of the people whom Yahweh had redeemed. This time I did not know for whom I was angry. There was the sense that it was me they were rejecting, me, who had spent myself and all my years in serving them. But it was not that only. There was the sense, too, that it was Yahweh himself they were rejecting from being king over them.

When I was calm again, I went into the Presence and the Silence, trying to lay down all the bitterness I was carrying before I entered, though I could never let go of it all. And when He was there, I knew that I did not need to tell Him anything. The Voice was just as near, just as real, just as if my old master was calling me from the next room, as it had been when I was a lad of eight with old Eli.

He said to me, "Listen to the voice of the people. For it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected Me from being king over them." Then the calm flooded and eased my mind and my heart, and I knew that I had not misjudged what He would say. I was still the seer, the listener, the one who was qualified to judge the people of Yahweh.

I sent for the elders to come to me again on the morrow. Again they entered the room, some swaggering and confident as if they had cowed the old man and forced him to accede to their demands, others more diffident, still unsure about how Yahweh would have told me to answer them.

I drew myself up to my full height, supporting myself again on my staff, and spoke to them the word of Yahweh. "Listen, you rebels, you stiff-necked disobedient children, always rejecting the word of Yahweh and turning from his ways. I have spoken to Him for you, told Him of your request; and He has told me to appoint for you the king that you desire, so that you might be as other nations. But He has commanded me to tell you also what will be the ways of the king you will have over you.

"He will take to himself the best of all that you have. He will take your sons to serve in his army, and your daughters to serve in his palace. He will take the best of your crops to feed his own household, the best of your animals to work in his fields, the best of your slaves to serve him. He will take one-tenth of all your wealth.

"One day you will cry to Yahweh for relief from the yoke this king you have chosen will lay upon. But He will not listen, He will not hear you. For it is He you are rejecting from being king over you."

At this most of the elders looked crestfallen, like the same disobedient boys they had seemed the day before. But two or three of them bristled angrily, pushed themselves forward again, and argued, "Never mind your complaints and excuses, old man. We will have a king to rule over us. If Yahweh has spoken and decreed it, then so be it. Give us what we ask."

Then I acceded to their demands, and sent them away. I knew that I could not act, even then, until He told me how, or who He had chosen to appoint as king over them.

Not many days afterwards, before even the most impatient of them had had time to come troubling me again, reminding me of the pledge I had given them, the Voice

came to me once more in the Presence and the Silence.

"It is tomorrow," He said. "About this time, tomorrow, I will send to you a young man from the tribe of Benjamin. Him you shall anoint with holy oil, to be ruler and prince over my people. For I have heard their cry, and I have chosen him to deliver them from their enemies who assail them."

2. The Lost Asses

There are a lot worse masters than Kish. Though he was a member of the smallest tribe in Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, his was a noble ancestry - son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Becorath, son of Aphiah - and he was a man of wealth and substance. He worked his men hard, but he was always fair, and shared the fruits of their labour with those who served him well.

None of us ever begrudged the master the sweat we shed for him, no matter what the task he assigned. That's not to say we didn't prefer some of those tasks to others. For me, I always enjoyed it best, and had the greatest fun, when he told me to help his son Saul with anything.

I loved Saul, like my own brother. In fact there were many times I wished he were my brother, though that would never have been the same. He was about five years my junior, so if we had been brothers, it would have been me that was the chief. Saul knew very well that he was the master's son, he was the one to command. But still, we played together, learned together, worked together, often more like brothers than master and servant. Saul was an outstanding young man, a full head and shoulders taller than the rest of us, even at fifteen years old. We never went anywhere, but all the girls heads turned, and their eyes followed him. These were the best of times, for out of any group that sought his attention, there would be one of the others, whom he did not choose from among them, who would be happy to pass time with his friend or companion. That way I enjoyed many a sweet hour.

Among all those golden days when we were young together, I will never forget the time the asses went astray; for those were the days that sealed my friend's future destiny. In a way, I suppose, that day laid the foundation for all the glory and the heartbreak that would come his way. We didn't know all that when our little summer adventure began.

It started with the tumult of hue and cry. The house and yard were in uproar after someone first asked the question, Where are the donkeys? They knew exactly which donkeys were meant. The best ones, the new ones Kish had bought from his neighbour the week before - and paid a good price for, though he had haggled with him and forced him to reduce the price from his first asking. Everyone's first thought was that they had wandered off on their own and found their way back to their old home. But a disgruntled neighbour hotly denied it, as if he was being accused of having stolen the donkeys. A quick survey of his property confirmed his denial.

So Kish called his oldest son and gave him the task of finding those lost donkeys. Told me to go along with him to make sure he didn't meet with any accident; for in those days raiding bands of the Philistines often found their way into Israelite territory. When they did, they didn't spare anyone who was too weak to resist them, stealing beasts or food or money, terrorising whole villages and sometimes carrying

off the women to be slaves or whores. The danger was that if they found the missing donkeys first, they would all too readily kill Saul if he came upon them claiming to be the rightful owner.

We set off from Gibeah with all the excitement of young men going to take part in a festival. I carried a bundle with food and a skin of wine, Saul strode out in front with his staff and short sword. There was laughter, voices wishing us well, girls waving and calling out to us. It was Saul they were calling to, but I loved every minute of it too, basking in his reflected glory.

The hill country of Ephraim, on a day of early summer, is a place of stark beauty that lowland people like the men of Asher do not understand. It can seem harsh and inhospitable, until you learn its ways and recognise the hidden sources of water and shade. But we were young and in good heart, laughing and joking, confident that we would soon find the lost beasts.

In village after village along the way, children and young women came out to see who we were, and stayed to talk with Saul. In answer to his questions about the donkeys, they told us they had not seen any sign of them, but if we went a little further, we might hear something more in the next village. People *there* had more to do with places further afield and would certainly know if three wandering donkeys - a remarkable event - had been seen; or if there were any rumours of brigands or raiding parties in the neighbourhood.

But in the next village too, there was no news. And after we had eaten and drunk most of our provisions, and rested for an hour during the heat of the day, and trudged on through a long afternoon, and still heard no news nor seen any sign of my master's donkeys, even our high spirits sank. We found ourselves near a village where we knew no one, and the best shelter we could find for the night was in among a pile of old, and none too savoury smelling, hay. After our long day's walk, Saul slept much better than I; though that was only what anyone would expect.

Still, we woke early and set off in the cool morning, convinced that the donkeys could not have wandered much further, and even if they had been stolen, the thieves would not be far ahead. We had come to places that neither of us knew well, and we wandered a whole day in parts that were called the land of Shalishah, and then the land of Shaalim. Towards evening of that second day, even Saul was becoming tired and angry. The villagers we asked for shelter drove us away with stones and sticks, accusing *us* of being robbers, and we slept under a scrubby olive tree, huddled together for warmth in the cold night air.

In fact we had come in a wide circle and were once again within the territory of Benjamin. When Saul realised where we were, he kicked his foot against a stone in bitter frustration - for he had been so confident that this would be an easy errand to do for his father, and he would return home in success, and earn the praise of his father and (more important) every maiden in Gibeah.

"We'd better turn back for home," he muttered. "My father will have stopped worrying about the donkeys, and will be thinking some mischance has befallen us."

My heart went out to him, he looked so disappointed, so young. At the last village we

had passed, they told us we were close to the town of Ramah, where Samuel the seer lived. Surely we could go and ask him, and he would be able to tell us what had become of the donkeys?

Saul hesitated. He knew that there was no food left in our sacks; in fact we had hardly eaten the whole of the previous day. What would we have to offer the man of God, in payment for his prayers and advice?

I don't know why I said it; it seemed absurdly presumptuous for a mere servant. But I told Saul about the quarter shekel of silver I had with me, which was all the money I possessed. I told him a lie: that his father Kish had given it to me in case of need. That was at least believable, since Saul, notoriously, could easily have given it to the first pretty girl he saw just to see her smile her gratitude. The silver would be a suitable gift for the seer, that no one would be ashamed to offer for his help.

And so Saul agreed, and we set off up the hill towards the gate of Ramah. Some girls were coming out with water jars, to fetch water from the well. They giggled, fluttering their eye lashes at Saul and smiling.

"Is the seer here?" he asked them.

One of them, greatly daring, and egged on by her comrades, told us, Yes, he was just ahead of us, for he had come to the town just now to offer sacrifice with the people at their shrine.

As we passed through the gate, there was Samuel coming towards us, on his way to the shrine. He seemed the oldest man I had ever seen, his beard long and white, his face wrinkled and pale, but with the most piercing eyes you could imagine. *Seeing* eyes, that could see what no one else saw. He seemed so old you would think a sudden gust of wind might blow him off his feet, and he grasped his staff as if it alone kept him upright; yet he seemed too to be the only thing in that little street that possessed any strength at all. As if he alone was substantial, and all else - people, houses, buildings, the blue sky above us - were somehow thin and dissolving like mist.

Anyone would have known that this was the man we sought. Yet Saul amazed me by going to him, bowing his head in respect, and asking, "Tell me, sir: where is the house of the seer?"

Samuel took his arm in a grip like a vice, and equally astonished me - for how should he not know already? - by asking, "Who are you?"

"I am Saul, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin."

The seer's eyes seemed suddenly to look beyond Saul. Not just past him, but through him, as if he was looking into impossible depths or distances. And he cocked his head to one side, seeming to listen to a voice that no one else heard, speaking to him alone.

"Yes," he said after some moments, "yes..." but he said it not to us.

Then, as his eyes returned to the two of us youths, standing before him now in fear and trembling, he fixed Saul with his gaze and said, "I am Samuel. And you, Saul, son of Kish, will stay with me this night. Go up before me to the shrine, for you will eat

this feast with me, and tomorrow I will let you go and tell you all that is on your mind. But let me just tell you this: The donkeys you are looking for these three days have been found. And you are the one that all Israel desires and longs for."

I have never known such an evening, such a feast, as that was. Saul sat at Samuel's right hand, and they gave him all the best portions of the meat of the sacrifice; while I, as Saul's friend and companion, also received meat and wine in plenty. We were young men who had eaten little for two days, and we fell upon what was set before us like ravenous beasts; more than once I caught the surprised, amused glances of the maidens who were trying to catch Saul's eye, only to find he never lifted it from the food he was eating.

When the feast was ended, Samuel took us to his house and we fell into the deep sleep of the exhausted and well-fed young.

Morning came, and we packed up ready to make the shorter journey home to Gibeah. As we were leaving the town, Samuel sent me on ahead while he held my master's son back to speak privately with him. I could not hear what he said, nor see clearly whatever it was he did to Saul. But when my companion rejoined me, he looked thoughtful, his eyes almost as distant as the seer's had been.

I pressed him to tell me what had happened, what the seer had told him.

Saul shook his head, as if trying to clear a film or veil from his eyes; he seemed to come to himself from somewhere a long way away, and said, "He took a small vial of olive oil and poured it on my head. He said, 'You are Yahweh's Messiah, for Yahweh has chosen you to be the prince of his people, the one who will deliver them from the hands of all their enemies round about.' And he told me about three signs that will happen as we travel on, that will confirm his words to me."

And as we went on our way, all those signs came to pass. First we met with two men, as we were passing along by Rachel's tomb at Zelzah, who told us that the lost donkeys that had caused us such sore feet and aching limbs and pangs of hunger, had indeed been found, and now Kish was worrying about his son and me. It didn't seem like much of a miraculous sign to me: by this time the whole countryside seemed to have heard about the missing donkeys, and the vain quest that had taken the son of Kish on a three-day march around the hills of Ephraim.

But then, some miles further on, three men going up to sacrifice at Bethel met us on the road. One of them was carrying three kids for the sacrifice, another three loaves of bread, and the third a skin of new wine. They greeted Saul as if they knew him, though he himself swore to me he had never seen any of them before, and offered us two of their loaves of bread which we were glad to accept, the effects of last night's feast having already worn off.

Lastly, as we drew near to Gibeah-Elohim, just near the place where the Philistines had one of their garrisons to keep us in check and continually flaunt their armed superiority to us, and our weakness to resist them, the third and strangest sign came upon us. A band of prophets was coming down from the shrine, with the musicians playing the harp, tambourine, flute and lyre before them, and the prophets themselves following. They were dancing, singing, chanting in strange meaningless

words given them by the Spirit, throwing themselves to and fro and sometimes flinging themselves to the ground and leaping up in the air. Saul and his family, pragmatic men of Benjamin, had never had anything but scorn for these so-called prophets in their frenzies, which no one had ever seen until the Philistines began to assert their power more aggressively throughout the tribes of Israel. They were sure it was some kind of moral or spiritual weakness, the recourse of men too weak to resist, or to accept what they dare not or could not prevent.

As we watched the band coming nearer, I turned to Saul, ready to make some joke at the expense of these crazy fellows. But even as I turned, Saul gripped my arm like a vice.

"It is the third sign!" he gasped between clenched teeth. He was trembling all over, his eyes rolled upwards in his head until only the whites could be seen. Then in a moment he leaped away from me, leaping high off the ground, waving his arms and singing with a strange, wailing voice I had never heard before. It was as if he was no longer Saul, my master's son, my friend and playmate in so many tricks and games. He had become a different man.

I hoped that what had happened before my very eyes would remain a secret: I certainly would never have told anyone about it, would have forgotten it and pretended it had never happened. But the bands of prophets never performed their rites in a corner: there were always witnesses, bystanders and hangers-on who supported them and spread the word of their doings far and wide.

By the time their frenzy had burned itself out, and Saul had regained his breath and put his clothing in order, and we had made our way home to Gibeah, the neighbours and others were already gossiping about Saul's strange behaviour, and the saying was going the rounds, "Is Saul also one of the prophets?"

3. The King-Making

My name is Ner, of the tribe of Benjamin. Brother of Kish, and uncle of the Messiah Saul, the prince of the people of Israel.

You ask me for my memories of my nephew, this hero beloved by Yahweh, and chosen by him but then just as suddenly rejected, and cast out from his presence for ever? I remember as if it were yesterday, the time when Yahweh's choice first pointed to my nephew.

It was just at that famous time, that the maidens and the singers sang about for months and years afterwards, of the Quest of the Lost Donkeys. They made it out to be some heroic saga almost, like Yahweh's battle with the Chaos-Monster Leviathan! But I remember the day the two of them came home to Gibeah, Saul and that scapegrace servant of his, who had spent three whole days marching around the hill country of Ephraim as if they were searching for the lost fruit of Eden. I blamed that servant boy, who was always up to all kinds of pranks and mischief, leading Saul astray; probably thinking this was a chance for a holiday, three days without having to do a stroke of work!

When they came home - and it had all been a complete waste of time, the donkeys had been found the very evening they set out, happily munching the new shoots in Kish's neighbour's field - and wasn't he furious when he found them! - I met them in the gate, for I knew that my brother Kish was too soft to deal with them as they deserved.

"Where in all creation have you two been?" I demanded.

At this both of them looked shamefaced, as well they might, and Saul began to make excuses for them. "You know, uncle, we went looking for my father's donkeys; and when we couldn't find them, we went to Samuel to enquire of him. You know how it is with these men of God: ask them a simple question and they keep you there all day telling you the whole will of Yahweh. We came away and came home as soon as ever we could."

But they weren't going to get off that lightly. "All right," I said. "If Samuel did detain you, what was it he said to you?"

Saul flashed that most winning smile at me, the smile that turned the heads of all the girls, and answered, "Just that the donkeys had been found, uncle, that's all." I knew it wasn't all; but I knew it was all I would get out of him, no matter how hard I pressed him.

I soon found out what it was that Samuel had spoken to him about. A few weeks later, messengers were sent throughout the tribes of Israel, with word that Samuel the seer, Samuel the judge of the people of Israel, was summoning all the tribes to gather to him at Mizpah, where he would appoint a prince over them, as they desired.

Not everyone went, of course: the whole land would have been emptied of its inhabitants if all had gone. But enough of us gathered at Mizpah to make it a bigger throng than I had ever witnessed for any festival or holy day in all my life. Whole families and households travelled from all over the twelve tribes, and camped out on the hillside before Mizpah, spreading out their blankets on the ground. Young men in groups stood laughing, or playing, casting their eyes all the time at the similar crowds of maidens who both returned, and avoided, their glances. Sellers of sweetmeats and bread and wine passed back and forth among the crowds, peddling their wares. There was a mood of celebration and high expectation, as everyone asked who was the one Samuel would name as king.

At last the aged seer appeared, walking as stiffly upright as he could manage, with his sons following behind, watching him warily, and ready to steady him if he should stumble. When he stopped on top of the rock facing the city, his voice though full of years was as strong and compelling as it had ever been.

"Hear, O Israel!" he cried, and the talking of thousands of tongues ceased immediately. "This is what Yahweh says: 'I brought you out of slavery in Egypt, I set you free from all the kingdoms that were oppressing you.' But you have rejected your God, your saviour, and have asked for a king to rule over you instead. Very well: pass before Yahweh now by your tribes and your clans, and he will show you whom he has appointed to be your prince and governor."

This was all part of the long and elaborate ritual of choosing by lot. Each of the tribes passed before Yahweh, like troops passing in review before their commanding officer, only there were more of these than in any army of the Israelites that had ever marched, since the days of Moses and Aaron who led them out of Egypt. And Samuel said, It was the tribe of Benjamin that Yahweh had chosen. So then the tribe of Benjamin marched past again, family by family, and Samuel said it was the family of the Matrites that was chosen. And finally that family passed by, man by man, and Samuel said, my nephew Saul, son of Kish, was the one chosen by Yahweh. But Saul was nowhere to be seen.

Immediately a cry went up from hundreds of voices "Where is Saul?" It was passed from mouth to mouth, and the children took it up like a game of hide and seek, hunting excitedly for the missing king. It didn't take long to find him, with so many seekers, and the cry then changed to, "He's here, hiding with the baggage!"

It was true: this strapping young man, for some reason I simply could not guess, had taken it into his head to be overcome with nerves as if he were some blushing girl. It seemed to me that the Saul I had known would have revelled in the attention and the glory, would have used the moment to impress his friends and all the girls. Something had happened to him, when he met Samuel in Ramah. Some new spirit had entered him, he had become a different man.

They brought him out from among the baggage, a cheering, laughing, whooping crowd, and brought him to Samuel. He towered above the old man, just as he stood a head and shoulders taller than all the people. A kind of low sound ran around the crowd: it was the sigh of thousands of women, and a murmur of admiration from the men. The seer placed his hands on Saul's shoulders and pressed him down so that he

was kneeling in front of him. Then he kissed my nephew's head, made him stand again, turned him round to face the crowds of the gathered tribes, and said in a ringing voice, "Behold the man! Behold Yahweh's Messiah!"

And now, for the first time in the long, bitter, sweet story of Israel, the cry rose from the people as one man: "Long live the king! Long live the king!"

Singing and celebration went on far into the night, and in the morning the crowds began to disperse, returning happily to their homes, talking and retelling the story of events as they went their way. As in any crowd, there were the inevitable grumblers: Who does this Saul think he is? A man of Benjamin, of all things, the smallest of all tribes! How can this man save us? We do not want this man to be prince over us!

But when Saul returned to Gibeah, he was carried on his way by a band of young men who felt a movement in their hearts they had never known before. Who were happy to pledge their strength to serve him, delighted to be a part of the new thing Yahweh had wrought, on which Israel had pinned such hopes, that would redeem them from the hated Philistines, and from all their other enemies round about.

Me? I was left musing, wondering what it could mean to have the Messiah as my nephew.

4. A Prince of Israel

Jabesh-Gilead is a town like hundreds of others among the tribes of Israel. Our forefathers chose to settle here when the tribes first came out of Egypt. After they had wandered forty years in the wilderness, the whole generation that Moses constantly denounced as rebellious and stiff-necked, died, and their sons and daughters came to the east of Jordan and stood poised on the edge of the Land Yahweh had promised them. But some still remembered why their fathers had refused to march on into the Land in the first place. It was the spies' report of the Land's inhabitants: that they were ferocious giants, living in walled cities we would never be able to capture. In comparison with them, our fathers felt like grasshoppers, and so they seemed to the giants in that Land.

So when the children of the rebellious generation came to Gilead, and found the land pleasant and fertile, the inhabitants no bigger and stronger than ordinary men, and the cities quite able to be captured by our armies, they decided it would be good to settle there. Joshua, our general, reluctantly agreed, on condition that the armed men should not enjoy their possession, until they had first helped the other tribes in their conquest of the Land beyond, and west of Jordan.

So it came about that the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, live east of Jordan and away from their Israelite relatives, to this very day.

Yes, Jabesh-Gilead is like those hundreds of towns; with this exception alone. It is dangerously near to the lands of the Ammonites, our bitter foes. Some of the old stories call them kin, the descendants of our Father Abraham's nephew Lot, born to one of his own daughters after Yahweh burned the Cities of the Plain with fire and brimstone from heaven. Me, I never believed that disgusting legend. But kin or no, they certainly did not behave like it, at the time when Yahweh appointed Saul as his Messiah, to deliver his people from their enemies.

The king of the Ammonites at that time was one Nahash, a cruel, blood-thirsty warrior greedy for gold and women. He delighted to lead his raiding parties into the territories of Reuben and Gad, to plunder their silver and their livestock, steal their women and humiliate the men who failed to defend them. His favourite torture was to round up the captured men of a village, gouge out their right eyes, and cast them out in the fields, screaming and bloody. To avoid this shame and dishonour, thousands of the men of fighting age fled from the Ammonites, abandoning their homes and villages, and came to Jabesh-Gilead, hoping they would be safe here.

But a man like Nahash can never be content with terrorising his victims and plundering their possessions. He must always be coveting more, reaching out for more wealth, more plunder, more humiliation of his enemies. And so it was he came to Jabesh-Gilead, in the strength of his might and overweening pride.

I remember to this day, how we rushed up on the city walls at the ringing of the

warning bell, and the watchman's cry: "The Ammonites! The Ammonites are coming!" Women and children screamed, running hither and thither through the streets. Men stood grim-faced and silent, looking over the ramparts at the armed warriors ranged along the hillside, while others hurried to bring in the last of the flocks through the city gates, and to shut and bar the gates.

Then Nahash sent out his herald: a greasy fellow who looked like some rabid beast slavering and licking his fat chops in anticipation of the feast he expected soon to be devouring. He called up to the men on the walls and to the elders, to open the gates and submit to the inevitable. Their conqueror, Ammon, had come.

The elders of our town begged for mercy. "Make a treaty with us," they pleaded, "and we will become your servants. Only spare us, our children and our womenfolk."

The herald laughed, a coarse, mocking laugh that struck fear into the hearts of all of us. "My master says this to you: I will make a treaty with you, to spare your lives and let you live as my servants, when first I have gouged out the right eye of every male among you; and so I will put disgrace upon all Israel. Accept these terms, or die!"

There was a horrified silence, followed by an outburst of everyone talking at once, while the crying of some of the men was added to the weeping and lamenting of the women. Outside the walls, the herald began to pace impatiently up and down, tossing his head and leering lustfully at any of the women who happened to peer over the wall. Further off, the main body of Ammonite warriors began to chant their obscene war songs, and beat their spear shafts on their leather shields.

After what seemed like an age, one of the elders shouted their decision to the herald. It was a request for a week's respite, so that they could send messengers throughout the whole territory of Israel, to see if there were any who would champion us in Jabesh-Gilead, any at all who would come to our aid and deliver us from our oppressors, and the disgrace they threatened us with. If, within that time, there was no champion, we would open the gates of the city and submit to Nahash and his terms of shame.

He must have been very confident of his might, and of the terror his army inspired in the hearts of the Israelites, for he agreed to this request and withdrew far enough from our city, promising safe passage to the messengers the elders might send. I, young as I was, was one of those sent with the other chosen men to carry the word and the plea to all the tribes of Israel. Never since the nation of Israel came to be, had such a threat and such a challenge come upon us, and the elders hoped and prayed that seeing one as young as me would bring home to those who heard it the horror and urgency of our need. What each of us knew and feared, and did not know whether or not Nahash knew it, was that the loss of an eye made an Israelite unclean, unholy, unfit to enter the Presence of Yahweh and share fully in the worship and the sacrifices. Having his eye gouged out was not just a shameful defeat and terrible physical maiming, it also stripped him of his identity as a true descendant of Abraham, a full member of the people of Yahweh.

Travelling as light as we could, without weapons or baggage, we made a forced march to take the message to Gibeah; for we had heard that Yahweh had chosen Saul as his

Messiah, to save his people from their enemies. It was not until the third day that we reached Saul's city, and then the word spread rapidly among the inhabitants, and the streets were filled with men and women talking loudly, wailing and lamenting.

Then Saul came into the midst of the crowds. Not from a palace or a rich house, not from campaigning or weapons practice with his fighting men, but from his fields. From Kish's farmland, where he had been ploughing with the oxen like any common farm boy. I thought when I first saw this that I would despise him, and be sure that such a man could not be prince of Israel. But no: in a moment my heart filled with love and went out to him. The Messiah whom the people had asked Samuel to give them, the Messiah chosen by Yahweh himself, was one of us, a man of the people not much older than I was. I knew, that instant, that I would follow him to the ends of the earth; that I would willingly shed my blood with him to fight for Yahweh's people; that nothing could stand against the love and loyalty that he awoke in men's hearts.

The next thing I saw confirmed all that I had felt in that first rush of devotion. As soon as Saul heard the message we had brought from Jabesh-Gilead, his face changed and darkened, his whole body began to tremble, and strange sounds issued from his lips, like words in a tongue I had never heard before. I heard one or two of the bystanders whispering in awe-struck tones, "The Spirit of Yahweh! It is the Spirit of Yahweh coming upon him, as it did on the road from Ramah!"

I had heard of the kind of things that the prophets did, when that spirit came upon them: strange things that went beyond the bounds of reason, that seemed mad, yet proved to be a true sign from Yahweh. And now I saw it for myself: Saul took up a great blade and cut the throats of the very yoke of oxen he had been driving before him. He slashed the beasts into twelve pieces, one for each of the tribes of Israel, and commanded his father's servants to carry the pieces to every tribe, to Asher and Dan, to Naphtali and Zebulun, to Issachar, Manasseh, and Ephraim, throughout all Judah and as far as Simeon, to Reuben and Gad and little Benjamin that knew of it already, and there to proclaim Saul's terrible call and curse: "If anyone will not come forth with arms, and follow Saul and Samuel, let this be the fate of his oxen!"

And at once he buckled on his sword and armour, and marched northward, followed by all the men whose hearts Yahweh moved to follow him, making swiftly for the rallying-point of Bezek, west of the Jordan from Jabesh-Gilead. I followed with them, my heart swelling with pride and warlike dreams as I saw my prince striding out at the head of us all, while the other messengers came puffing along behind.

On the third day - the sixth day of marching for me, though I scarcely felt the weariness and pain, for the joy of following my prince - the men of Israel were numbered at Bezek: three hundred thousand men, armed and ready to strike in vengeance against the Ammonites, and seventy thousand from Judah alone. Then Saul sent the messengers home - though I remained with him and the army - saying, "Say this to the people of Jabesh-Gilead: Before the sun is hot tomorrow, I, Saul, will give you your deliverance. Yahweh will strike your enemies, and you will be free."

As we camped for the night, Saul himself walked among us and gave his orders to each company and band of the Israelites. I have called us an army; but in truth we were nothing more than a mass of men, spoiling for a fight. We were not formed as

divisions or companies, we were nothing more than haphazard bands of men from the same town or village or group of villages, or men who just happened to have been marching together on the way, and had come to know and like each other. But even without the leadership of trained captains, we responded to Saul's orders and encouragement. He divided us into three divisions, and gave the first orders of battle he had ever given as king. The smallest of the three companies was to advance directly on the Ammonite camp, while the two larger, equal companies set off before first light in flanking movements to attack them from the sides and the rear. After eating whatever we had with us, and snatching a few hours of sleep, we hurried to obey.

That was my first battle for Saul. Anyone who has never fought an enemy hand to hand, with naked sharp blades, flesh against flesh, cannot know the tempest of feelings that sweeps through a man before, during and after the battle. There is a surge of exhilaration as he is carried along with his comrades, the excitement of preparing to fight which moves him forward as if his feet are raised up off the ground, on wings, rather than still stirring up the dust or mud. And with it the fear: of pain, or death, or of turning out to be a faint-heart and running headlong from the fray. A grim, tight-lipped determination to do what must be done, to support his friends on either side in the line, to defend his home and family and avenge himself on his enemies, to take life if he can or to die if he must. Once the fighting begins, there is so little time to think or feel, that the whole of his concentration of mind and body is taken up with the need to defend, to survive, to hold together, to strike and wound and kill if possible. It is as if he has eyes all over his body, senses heightened to the utmost to detect an approaching enemy, the swing or thrust of a blade, or a flying spear or arrow, any threat to himself or his comrades. And afterwards the elation of having survived, the tales to share, the boasts of enemies killed, or near escapes from death, the sadness of friends taken from him, that he will never see again.

On the field before Jabesh-Gilead, the cry to attack went up. A great shout greeted the command, that was then taken up by thousands of Israelites, and we poured down on the Ammonite camp like the flood in a dry wadi, following a sudden storm. Our enemies fought like men, and died like cattle. Those who were able, fled, every man for himself; and there was wailing and lamenting in all of Ammon that day.

But in Jabesh-Gilead there was rejoicing, and in the camp of Saul, and throughout all Israel. Never since the days of Deborah, Gideon and Jephthah, had there been such a victory for us against our enemies. At last Yahweh had heard our prayers, and raised up a Messiah to lead us to victory!

In the elation and celebration, some of Saul's own band, the men who had first been moved to follow him on the day he was chosen as prince, began to cry out against those who had grumbled against. "Where are the men who said, We do not want Saul to rule over us? Bring them here! Kill them! Let their name perish with them!"

In the midst of their angry shouting, and a tumult that was beginning to infect the companies and bands round about them, Saul stood up and shouted for silence.

"Enough of this! No Israelite shall die today at the hands of another, for this is the

day that Yahweh has given victory to his people. Let us give thanks to Him, give Him the glory and the praise!"

The celebrations of victory and thanksgiving went on for days. The tribes gathered again to Gilgal, where they renewed their pledge of allegiance to the king who had saved them, and offered sacrifices and offerings to Yahweh.

That was not the last battle I fought with Saul, but it was the one I remember most vividly: the battle that saved me and my family and my whole town from the humiliating defeat and shame that Nahash the Ammonite had sworn he would inflict on us. My townspeople never forgot their debt to the Messiah Saul. Years later, after the disaster of Mount Gilboa, where he fell in battle against the Philistines, because David had betrayed and abandoned him, we were finally able to discharge that debt. The Philistines - may Yahweh reward them as they deserve! - had found the bodies of Saul and his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Melchishua among the piles of the slain. They cut off their heads, stripped them of their armour which they dedicated in the temple of their vile whore-goddess Astarte, and hung up their bodies on the wall of Beth-Shan.

When we in Jabesh-Gilead heard this, the best men - and I among them - armed ourselves with our weapons and marched through the night to Beth-Shan. We took their bodies down, in spite of the threats and curses of the Philistine garrison looking down on us, and it was well for them they did not try to prevent us, for our blood was up and tempers running high. Then we wrapped them in linen, took them back home and burned them with prayers and full honours. We buried their bones under the sacred tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted with mourning for seven days. It was the least we could do for the Messiah who had redeemed us.

5. Saul and Sons At War

It was just after my father's first, great victory against Nahash king of the Ammonites, and his deliverance of the people of Jabesh-Gilead, which gave the Israelites their first real taste of victory since the time of Jephthah, that my mother conceived me. And so it was that when I was born, a first-born male to open my mother's womb, my proud father gave me the name Jonathan. It means, Yahweh has given. In his first flush of the knowledge that he was Yahweh's Chosen, he saw every day, every blessing, as a gift specially for him, by which he could be Yahweh's man in the world, to serve the chosen holy people, and to bring glory to the Name of their God.

I grew up in the knowledge that my father Saul, the man I called abba with the familiarity that no one else could, was the king of Israel, Yahweh's Messiah. We did not live in a great palace like the kings of the nations around us. There were no courtiers, no secret rooms full of wives and concubines, no gossiping and conspiring factions. When my father was first anointed king, he returned from the feasting and celebration to till his own fields, to work on the land which still belonged to his father Kish. It was from those same fields that he returned to hear the news of the humiliation that threatened the people of Jabesh-Gilead, and set out to deliver them so successfully, with the result that confirmed him in his kingship and made the whole assembly of the tribes of Israel love and follow him.

It was a heady atmosphere for a boy to grow up in. From a very early age I began to learn the use of arms, more than the use of the plough. The other boys of my age admired and respected me, not for my own sake, but for my father's. We all longed for the day when we would reach manhood, and be able to take our part in the bands that followed Israel's Messiah, whenever they were called upon to help him defend us against our enemies.

For in those days there were many tribes and nations surrounding our ancestral lands, that hated us and longed to wipe us off the face of the earth. It was their belief that we had stolen their land when Joshua led our forefathers out of the wilderness and over Jordan into the hills and valleys, the towns and villages of Canaan. Yet even the youngest Israelite boy or girl learns from their mother's breast, that this Land was promised to our forefathers by Yahweh himself. It was promised to Abraham, before ever the people went down into Egypt and slavery. The promise was renewed to Isaac, and to Jacob who received the name of Israel, and to all his twelve sons. This is our Land, the land flowing with milk and honey that is our promise and our birthright as the children of Israel.

No wonder the nations around us look with envy on all these blessings that we enjoy, the favour of Yahweh our God, and the Promised Land itself. To the north, the Sidonians and Arameans; to the east, the Ammonites and Moabites; to the south, the Edomites and the Amalekites. And to the west, between us and the Sea, and the

worst of them all: the Philistines. They have long been the fiercest and most dangerous, because they possessed one thing that we lacked: the knowledge of iron. No one knows by what devilry or magic they acquired this skill with the black ore from out of the earth, and how to transform it into the hard, sharp metal which can shatter the bronze of our blades, and slash through flesh and bone, to sever a man's soul from his body. They say, it was the gift of their vile idol Dagon; but how could such an abomination reveal to men such a complex and mighty artistry? Perhaps it was Yahweh's punishment upon us for turning away from his word in the days of the earlier judges, when the Philistines first came from the Sea and planted their settlements upon these shores?

By the time I was growing to manhood, the knowledge of iron was the one thing that kept us in thrall to the Philistines. Certainly, there had been times when we had gained victory over them. Samson had wrought terrible carnage upon them in the days of his strength, and even after they tricked and captured him, and robbed him of his strength and put out his eyes, still he slew more of them on the day of his death, than he had slain in all his life. Later, in the time of Eli, Yahweh Himself smote them with plague and suffering in all their cities, when they captured the sacred Ark in battle; and he would not hold back his hand, until they sent back the Ark to its rightful place among the tribes of Israel.

But for these defeats, the Philistines hated us all the more and were determined to keep us in chains. They kept the secret of iron from us, and charged extortionately for the very few iron implements they were prepared to sell us. That was a few ploughshares and other farm tools, which only the wealthiest among us could therefore afford. When these needed repairing or sharpening, there was no smith in the whole of Israel who knew how to do the work, so we must go time and again to the Philistines and suffer the humiliation of having to ask them to do the work. They might or might not agree to do it; and even if they agreed, our people were entirely at the mercy of their whim, for the price they would have to pay.

A very few iron weapons fell into our possession. My father Saul had one, which he had captured from a slain enemy on the battlefield, and there were a few others like it. Our craftsmen studied them, tested them, tried to divine the secret of their making. The best of them worked on this project for months and years, but were no nearer discovering the truth. And so the Philistines continued to hold us in their power, like an enemy who has your manhood in his fist, and squeezes until you submit to whatever he demands.

It was the year I turned sixteen, by now a youth with my coming of age behind me, and many of my friends were already married with children, though I had yet to find a maiden who took my fancy. It was my first real campaign, yet my father showed his supreme confidence in my - though there were many seasoned men who grumbled against him and me - by giving me command of a thousand of his trained warriors. There were just three thousand of these in all, the core of an army, the men on whom the Messiah could call at a few days' notice to leave their homes and farms to come and fight for Israel's cause. Two thousands were with Saul in the hills around Bethel, while my thousand were in Gibeah itself, the city of Saul.

The nearest Philistine garrison was at Geba, some three miles away. The very existence of that garrison, so close to my father's city, was a standing insult, a constant offence to our nationhood and a reminder of our weakness. At the same time, it was not always a strong garrison, so arrogant and self-confident had the Philistines become about their strength. The supremacy of their wonderful iron. They sometimes forgot that even more powerful than the metal, is the spirit of the man who wields it.

On that memorable day of my first command, I led my thousand out against the Geba garrison, and almost without thinking, found myself giving the order to advance and attack. Whether they were lazy, or drunk, or just the dregs of the Philistine fighting men, we took them completely by surprise, and our superior numbers and sheer rage enabled us to inflict a stinging defeat on them. We killed a dozen or so, half of the rest fled into the hills and back to Philistia, and the remaining twenty men took refuge in the garrison stronghold.

In all this, I had not acted with my father's full knowledge and agreement. For good or ill, I believed in my youthful zeal for the work of Yahweh and his Messiah, that I saw a perfect opportunity and seized it. My father would probably have waited until the opportunity was even riper, when it would have been possible to destroy even more of the enemy's forces. But he could not find it in himself to rebuke me, when he saw my joy and pride, and the infectious excitement that spread to the rest of the men: the Messiah's son was now also a leader and a warrior, able to inflict shame on those who had for so long shamed us.

What I had not foreseen, though my father had, was the effect this small defeat would have on the Philistines. When those who fled from Geba reached the cities of the Philistines and told what had happened, their kings and people were filled with fury. They determined to teach a lesson to these upstart Hebrews, that they nor their children would ever forget. They raised the biggest army that they had ever brought into the Land, thirty thousand chariots, six thousand cavalry, and troops more than we could count. They marched up from their coastal plains, driving a wedge between the northern and the southern tribes, and camped at Michmash, driving my father and his men further east to Gilgal, just four miles from the Jordan.

In spite of the jubilation my little victory had caused, the Israelite tribes were now filled with terror, and especially those towns and villages close to where the Philistines made their camp. Those iron chariots, and the black armour of their drivers and bowmen, seemed like some fell spirits from the underworld of Sheol. At the sight of them, the people of the villages fled to the hills and hid themselves in caves, in holes in the rocks; even in empty tombs and water cisterns that were almost dry by that time of the year. Others even crossed over to the east bank of the Jordan, and took refuge in the land of Gad and Gilead.

What I did not learn until much later, was the division that occurred at that time between my father and Samuel. Samuel had a great love for Saul. Even though he had first been bitterly opposed to the whole notion of a king for Israel, fearing as he did that by asking for a king like other nations, they were rejecting Yahweh as king over them, he had been won over. First by that mysterious Voice of Yahweh, which

brought him knowledge of the will of his God, and second by the sheer charm and grace of the one Yahweh chose to be his Messiah. Saul, my father, had some gift of making men as well as women love him. Even before the hour when the spirit of Yahweh came upon him, and he became a new man, he had had that gift; but afterwards, it was even more powerful.

It seems that at some point in the many conversations Samuel and my father had, and the messages that passed between them, Samuel had foretold that Saul would be at Gilgal and facing some terrible threat or danger. It had been part of the sign that Samuel had told him, to prove the truth of his Messiahship. My father had not understood this mysterious sign when he first heard of it, but now it all came back to him.

"Wait for me at Gilgal for seven days," Samuel had said, "until I come and offer burnt offerings and sacrifices, and then I will tell you what you must do."

But now Saul had waited seven days, and still Samuel had not come, and even his chosen, picked warriors, were beginning to desert and slip away from him. When the seventh day ended, Saul decided he could wait no longer. He called for his officers to bring the animals for the burnt offering and the peace offering, and he sacrificed them himself on the altar that was at Gilgal. He reasoned that though he was not a priest, still he was the Messiah, and the need was pressing.

No sooner had the burnt offering been consumed on the fire of the altar, than Samuel appeared. When he learned what Saul had done, he was furious. In his mind, the offering of sacrifice was the privilege of the priest alone; anyone who presumed to do so without being of the priestly caste, was guilty of sacrilege or worse. There was no hint of an explanation or apology for his delay. He was the one who had failed to honour his promise to my father, that he would come after seven days. No, he upbraided my father, called him fool and rebel, told him he had disobeyed Yahweh's express command. And now, when Yahweh would have established his kingdom over Israel for ever, he would instead seek another man, a man after his own heart, to rule over them. As if Saul were not a man after Yahweh's own heart! as we all well knew. But Samuel went off in a sulk, back to Ramah, leaving us to face the Philistines without his aid. Those that remained at Gilgal with my father came up to Gibeah and we joined forces, by now only about six hundred strong.

Perhaps I was just headstrong in my youth, but this was the first time in my life that I began to doubt my father's wisdom, and military skill, and began to believe that I knew better what needed to be done to fight our enemies. My father was surrounded by old men, as they seemed to me, as his advisers. There was Abner his cousin, the chief captain of his warriors. He was a good and honourable man, valiant in battle and the one man whom more than any other you would want at your side in a tight place, in the heat of battle. Many a time he and Saul had saved each other's lives, and there was no man my father trusted like him. And then there was Ahijah the priest, the bearer of the sacred ephod. He was the great-grandson of Eli the priest at Shiloh, whose fame we were constantly being told about, because he had been the master and teacher of old Samuel, whom my father set such store by. Not an old man, then, yet he had all the boring solemnity and caution of the old. Whenever he used his

precious ephod to seek Yahweh's guidance, you could be sure of only two things. It would take for ever for him to get any kind of answer out of the thing; and when he could it, it would be nothing good for our cause. It would always be, Wait, or Not yet, or The time is not right. I and the young men, my comrades, were sure it was not Yahweh who delivered these messages - for is not Yahweh our God the Lord of Battles? It was dull, cowardly Ahijah, who dreamed up these answers for the oracle, and passed them off as his own.

Many a time, in our hot-headed drinking and swaggering, we would talk about knowing better what Yahweh's plans might be, or what he might accomplish. What did it matter if we were only six hundred, in my father's whole army? Against these uncircumcised dogs of Philistines, a handful of men, with the help of Yahweh, could win a crushing victory.

In our growing frustration with the old men's cautions and delays, some of us resolved to strike a blow against the Philistines, with or without their permission. Early on the second day of the month, I crept out of Gibeah with my armour-bearer Elizur, to spy out the Philistine garrison at Michmash. The plan was, that if we spied out any weakness in their positions, we would return with all the young men in arms and exploit that weakness to win a great victory before the older men were even aware of it. We were already dreaming of the glory that would be ours, and the way the girls would swoon and fawn over us when we came back in triumph from the battlefield.

Things did not turn out the way I had planned or expected. When we first got near the pass at Michmash, my heart turned to water in my breast. The Philistines had chosen what seemed the perfect place for their outpost. It was in a commanding position, with an unhindered view in all directions, of the steep paths by which any attacker could reach them. Two rocky crags overlooked those approaches. On the north in front of Michmash was the crag Bozez; while to the south, facing Geba, rose the crag called Seneh. We squatted in the shade of a tall rock at the foot of Seneh, looking up the steep defile that led to the Philistines' garrison, and it seemed there was no way even a host of warriors could get up that way and attack the enemy.

But as we hid there, occasionally peering around the edge of the rock to see the enemy position without being seen, something happened to me which I have only experienced a half a dozen times in my life. It was as if I heard the Voice of Yahweh speaking as clear as Elizur my friend. "A host of warriors could not do it; but doubtless Yahweh will act for us, for nothing can hinder Yahweh from saving by many or by few."

Elizur seemed to catch the same inrush of faith, or inspiration, or whatever it was; for his whole face was lit up with a boyish grin, his teeth flashed at me in his joy, and he said, "Go on then, and I am with you! My heart is as your heart, and may Yahweh fight for us, if he will!"

We stood up then, no longer caring whether the Philistines saw us. For this would be our sign from Yahweh. If the Philistines called out to us, and told us to come up to them without shooting their arrows at us or warning us off, that would be our sign

that Yahweh was giving them into our hands.

We heard the sentries talking to each other as they watched us begin to toil up the path. The sun was already high in the clear blue sky, the heat shimmered all around us, the sweat ran down from the rim of my leather helmet, and under my breastplate. There was not a sound in all creation, but the scuffing of our sandals on the stony ground, and the foul jabbering of the enemy soldiers. I heard their words, and understand them, for we had been forced to learn enough of their barbarian tongue to have dealings with them.

They laughed as they said to each other, "Look: Hebrews are coming out of the holes in the ground where they have hidden themselves like rats." There was much more besides, typical coarse soldiers' talk, concerning our mothers' virtue, our fathers' manhood, and what they intended doing to our sisters, when they finally took possession of our villages. All accompanied with their gross, sickening laughter, until my blood boiled and it was as if I saw everything through a red veil before my eyes. But I held my peace, and climbed nearer to their position.

Then they started shouting to us, in the kind of loud pidgin language always used by conquerors when speaking to their despised subjects - as if we were too stupid to understand their perverted tongue.

"Hey, you little Hebrew-boys! You comee up here to us, pretty damn quick like. We showee you some pretty thing, something you likee." More guffaws and snorts of contempt.

"Come, Elizur," I said. "It is the sign! Yahweh is giving them into the hands of Israel today."

We clambered up the rest of the way on our hands and knees, and stood on the level ground at the top, with the Philistine sentries clustered around us, and the rest of their camp no further away than the length of half a furrow in an acre of land.

For a few short moments, Elizur and I stood drawing breath, and pretending that we really were the simple, innocent farm boys they seemed to take us for, looking forward to seeing whatever pretty gewgaw they were going to show us. Their jeering and their jibes continued, becoming ever more disgusting and obscene to us, and hilariously amusing to them. Several of them were almost doubled up with laughter at the antics of one of them, who was miming the prodigious size of his male member, and the fright and pleasure of my younger sister when it penetrated her virginity.

That was the last straw for me, the final proof that Yahweh had given these men to us to exact his judgement on them, for they were too vile to live. I felt the surge of rage, strength, and courage flow through my whole being, that I have always imagined is what is meant when the stories tell us, as they do about Samson and Gideon and others, that the spirit of Yahweh came upon them. That was exactly what it felt like to me that day, when we climbed to the top of Michmash below the crag of Seneh. I drew from my tunic the blade I had hidden there, my iron sword that had been taken from one of the Philistines we had slain at Geba, and swung it in a wide arc at the dog who would ravish my Michal. With one blow it almost severed his head from his

shoulders and he fell without a scream. Two more blows, and the nearest of the others, still almost paralysed with their lecherous laughter, lay dead on the ground. Some of the others shouted and fumbled for their weapons, but surprise was completely on our side. Elizur had drawn his sword too and was laying about him with the same swift strength that empowered my righteous arm. Together we were the hand of Yahweh, wreaking vengeance on his enemies.

We swept forward like a wave of the mighty sea, leaving no man standing in our path, advancing towards the edge of the camp. In that space of half a furrow's length, twenty men lay dead by our hands, and the camp was shaken with panic. Enemy soldiers were running in all directions, unsure whether they were running out of or into danger. It seemed impossible for them to believe that only two men could be responsible for this slaughter, and in the confusion some began to turn on one another, while others ran onto our blades, thinking they were escaping from an imaginary main body of attackers, and fell dead before us.

Later I heard from my friends, who remained with Saul in the camp at Gibeon, how they first learned of the slaughter. Looking out in the direction of Michmash, they saw the tumult and heard the shouting, the screams of the dying. They called the roll of the warriors, and realised that Elizur and I alone were missing. Saul sent for Ahijah, to bring the Ark of Yahweh into the camp and lead the main body in the attack. But as the noise and clamour on the opposite hill continued to grow, at length even Saul would not wait for the priests to move slowly into action. He commanded the horns to be sounded, giving the signal to attack, and the little army of Yahweh surged forwards onto the killing field.

As the battle continued, the men of Israel who had gone over to the Philistines, to serve them in the garrison, rose and turned against their alien lords. News of the reverse the Philistines had suffered, quickly spread to nearby towns and villages, and Israelites who had formerly lived in dread of the enemy, and cowered from them in unmanly dread, now rose up in anger. They came from all their towns, even from east of Jordan, to join in the rout. Wherever the Philistines had posted a garrison, small or large, the Israelite tribes turned on them with a rage that the Philistines could not withstand, and throughout the whole of the hill country of Ephraim, our vengeance against the occupier and the oppressor, the hatred master of the black iron, went on.

That day might have seen the utter annihilation of the Philistine army, a defeat so total that they would not have dared venture into our territory again for the rest of Saul's reign as king, if it had not been for my father's rashness and foolishness with regard to the Curse. As he led his troops from Gibeon into the fray, he thought to urge them on, to encourage them to the utmost zeal for blood, by uttering a solemn oath and curse.

"Cursed be any man who holds back his hand from the killing, and eats any food or drinks any drink, before it is evening and I have been fully avenged on my enemies," he cried, in the hearing of all - and the word was passed to all those who followed him.

Only, Elizur and I were not with him when he uttered the curse. We did not hear his

words. And so, when we came in our pursuit of the fleeing Philistines to the Wood of Bees, where honey was simply dripping from the bees' nests in the trees, and falling to the ground, I dipped the tip of my staff in the sweet honey, and ate it. We had not eaten or drunk since before dawn, and killing is always thirsty work, especially in that kind of heat. I thought that honey was the sweetest, the most delicious food I had ever tasted. My flagging strength was renewed, my feet became swift again in pursuit of those who fled.

But some of the men were quick to rebuke me and tell me about my father's curse. In my fear, and foolhardiness, I spoke rashly so that many around heard me find fault with my lord the king: "My father has brought great trouble on the land, with this curse. Look how my strength was renewed when I tasted a little of the honey. If he had only allowed the men to eat some of the spoil of the Philistines, the slaughter today would have been greater; but now many of them will get away."

These words were taken up, repeated around the different bands, and when the pursuers were ready to faint with thirst and hunger they turned on the captured sheep and oxen and calves they had taken from the enemy as they fled. They slaughtered them on the ground, wherever they were, and ate them with the blood still in the flesh, which is strictly forbidden by the Law that Moses gave us.

When Saul came up and saw the orgy of killing, roasting and eating that was going on, he commanded a proper altar or killing stone to be set up, and for the animals to be killed according to the Law, so that his men would not sin by eating them with the blood. But it was too late: the harm was done, and Yahweh in his fickle anger had withdrawn the might of his right arm from us.

After that night's feasting and heavy sleep, we awoke to a cold grey dawn. The corpses of those who had fallen the previous day, still lay scattered across the hills, along the whole route of the Philistines' flight. Our own camp was a confusion of men who were weary after the bloody work they had done, some eager to continue the pursuit into the midst of the Five Cities themselves, some grateful to have survived, and ready to return to their homes and families, others ready to follow their Messiah for as long as he commanded, but all looking to him for Yahweh's instruction. No longer the six hundred, the faithful remnant who were with him in Gibeah, the host had now grown to nearer ten thousand in number, all in hope of vengeance and plunder.

My father stood up in the midst of his troops, and though I had publicly disputed the wisdom of his curse of the previous day, my heart still went out to him in joy and love.

"Men of Israel!" he cried. "Today is the day of our great victory! Let us pursue these uncircumcised dogs of Philistines and strip them of their weapons and their spoils. Let us not leave one of them alive to crawl back whimpering to his womenfolk!"

The cry of agreement and approval went up from thousands of throats. We would have pursued them; we would have routed them so thoroughly they would never have dared to return. But at that moment that pusillanimous runt of a priest, Ahijah, stepped forward.

"It would be wrong to begin this great work without prayer," he said. "Let us seek Yahweh, and inquire of him."

And he began his priestly mumbo-jumbo with the Urim and the Thummim that he took from his sacred breast-piece. "Ask your question, my lord."

My father thought for a few moments, his face serious. The Urim and the Thummim are tricky, elusive ways of seeking guidance: just the kind of thing the priests love, because they alone have authority to inquire of them and to manipulate them. It is part of their arcane craft. It's easy to get a deceptive or misleading answer, unless you are quite precise in the way you frame the question. Questions with a simple Yes or No answer are the best.

As soon as my father spoke, I felt my blood run cold, for in his haste and eagerness he asked not one question but two; and this is just the kind of thing the Urim and the Thummim so often balk at.

"This is what I ask of Yahweh: Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?"

The priest Ahijah raised an eyebrow; but he continued to mumble over the stones in his hands, and to do whatever it is the priest does with them.

The Urim and the Thummim can answer in three ways. That's to say Yes, or No, or to give no answer at all. This time there was no answer. Saul commanded the priest to try again. The same: still no answer. A low murmur of grumbling and muttering began to spread around the host. No answer was common enough; but it always seemed like very ill chance, a sign of God's disfavour or judgement.

Some of the warriors began to call out that we should ignore the oracle and pursue the enemy anyway. Others, the more superstitious among them, were already making their signs to avert the evil they felt so sure was coming on us. My father was clearly furious, gnawing his lip in his anger. But he would not go against the will of the God he loved and served with all his heart, the God who had appointed him Messiah. He strode restlessly up and down, consulted urgently with Abner and the other leaders, and reached his decision. Yahweh's silence, Yahweh's failure to answer, was because of some sin that his people had committed. Find out the guilt, and punish the offender, and Yahweh would smile on us again and give an answer.

Saul proclaimed in a solemn oath, that whoever was found to be responsible - even if it was himself or me - would surely die. Placing the two of us on one side, and the rest of the people on the other, he commanded the priest to consult the oracle. And this time, the accursed lots gave a clear answer: Urim, meaning that the guilt was with Saul and me. The lot was cast again, between the two of us, and the priest looked up nervously as he pronounced, "Thummim, my lord. The guilt is with your son, Jonathan."

The most profound silence I have ever experienced fell over the host. I swear I could hear the blood pulsing in my temples as my father stared at me in horrified anger. He strode up to me - he towered over me, as he did above all the rest - seized me by the shoulders and looked down into my eyes.

"Tell me what you have done," he demanded.

I looked him full in the face. I knew I had done nothing to be ashamed of, even if I had offended against his curse. If I had to die for it, then so be it. I told him about the honey I had found and eaten, how it had revived my strength and enabled me to go on pursuing and striking down our enemies on the previous day. That he had troubled Israel by his decree; that I would do the same again, if Yahweh spared me.

In my father's face I saw a procession of emotions, passing over his handsome features. Fury, disappointment, unshakeable trust in Yahweh, love, regret, grief, and yet a grim determination to honour the oath he had taken before God and all the people. With his left hand he seized me by the hair at the back of my head and bent it backwards, forcing me to my knees with my bare neck exposed to the blade he held in his right hand. It was the knife of sacrifice, the very blade the priests used for their sacred slaughter of the burnt offerings.

"As Yahweh lives, Jonathan, you have proclaimed the sentence upon yourself. You shall surely die for your sin!"

For a brief second it seemed that time stood still, or formed itself into a loop, and I saw myself in one of the stories from our history, that every Israelite child learns from its mother's knee. I was Isaac on Mount Moriah, bound with rope and laid upon the wood on the altar, where his father Abraham raised the knife over him to slay him, and offer him as a sacrifice to Yahweh. Why had Yahweh required such a thing of him, to give up the child of Promise, the one he had prayed and waited for so long? How many children have wondered and asked that same question, and been told by their parents, "It was because Yahweh was testing Abraham, to see if he really believed God's promise." I had never really believed that explanation. To me it had always seemed another evidence of Yahweh's remorseless and inscrutable mystery. But in a shimmering change of view, I was no longer the screaming terrified lad on the stone altar, but the one standing over him, with my arm raised ready to destroy what I most loved in all the world.

All of this flashed through my mind in an instant, less time than it takes to draw in a last gasp. And I thought it would be my final breath. But Abner and the others with him leaped forward and seized my father's arm, holding him back from striking the fatal blow.

The men at arms were shouting too, crying out that Jonathan should not die, that I had wrought a great victory for Israel. They would ransom me, so that not a hair of my head should fall to the ground.

The priest Ahijah stepped forward again, for this too was his craft, the holy mystery that he alone could minister. There are rituals and procedures for ransoming people or animals that have been promised in sacrifice or placed under the ban; and like all priestcraft, they take hours if not days to perform. The ablutions, prayers and offerings that Ahijah decreed were necessary to ransom the king's son, lasted from morning until evening. When at last they were finished, and Yahweh deigned to give answer by the Urim and Thummim to the question Saul had put, the answer was No, he was not to pursue the Philistines, Yahweh would not give them into his hand. But

we knew this already. The enemy were long gone, fled to the safety of their walled cities. We would never catch them now; the triumph of Israel would only be half accomplished.

We returned to our homes, fêted as victors and conquerors, celebrated as heroes. But sick at heart, too, at the thought of the final victory that might have been.

My relationship with my father, and my campaigning with him, was never quite the same after that day.

6. Rejected

Of all the daughters of Benjamin, I am the most honoured. For it was I, Ahinoam daughter of Ahimaaz, whom the Messiah Saul chose to be his bride. When we were young, growing up in Gibeah and its villages, I was already proud that he chose me from among the other maidens. At that time there were many girls who set their eyes on him. He was the most comely youth among all the families of Benjamin, already at the age of fifteen, taller than any of the grown men, standing head and shoulders taller than any of them. Yet for all his stature, and his darkly handsome beauty, he was not proud like many of the other young men who came nowhere near to matching him. He was quiet, shy, sensitive. He often preferred his own company to that of the noisy crowd. He would wander alone into the hills, to be with his thoughts and commune with Yahweh under the wide sky. We were betrothed by our parents, because we pleaded with them and would not let them rest until they gave in to our request - though secretly they were all glad, for it was a good match for both our families - when he was fifteen and I was thirteen.

Then came the Adventure of the Lost Donkeys, which the people of those parts still tell of as if it was a legend of ancient heroes. In a way it is, though many laughed about it at the time, for it was the occasion on which my beloved first met with the seer Samuel, who anointed him as Yahweh's chosen. And as my Saul returned at the end of that adventure, it was then that the spirit of Yahweh first came upon him, and he became a new man.

What did that mean? people have often asked me. What difference did it make, when Saul received his anointing and was turned into a new man? I thought at the time that he would no longer love me or want to be my husband; that he would set his heart on marrying foreign princesses, and having many concubines, as the kings of other nations have always done, and as the bloody man David did, who took the throne after my Saul was slain. But no, if anything he became more loving and more attentive to me; more content to take as his wife a girl who was the daughter of his neighbours in Benjamin.

He became, over the months that followed, less reserved, more confident of himself and of the fact, surprising to him at first, that men did indeed love and respect him, and trusted him to lead and command them. Most of all, he lived for what he called sometimes the Glory, sometimes the Beauty or the Mystery, sometimes just Him. The God Yahweh, who was always a terror to me who never sensed or felt him in any way, and only had the word of the men who served him and spoke for him. Saul knew him in the same sort of way as those men of God claimed; yet when he spoke of his God, it never terrified me as it did whenever Samuel or Ahijah or the other priests spoke in his Name. For Saul, the God was as present as me, or any of his children - more so, I often thought. But when he spoke of him, it was with tenderest love, with the deepest respect which seemed then to shine from his eyes and be reflected in all his relations with the people around him. I had never known anyone love God, but

also other men and women, as Saul did.

It was after he returned from the Adventure of the Donkeys, and before the king-making at Mizpah, that Saul and I were wed. We lived in the house of his father Kish, in his home town of Gibeah, for the first five years of our marriage, until the men of Israel began to complain, and say it was not fitting for their king to be living still in his father's house, as if he were no prince of his people. Then they built him a house of his own to live in, though Saul insisted it should be no different, no richer or bigger than the houses of his neighbours. By then I had born his first three children: Jonathan, that precious gift of Yahweh, Ishui, and our first daughter Merab.

Through all those early years of his kingdom and his campaigning, the victories he won against our enemies round about, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Amalekites, the Moabites and Edomites, and the kings of Zobah, it was I who supported the Messiah, who watched and waited and prayed for him when he was away with the warriors. Each time he went away, I smiled and promised to keep the house, and to have a special feast waiting when he returned. And each time my heart was filled with dread even more than pride, in case this was the last time I would see him alive, that this time Abner or one of the others would bring word that he had fallen in battle. And that I would see his dear body, that I had held so often in my arms in the passion of our nights together, carried back on an ox cart, torn with gashes and wounds and with its life snuffed out. It is a bitter and a sweet thing, to be the wife of a king and a warrior.

And then came the day that changed the Messiah's life, just as much as the day when he met Samuel. But where that was a day of hope, of promise, of joy, this was a day of abandonment. The day Yahweh rejected him.

We had been enjoying a summer of peace, for the nations our enemies had learned enough of Saul and his prowess, and the battle skills of his mighty men, not to come troubling us or raiding within the borders of the tribes. It was like a second honeymoon. Saul was enjoying being a simple farmer again, in the bosom of his family and held in respect by all our neighbours. Whenever he could, he liked to try to forget that he was king and Messiah, and live as any man of Benjamin, the smallest and least significant of the tribes of Israel, might live. When he came in from the fields at evening he would play or talk with the children, then sit with me after we had eaten until it was time to go to our bed, where we enjoyed many nights of sweet love. Saul was a strong and vigorous man, and though I knew in my own soul that we would not have any more children, it did not diminish his or my ardour, or the pleasure we had in one another.

I was sitting outside our door, milking the goats one morning, when I looked up and saw Samuel; and knew at once, as if it was an arrow piercing through my soul, that the time of our happiness was at an end. The withered, bent old man came slowly and shuffling up the street and stopped before me, asking for the Messiah. Saul heard and recognised his voice and hurried from the house to greet him, welcomed him, bade him sit down and brought him some food and wine from our store. But Samuel waved it aside: he had an errand from Yahweh, and would not eat or drink, until he had discharged the commission.

Saul bowed his head, and heard the words that would decide his fate.

"Yahweh sent me to anoint you, to make you king and Messiah over his people. Here, then, the word of Yahweh. This is what Yahweh of armies says, 'I have determined to punish the Amalekites for what they did when they attacked my people as they came up out of Egypt. Go now and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy them. Man, woman and child, beast and cattle: all shall die. Show them no mercy, neither spare a single soul alive.' This is the word of Yahweh."

In the silence that followed, I became aware that Saul was clutching my hand, so hard that I almost cried out, and was breathing heavily as if it were he who was in pain.

"Do you understand what this means?" he asked Samuel. "To destroy their women and children, as well as their armed men and animals? How do you know that this is the word of Yahweh?"

Samuel's face, already red from the effort of walking from Ramah, grew even darker in anger. "And should I not know his word?" he exclaimed. "Should I not know the Voice that first spoke to me when I was a boy of eight, serving before Eli in the tabernacle at Shiloh?" He seized Saul's arm, thrust his face into Saul's face, and spoke harshly and excitedly, "It is the same Voice that commands you to annihilate the Amalekites! It is the Voice of Yahweh of armies!"

"I hear and obey," said Saul, bowing his head.

Samuel stared hard at him, turned on his heel and went back the same way he had come.

Late in the night, or early in the morning long before first light, I woke from a troubled dream and found that Saul was tossing and turning beside me.

"Have you not slept?" I asked him.

"Not for a minute," he replied. And sitting up in the darkness, he drew me to him and, his arm around me, said, "I cannot believe it, Ahinoam, my sweet love. I have known Yahweh all these years, too. Not for as long as Samuel has known him; but I have known him too, since that day his spirit came upon me and I prophesied with the rest. He is Darkness, Silence, Mystery - often, always. I do not comprehend his ways; if I thought I did or could, I would know he was no God. But he is Beauty too, and Mercy, and Love. Not cruelty and terror! I would not bid my warriors kill women and children! Surely Yahweh of armies would not, either?"

"Then - this is some invention of Samuel's? But why?"

He shook his head in an agony of uncertainty; it felt as if he was being torn apart as he wrestled with what he knew of his God, and what the great prophet, his guide for so many years and the religious guardian of Israel, claimed that *he* knew.

"What will you do?" I asked him.

There was a long silence. Then, "I will do what I must."

It was many days before Saul was able to leave for this new campaign. His officers

and men needed to be mustered and prepared, their weapons sharpened and their armour polished and put in order, their provisions gathered. Eventually the Israelite army numbered two hundred thousand men, or so the tellers of tales afterwards claimed; this would be because of the popularity of the cause, for the Amalekites were indeed the ancient, hated enemies of Israel. It may also have been because of the hope of spoil: if an enemy was placed under the decree of total destruction, it seemed that there were always rich spoils to be had, even though the priests claimed that everything was to be dedicated to Yahweh by slaughter and burning. And while the troops were gathering together from all four corners of the territory of the tribes of Israel, Samuel kept sending messengers to demand how the preparations were going, and how long it would be before the word of Yahweh, decreeing the destruction of Amalek, would be fulfilled.

At last the day came when Saul and the army marched away from Gibeah towards the south. I and the women and children waved them farewell, with shouts of blessing, and with weeping. In one way it was just as bad as all the other times I had seen him march away to do battle with our enemies; in another way it was worse, for there was that grim sense of foreboding, which I could not put into words, that something evil hung over the whole of this expedition. Not just the fear that he would be brought back maimed or dead; but that somehow his soul would also be forfeit.

It was only later, of course, that I learned from Saul's own lips what had happened.

The army marched away to the south, and camped in the valley in front of the leading city of the Amalekites. Saul then sent messages to the Kenites, who were living in the midst of Amalek at that time. The Kenites were our kin, and had shown kindness to the people of Israel, when we came out of Egypt, when the Amalekites had resisted us and tried to destroy us. So Saul warned them to flee from the coming battle and save themselves, for the sake of the love their forebears had shown to ours; if they did not, they would be wiped out together with the Amalekites. Most of them heeded the message, and quickly moved away into the wilderness, for they were always a nomadic people, preferring the life of following the flocks and herds, to the life of the city.

Then the attack began. Saul attacked the Amalekites in their chief city, and in all their towns and villages from Havilah as far as Shur, on the borders of Egypt. They could not stand against the anger and the might of the Israelites under their Messiah. But Saul had determined in his own mind that Samuel's word, concerning the will of Yahweh, was a lie. He did not describe it as such to himself: he would probably have called it a mistake or a misunderstanding. He gave orders that all the warriors should be killed - though of course many escaped and fled into the wilderness of the southern desert. And a token number of women and children should also be slain, so that it would look as if the whole population had fallen victim to the armed might of Israel. But most of the unarmed people of Amalek were allowed to slip away into the hills and the desert, or were taken captive and brought into slavery, when they became Israelites by virtue of being Israelite property. And Agag, the king of Amalek, who surrendered in the battle, was taken captive and spared, together with the best of the sheep and cattle, so that they might be offered to Yahweh at a victory festival.

So Saul returned in triumph, confident that he had obeyed the will of Yahweh as it should be obeyed, rather than in the way a vindictive old prophet said it should. And there his last, fatal, tragic, confrontation with his old mentor took place.

The army was gathered at Gilgal, to celebrate their victory with feasting and with sacrifice. Saul was told that Samuel was coming, and he went out and stood alone, in the posture of a humble supplicant, to greet the man of God.

Samuel stopped in front of him, leaning on his staff, and looked him up and down.

With bowed head, as if he were a servant or an underling, rather than the Messiah king, Saul said, "May Yahweh bless you and give you peace, my master. I have fully carried out the will of Yahweh."

Samuel spat in his face. "Then what is this bleating of sheep in my ears? And what is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"

"Master, these are the beasts we captured from the Amalekites. My warriors spared them and brought them here to Gilgal, in order to offer them to Yahweh our God. The rest we utterly destroyed; the best we bring for the holy sacrifice."

"Enough of your whining and lies!" cried Samuel. "Hold your tongue, and listen to what the Voice spoke to me last night."

Saul fell on his knees before the furious old man, and did not raise his eyes, as he listened to the sentence of the God he loved and served so passionately.

"Do you really think yourself so small and of no account? Though you are from the smallest tribe of Israel, are you not the head of all the tribes? It is Yahweh who made you his Messiah! He sent you on a holy mission, a task just as sacred as if you were one of the priests in the sanctuary. He commanded you to destroy the Amalekite sinners, to fight against them and wipe them from the face of the earth, until not one of them remained alive. Why then have you not obeyed Yahweh's voice? Why did you take the spoil, and do what is evil in Yahweh's sight?"

Then Saul looked up and spoke in his own defence and in the defence of his God. He did not believe that Yahweh willed the absolute bloody destruction that Samuel wanted. He believed it even less when, in a show of obedience, he had permitted the slaughter of some of the Amalekite women and children and the old. Even this had turned his stomach, and convinced him that God was a God of mercy, not sacrifice. And so he looked the man of God in the face, and lied.

"I did obey the Voice of Yahweh! I have gone on the mission on which Yahweh sent me. I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites and have brought Agag their king for you to deal with. But the people, in their devotion to Yahweh, brought the best of the beasts and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to offer to Yahweh here in the holy place of Gilgal."

Samuel bent forward and grabbed a lock of the Messiah's head, pulling it towards him. Standing, he was only a little taller than the kneeling Saul, and he thrust his face almost into my husband's and hissed his venom at him. "Do you think Yahweh cares about sacrifices and burnt offerings? Is it not obedience that he demands? Rebellion

like yours is as bad as the sin of divination, or witchcraft or idolatry. Saul, Saul! You have rejected the word of Yahweh. And he now rejects you from being king."

He pushed Saul away from him; but it was not the old man's feeble strength that sent Saul reeling, falling full length on the ground. It was the shock of the prophet's words. Rejected by Yahweh! Rejected from being Messiah and King over Yahweh's people! That was the moment, I know it, that his strong, manly, passionate, sensitive heart was crushed and broken in two.

Saul pleaded with him, confessed that he had sinned and disobeyed the Voice, cast the blame on the people who followed him, claimed that he was afraid of them and had yielded only to their demands. I think he was a little mad already, begging with tears that Samuel would intercede for him, would tell him that Yahweh forgave him and would not carry out the dreadful sentence of rejection. That Samuel would return with him and join him once again in worshipping Yahweh.

But Samuel, that twisted old man who had probably never changed his mind in his life, set his face like adamant. Again he spoke, loud enough for all to hear, "I will not return with you, and I will not worship with you! For you have denied and rejected the word of Yahweh. And now he rejects you from being king over his people."

He turned to walk away, and Saul in desperation lunged after him and caught the hem of Samuel's robe, tearing a strip from it as he did so.

Samuel stopped and turned. The wild look of prophecy came into his eyes, and he spoke in that peculiar chanting tone in which he so often uttered his oracles. "As you have torn my robe, so Yahweh has torn the kingdom from you, this very day, and given it to one of your neighbours, to a man who is a better man than you. Do not suppose that the Glory of Israel will change his mind. He is not a thing of flesh and blood, a mortal man, that he should change his mind."

But my dear husband's humiliation was still not complete. Still he pleaded with the relentless old man of God, that he would at least not disgrace him, but honour him in the sight of his men and his followers, by returning with him so that Saul might worship Yahweh according to the proper form, together with all his warriors. To this, at last, Samuel consented.

When the sacrifices had been offered, and the feasting begun, Saul stood up and commanded that Agag, king of the Amalekites, be brought before him.

He was a fat, vile, greasy man with curled black hair and a beard, according to the height of the decadent courtly fashion of Israel's neighbours. You know the kind of thing, for the sons of the bloody man David have now started aping it, in their attempt to appear wise in the ways of the world. He minced into Samuel's presence, more like some effeminate dancing boy, than a captured warrior. Wracked with fear, he yet hoped that by an unwarrior-like show, he would avoid the penalty of death that his officers and men had suffered. But if he thought to charm Samuel, he was mistaken.

The prophet addressed him as a man under ban, condemned to die: "Dog of Amalek: your sword has made many women childless; so your mother shall now be childless

among women!"

And with a speed and strength that staggered all who saw it, so unexpected was it in a man of his holiness and years, he swung the sacrificial axe above his head and brought it down on Agag's skull. There was a ghastly thud, as gobbets of bone and blood and brain spattered the clothes of the nearest bystanders, and the light which an instant before had shone pleadingly in the king's eyes turned dull and was extinguished. He fell, as Samuel with the the same preternatural strength wrenched the axe out of his head and proceeded to hew the head from the shoulders, and the whole body limb from limb. As he toiled at his grim butchery, he chanted over and over again: "Yahweh, for you! For you, Yahweh!"

When the work was done, he wiped his bloody face with a bloody sleeve of his garment, dropped the axe, took up his staff, and walked calmly away. He left Saul and the warriors aghast, speechless, trembling. The feast was ended.

My dear Saul came home to me the following day, and I knew as soon as I saw him that something in him had broken. He was not wounded in his body, in spite of the hard campaign and battles he had fought. I searched with my eyes and my gentle fingertips, night after night as we lay in bed together, to see if there was some hidden scar that I had missed, some place where a secret blade might have entered his flesh and left a poison or infection that was consuming him from within. But there was none. It was in his mind, or his heart, or his spirit, or in all three at once, that he had sustained his most grievous hurt; and he would never recover from it.

When he first spoke of it, days or weeks later, he said simply, "Yahweh has taken his spirit from me."

He had never talked about it before, never described what it was like when Yahweh's spirit filled him and moved him; but now he began, from time to time, to talk about what the spirit's absence was like. They say that if a man survives the loss of an arm or leg - which I have only heard of two or three times in my life - he often still feels pain even in the limb that is no longer there. Perhaps it was like that for my Saul. It was when the spirit was no longer with him, that he felt most keenly the pain of no longer having it.

He would say, "It is as if all that I have ever loved had been torn away from me with one blow."

"What do you mean, beloved?" I would ask. "I am here, your children are all here in the house, Abner and your men are still here with you."

But he would shake his head, as if it were impossible for me to understand what he meant.

Or, "I look for Him every morning, every night; I listen for the Voice; but always it is as if He has just left the room, and when I run after Him, He is moving away from me faster than a horse can run, and I can never never catch Him."

Or, "It was an ecstasy such as I have only known in you, beloved, when you say it feels as if I am filling your whole being with the strength and joy of my manhood, and you cry out if I withdraw for a moment, to tease you and pleasure you all the more,

and then I enter you again. But He, who filled me with an ecstasy even beyond what I have known in our love for each other - He has withdrawn from me, and gone away, and will never enter me again."

And he would shudder, and turn his face to the wall, and sometimes I could see that his strong body was wracked with sobs, and if I took his face in my hands it would be wet with bitter tears.

But he never saw Samuel, or spoke to him again, until after the terrible old man's death.

7. For the Love of David

Yes, I loved my father Saul, as I have told you, as every dutiful son must love his father. I loved him beyond duty, even; I was proud of him and loved him with the devoted love of hero-worship, even after the episode of my great victory at Michmash, and Saul's intemperate vow and curse which robbed us of the total victory which would have removed the Philistine threat from our land forever.

I had loved women too, drawn to their beauty, and filled with imaginings about the perfect Israelite maiden whom I would one day marry, and who would share my life and my dreams just as my father Saul and my mother Ahinoam were one flesh and one heart. I could not have imagined that when I did at last marry the maiden of my choice, and we lived together as man and wife, it would turn out to be far from the idyll I expected.

But by then I had met David.

David had first come to my father's house when I was away on some mission or patrol, and did not see him. At that time Saul was already troubled by an evil spirit of dark despair, and his counsellors and physicians recommended music as a cure for his heart-sickness. They inquired after musicians who could play sweetly, music that could soothe a troubled heart, and someone spoke of David son of Jesse son of Obed son of Boaz, from Bethlehem. He was, they said, a youth skilful in playing the lyre, and blessed by Yahweh in all that he undertook. They sent for him and brought him to the king's house in Gibeah, and had him play his lyre, and sing the sweet psalms for which he was well-known, just as much as he was known later for his prowess as a fighter, and lover, and leader of men. And Saul, who moments before had been sunk in bitter anguish, or raging in sullen hatred of himself and the whole world around him, would suddenly become calm, would relax, begin to smile and talk peaceably to the people about him. Saul's servants and officers would also relax, with smiles of relief, to see their lord and master so much improved. It was as if he had had some kind of evil spirit, possessing or infecting him; and David's sweet playing drove the evil away, and set Saul free again. And so it was that David was appointed to be court singer and musician.

But this lasted only a few weeks, the shortest period of time. When the Philistines again invaded our territories, and Saul had to take to the field again for more hard campaigning, there was no longer any room for the luxury of music, and the boy David was sent home to his father Jesse, and to his older brothers.

The first time I set eyes on him, was during that campaign. It was the day of his first great victory over the Philistines, that eclipsed even my victory and ever afterwards captured the imagination of every Israelite child. The day that David killed Goliath.

I was with my father in his tent behind the main battle-lines. I could see nothing, but heard the enormous shout that went up from the whole army when the giant

champion of the Philistines crashed to the ground in death. Immediately afterwards there was pandemonium as the enemy turned and fled, with our soldiers in pursuit, harrying and plundering them as far as Gath and the gates of Ekron. It was another rout, like the one on the day of Michmash, but with bodies scattered over even more miles of hills and woods.

Then the young hero David brought back the grizzled head of his defeated foe, and laid it at my father's feet. He looked impossibly slight and young, little more than a twelve year old boy, though in fact he was some years older than that. David always looked younger than his age. His face was round and ruddy, grinning like a schoolboy who has got away with some prank against a dull and boring teacher, and his hair was a tangle of close curls on his head

"Here, my lord king," he said. "And may all your enemies perish, like this uncircumcised Philistine."

My father asked the formal question that a chief of men was supposed to ask of a victorious champion, even if he well knew the answer - as he did now.

"Tell me your name, my son. Who are you, and who is your father?"

David said laughing, "My lord king, you know well I am David your servant, the son of Jesse of Bethlehem."

I suppose I might have hated him for his impudence, his beauty, his victory that was so much greater than my own. But I did not hate him. My heart went out to him in a rush of sheer love. That day my soul was knit to the soul of David, and I loved him then and ever after, as my own soul. I made a covenant with him and stripped off my own robe and put it on him, with my armour, my sword, my bow, my belt. It was the soldier's pledge of brotherhood, but it was more than that: much more. David used to laugh about it, and tease me about my love for him. He made up songs about it, which he used to sing irreverently, when we were alone together, to the tune of the hymns that were sung in the sanctuary: "Jonathan, your love for me is wonderful, passing the love of women."

I rejoiced when my father appointed David to his household, for it meant I could see him and be with him every day, and later when Saul made him one of his chief captains, so that we could be comrades in arms, wherever my father's campaigning took us.

There was only one dark cloud that blighted my joy in my new friend; and that was that my father, the man I had loved and respected all these years, was no longer the man he had been. It was as if a part of his life had been torn away; as if his heart had been broken in pieces. I often asked myself, when the change had taken place, and could only think it was about the time of the campaign against the Amalekites, when Saul spared so many of the women and children, or allowed them to escape into the hills, and when Samuel hewed their king Agag in pieces, claiming it was an offering to Yahweh. Whatever it was he said to my father, seemed to cause a sorrow from which he never recovered.

The defeat of the Philistines that followed the death of Goliath, gave us one of the longest periods of peace we had ever enjoyed. We had more iron weapons than we had ever had before, that we had either captured from the slain, or that the enemy had simply thrown away in their headlong flight. We still did not know how to make new ones, but we were beginning to learn how to sharpen the ones we had, and keep them in trim; and for some time the Philistines did not dare come raiding into our territory.

The unexpected blessing of peace, and the rejoicing that went with it, led to much telling and retelling of the stories of the prowess of the warriors who had achieved such success. Certainly there were many stories of Saul's victories, and of my own great day on the field of Michmash. But now there was a new hero: beautiful young David, my dear one, and the dear one of most of the women and maidens of Israel. They began to make songs about him: "Saul has slain his thousands; but David has slain his tens of thousands!" It went to a catchy tune, with much skipping and dancing, tossing of heads, clapping of jewelled hands, and clashing of timbrels. The fighting men liked to watch that kind of thing, and that was probably what started them humming and singing the words too; so that it was not long before they came to the ears of my father, too.

He had been quite well since the victory, as if peace had returned to his troubled spirit, as it had returned to the Land. But all that changed when he heard what the women were singing. I was with him at the very moment, sitting with him in his room when the sound of the voices of two women passing by in the street came floating through the window.

Saul did not need to ask me or the others in the room to repeat what the words had been: he knew at once that what he thought he had heard, was indeed correct. His face darkened, his brow furrowed, his teeth ground together. "Do you hear that?" he muttered. "They ascribe tens of thousands to David, and only thousands to me? If this is how it is, what more can they give him, but the kingdom itself."

He went to the window to call out after the women and rebuke them; though it would have been a fruitless effort, for they were only foolish girls. But he never said a word, for as he reached the window, he saw David coming from the house opposite, and walking down the street towards the town gate. Seldom have I seen such a look of hatred pass over a man's face, a glare just as clearly suppressed when David looked at my father with his boyish grin, and waved his hand. Saul nodded in acknowledgement, with a grim smile, and turned from the window swearing sullenly under his breath. From that time he began to hate David with a passionate and growing intensity, fuelled by fear and envy.

The next day Saul was in one of his distempers, and we had sent for David to play the lyre for him as he was becoming accustomed to do on most days. I was watching carefully, these two men whom I loved more than anything else in the world, for I was afraid of what might happen. At first, my fears were lulled by the good effect that David's playing seemed to be having. My father, who had been in a truly black mood while he ate, complaining about the food, swearing at those who had prepared it and were bringing it to table, raging about the villainy of his enemies and the treachery of

his friends, calmed down and was breathing deeply and gently. I thought he might sleep peacefully and awake in a better frame of mind the next day.

I never knew what made David do what he did next. He was always a skilled player, mixing well-known old tunes with his own compositions, and often improvising melodies as he played. Out of some boyish mischief or devilry, he suddenly began to play with the melody to which the women sang their new song: "Saul has slain his thousands; but David has slain his tens of thousands!" I looked at him, desperate to catch his eye and warn him of his danger, but it was too late.

Suddenly my father sat bolt upright in his seat. He exhaled deeply, as if all his spirit were leaving him in a rush; then breathed in again with a jarring, shuddering gasp. His eyes rolled up in their sockets until only the whites were visible, and when they returned, they looked as if they were flashing with the fire of Sheol. He reached out with his right hand and picked up a spear that one of the guards had leaned against the wall behind his seat, and with a shriek of rage, hurled it at David as if he were trying to pin him to the wall.

It was the merest chance that David, who usually looked at the strings of his lyre in total absorption in his music, looked up at the moment that Saul grabbed for the spear; and even as the weapon left the king's hand, he threw himself backwards off the bench on which he was sitting, and sprawled on the ground. Then he was up on his feet and running. A second spear struck the wall inches behind him, and he was gone, out of the door.

After the first stunned silence that followed, there was an outcry of voices and shouting. Saul was on his feet, while Abner and I grappled with him to stop him from pursuing David, or from doing any further harm to anyone else or to himself. My two sisters ran out after David, to see if he had been wounded.

But there was no need to restrain my father, for the fit had already passed and he had slumped to the floor with a groan, while tears gushed from his eyes. "He has taken His spirit from me, and sent an evil one in its place!" he cried. "God forgive me! David, my son, my dear one, forgive me! I did not mean it. You are dearer to me than my wife, my sons, my daughters; than my life itself."

I was never able to forget that moment and its pain. Which was worse? That the father I loved should have fallen so deeply, so overwhelmingly, into madness, as to try and kill the man to whom I had pledged my very soul? Or that he had confessed - and I knew at once he had spoken nothing but the plainest truth - that he too loved David more than he loved his own kin, the love of his life and his own seed? He would have been content if I, or one of my sisters or brothers had died, if only he could be well again, if only Yahweh would give him His spirit again, if only he and David could again be as one.

But now all that could never be. What Saul now felt for David was as changeful as the weather in Galilee. One moment a passionate love and admiration, the desire to give him one of his daughters in marriage, not as a reward for David, but so as to feel that the warrior he loved with such intensity was united with himself, through this union with his daughter's flesh. The next a black, murderous, raging fury that would have

crushed him like a beetle and consigned his soul to a thousand hells. Then again, genuine regret and repentance as he begged David for pardon, and assured him of his undying regard. Then, constantly renewed promises that David should live and inherit his kingdom: that David should rule Israel, rather than his own flesh and blood! Through all of this maelstrom of passions, the one sustained note was fear. Saul feared David, because the spirit of Yahweh had departed from him, and now was with the son of Jesse.

All of Saul's family, friends, and counsellors tried to keep the two men apart; or to stand between them whenever they had to be together. Often David was sent on various tasks and missions that the king assigned him, it may have been, to try to expose him to dangers that might kill him. But David was invulnerable, Yahweh saw to that. The more danger he was exposed to, and the more risks he deliberately chose to run, the greater was his success and the fame that accompanied it. All of Israel and Judah loved David, though often it made me mad with jealousy to see it, for in my own love for him, I wanted him all to myself, not to have to share his love with everyone else in Israel. Then at the next moment I was glad for it, because I thought in my folly that if everyone loved David, he would perhaps be safe, and would not fall a victim to my father's schemes to bring about his death.

David *was* preserved, but not without my efforts, and those of many others who loved him, including my beautiful sister Michal. We laboured mightily to reconcile the two men, the Messiah my father, and the Messiah I loved, and who was to come, who had already been anointed by Samuel, but could not yet come to his power as long as his predecessor still lived.

The first of those times came when David was out with a patrol in the hill country of Judah, following reports Saul had received that a small Philistine raiding party had been spotted down near Ashnah. While we waited for news of the expedition, my father was taken with one of those fits in which, as he described it, an evil spirit from Yahweh came upon him and he knew, with total clarity and unassailable conviction, that David was plotting against him, would return with a Philistine army, seize the kingdom from him and put him and all of us to death.

He summoned a council and harangued us, denouncing David for his treachery, accusing us of cowardice because we were afraid to defend our Messiah, accusing us of wanting David as king instead of him, urging that if we were men, we would not hesitate to murder David. I could hardly bring myself to meet the eyes of the others as we were forced to listen to this, and all the rest who loved Saul as well as I did felt the same. Not all of them had been there on the day when Saul tried to pin David to the wall with his spear, and for them this was the first time they had seen for themselves the depth of the sickness of mind that was overwhelming my father. Several times I glanced at Abner, who was my father's closest friend as well as his cousin, as we tried to exchange glances about what we should do. It would have been futile to try to argue with Saul in this state, and persuade him that his words were untrue, that he was imagining all of it. His rage was simply too great, he would have turned on us, possibly violently. Instead we tried to calm him with gentle words, assuring him of our love and devotion, agreeing with him, as far as we could, that

David needed to be watched, and that we would support the Messiah in whatever he decided to do.

When we were dismissed at the end of that terrible council, Abner and I spent hours with the other men who had been there, explaining to those who did not understand, swearing them to silence, promising that all would be well, it was a passing sickness. I do not think any of them believed it; and we too, however much we hoped, dreaded that it was not to be.

But the following day my father's mood seemed brighter and I risked talking to him about David. I urged him not to sin by seeking David's death. I reminded him that, whatever his fears and suspicions might be, David had not in fact committed any treason against him, but rather, all that he had ever done had served my father well. David had risked his life against the Philistines, most notably in his single combat with Goliath, which had led to such a notable victory. Surely Saul, who had rejoiced in that victory as much as all of us, would not sin against innocent blood by seeking David's life?

My father was always a passionate man, unafraid of expressing what he felt. Just as he had not stinted in his raging against David the day before, so now he did not hold back his remorse, and the shame he felt at the mistake he had made. He burst into tears, asking forgiveness - *my* forgiveness - for his folly, promising that he would not threaten David's life, or try to incite any of us to kill him again.

"As Yahweh my God lives," he said, "David shall not die. I love him, I will have him by my side to play to me, to share with me in the leading of our armies."

I did not know which was the greater: my relief that I had persuaded him to change his mind about David, or my shame that my father had become as changeable and fickle as the weakest-minded girl that ever loved.

But as events soon proved, this change of heart was no longer lasting than the previous one. Whatever soul-sickness afflicted my father, whatever madness or evil spirit from Yahweh - if that is what it was - it soon turned him back again to that murderous frenzy from which we had with such difficulty dissuaded him.

The new thing that happened, was that my father became more devious about his plots against David. He had come to realise that my soul was knit to David, that my love for David was greater than my love for family and kin. And, fearing that even I his son had become part of the conspiracy he imagined against him, he concealed his next plans from me.

David had better judgement than I, and a deeper insight into how things really stood. I was still fondly imagining that my father and my soul-friend were truly reconciled, and that all was well. But David, who had fled to Naioth in Ramah to evade Saul's latest attempt on his life, came secretly to me and told me how things really stood.

"Jonathan, my love," he said. "Tell me what I have done? What is my guilt? How have I sinned against your father - a man to whom I owe everything - that he should seek to take away my life?"

I refused to believe what he was saying. "It is not so!" I cried. "Far from it: you shall

not die. My father the king opens his whole heart and mind to me, he does nothing without telling me. And he has sworn to me, as Yahweh lives, that you shall not die."

"Alas," rejoined David, "you are deceived. Your father knows of your love for me, and he has made up his mind that Jonathan shall not know of his plans, for fear you will be grieved and try to dissuade him. But this is the truth: as Yahweh lives, and as you yourself live, there is but a step between me and death."

It was as if scales fell from my eyes, and suddenly I saw it all. The silences that had fallen in the last few days, when I entered the room where my father was talking. The sidelong glances and searching looks. I knew it was true; and immediately promised David that I would do anything for him, anything that he wanted me to do. What we agreed was, that I would test my father to find out what his plans really were. It was purely to convince me, for David was already convinced. If I found out for sure, then there could no longer be any doubt of my father's murderous madness, and I would no longer be able to try to mediate between them.

The day after this meeting was the New Moon Festival, a day of special, holy observance in the house of Saul when he and his highest officials and closest friends shared in the feast that followed the monthly sacrifice. He would surely expect David to be present, especially if he suspected him and wanted to test his loyalty, or was looking for an excuse to cause him some harm. As I took my seat at table in the house, I watched my father closely, studying his every move and word, every flicker of emotion that crossed his handsome face, to see how he would react to David's absence. It was obvious that he noted it, with some impatience; but the talk among those around him, as they speculated about it, was that some ritual uncleanness had probably befallen David, making it impossible for him to share in the sacred meal. Saul seemed to accept this explanation, and the rest of the meal passed without incident.

But on the following day, the second day of the month, David's place was again empty. And this time, Saul did not remain silent. "Where is the son of Jesse?" he demanded. "Why has he not come to the feast, yesterday or today?" As he spoke, his brow darkened, and it was obvious that anger rather than simple curiosity lay behind his question.

I stood up to answer him, as David and I had agreed between us. "My father, my lord king. David urgently asked for leave of absence to go down to his father's house at Bethlehem, because his family is observing the sacrifice and his brother commands him to be present. I felt sure my lord the king would permit him, so I let him go. That is why he is not at your feast."

Saul rose to his feet, reeling as if he had been stabbed between the ribs from behind. "You son of a whore, of a slut and a faithless bitch!" he shouted in rage. "When did you turn against your own father who begot you, and give your love to my enemy? Have you also become his whore? Do you not realise that as long as David lives, you will never inherit the kingdom? As you value your life and your mother's honour, send messengers to David now, and command him to return, for he shall surely die!"

It was not wise, but sheer shock and horror made me answer him back. I could not

believe what he had said about my mother Ahinoam, whom I knew he loved better than his own life. I could not believe that he was also rejecting me and the love I bore him.

"My lord king! Why should David die? What wrong has he done you, who has always been faithful to you, and has fought your battles since he was a youth?"

With a hoarse cry of frustration and fury, my father grabbed a spear - probably the very one with which he had already tried to kill David - and threw it at me. Something still remained, no doubt, of fatherly feeling, for it was more a gesture of anger than a genuine attempt to kill me, else I would not be here to tell the story. But what was clear was that David had been right: my father had resolved that David should die. In bitter anger at the disgrace my father had laid on me, and at my grief for my friend, I could not eat a mouthful of food but immediately left the room.

The following morning was the third day, when according to the plan I had agreed with David, I would give him word of how my father reacted to his absence. I took my boy servant, and went out into the fields as if to practise my archery by shooting at a target. The signal we had agreed was this: I would order the boy to run and collect the arrows I had shot from my bow. If I called out to him, "Not so far, the arrow is on this side of you," it meant that David was safe and could return to Saul's house. But the order, "The arrow is beyond you," would mean that he should flee without delay, for Saul had definitely resolved that he should die.

We reached the place where I had always practised with the bow. It was full of pleasant memories for me, for in happier times this was where my father himself, and his cousin Abner, had taught me to shoot. In the best times of all, David and I had also spent hours there, in practice and in play together. Archery was the one martial art in which I excelled over my friend, for he had grown up as the son of a herdsman, and had not learned the bow until he became a man. His weapon of choice was the shepherd boy's sling, and with it he was without equal; but I had been already the son of a king, and my father's men thought it proper that I should learn the bow. So David and I would compete with our different weapons. We would shoot at the target, or sometimes at birds, or deer, or conies. For every one that I brought down with an arrow, David would kill one with his slingshot.

And now, on this perfect early morning of springtime, I was standing in the same field, knowing that David was hiding somewhere watching, while I delivered my father's sentence upon him. In the anguish of my soul, I feared that I would never see my beloved again, unless I somehow did the unthinkable, and fled with him instead of staying with my father and what we all believed was my destiny as the king's firstborn son.

The boy looked up at me in eager expectation. I could see hero-worship written in his face: he was full of childish dreams that he would one day be a warrior like the king's son, and a bowman without peer. I pointed out to him the stunted tree that I had selected as my first mark, and loosed swift arrows at it without pausing to see where they fell: one, two, three. One of them actually hit its target, the others disappeared somewhere in the scrubby undergrowth. I didn't need to see where they went: that was what I had brought the boy for. He looked up at me again to make sure I had

finished shooting, then ran off in search of the arrows. He pulled the first one, the easy one, from the tree, then began to move around in circles looking for the other two.

As he went I swallowed hard, for a lump had come into my throat, and shouted after him in a voice that I hoped was loud enough for David in hiding to hear. "Look over there! Isn't the arrow beyond you?" And then, because my voice cracked and broke at those words, I repeated them. "Beyond you! Hurry, be quick, do not linger!"

The boy found the arrows and brought them back with a puzzled expression, for the arrow had not been where I said, but on the nearer side, towards where I stood. I ignored the question in his glance, and simply told him I had changed my mind, I did not feel like any more shooting this morning. I handed him my bow and quiver full of arrows, and told him to carry them back into the city and leave them in my room.

Even before he had disappeared from sight, I was anxiously scanning the field with my eyes, hoping that David had not indeed fled immediately, but that we would be able to bid each other farewell. I was terrified that I might never see him again, and for the rest of my life the last words I would remember saying to him would be that warning, that order to him to leave me and get away as quickly as possible.

But David had not been able to leave without a goodbye, any more than I would have been. He stood up from his hiding place, ran towards me and bowed himself to the ground at my feet. I took his dear, precious hands, that had so often charmed me with his playing on the lyre, or stroked my cheek when I was sad, and pulled him to his feet. The tears were pouring from both our eyes, streaming down our cheeks, as we clung to each other.

"So it is death?" David asked. "My lord the king is determined."

I nodded. "I could not turn him. The evil spirit has him too much in its power."

Did I believe that? It was the common story among those who loved my father, that the murderous rage that he harboured towards David was caused by an evil spirit sent from Yahweh. The faithful had to believe it was from Yahweh: who else but God could control the spirits? But I wanted to curse Yahweh, if it was true, for bringing the father I loved to such ruin, and for threatening the life of the friend I loved more than my father, more than my sisters, more than my own wife.

I said to him, "Go in peace, dear friend, dearer to me than my own soul. You know I will never fail you nor forsake you, because we have sworn to each other by Yahweh himself, that Yahweh will be between you and me, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever. And David - remember me, when you come into your kingdom. For I will never be king over Israel, since Yahweh has chosen you as his Messiah."

We wept again, and embraced. Then David got up and left, making for the open country and exile; while I returned to the city.

I spoke to him only once more after that day. It was some years later, when David was living as an outlaw at Horesh, in the Wilderness of Ziph, with a price on his head, and hunted by my father and those tribes and villages loyal to him. I had

received word of David's hiding place, but so had Saul, who now set out to take him by surprise, bring him back to Gibeah in chains and put him to death for treachery.

With great effort, and only by lying to Saul, I escaped from the army and found David first, taking supplies of food and wine with me, to give him warning once again. I found David at a low ebb in his fortunes and his courage; he seemed despondent, almost ready to give up and allow himself to fall into the king's hands, no matter if it cost him his life. Living as a fugitive had drained his face of its beauty, his heart of its strength. His soul of its faith, almost.

But when he saw me, and realised that my love for him burned undimmed, that here was one friend who was loyal, the courage seemed to flow back into his veins, as refreshing as a draught of water to a man dying of thirst. We talked together for as long as we dared; we spent whole minutes just looking tenderly at each other; we prayed together for Yahweh's blessing on him and me. I told him not to be afraid, above all, not to fear my father Saul, for Saul would never be able to find him as long as I was for him. I promised him that he would be king of Israel after my father, and I would be second to him: even my father knew this.

And then we renewed the covenant to one another, the vow we had taken before Yahweh, on the day we first met, the day David won his great victory over Goliath.

That was the last time I saw David.

8. The Idol Under The Blanket

I have known more of love than most women, I think. Of giving love, of being loved; and of the cost of both.

The first man I loved, like every other woman who has ever lived probably, was my father. My father Saul, the Messiah of Yahweh, the king He chose to rule over his people Israel. At the time I was born, his fifth child and second daughter, he was not yet afflicted with the dark spirit - the black madness, or the curse of Yahweh, some ill-wishers called it - which blighted the last years of his kingdom. He was still a true man among men, handsome, tall - a good head and shoulders taller than other men - strong, passionate, full of confidence and faith in Yahweh his God. When my mother Ahinoam bore me it almost cost her her life, so that though she recovered she was never able to bear my father any more children. My father was so grateful that she and I both lived through that night, that he named me Michal, "Who is like God?"

In those years, Saul was often away from his home in Gibeah, campaigning against our neighbours the Philistines, and all the other tribes and nations that were enemies of our people. In the past they had preyed easily upon us, and it was rare for Israel to find a judge or protector who was able to lead them to victory against those enemies. But with my father Saul, all that began to change. Defeat was turned into victory, even against the iron warriors and chariots of the Sea People, the Philistines; and the other nations began to fear the people of Yahweh, while their raids and invasions became few and far between.

Yes, he was often away, but each time he came home, it seemed to me in my childish love for him, that I was the first person he asked for, the first he took up in his arms and kissed, the only one he would always set upon his shoulders and carry around the house and through the streets of Gibeah, whooping in my delight that the men had returned from the wars.

The other men I loved were my older brothers Jonathan, Ishui and Melchishua. Jonathan of course was my favourite, my preferred playmate, rather than my older sister Merab, through all the years until he became a man and began to march with Saul and the others, and wield the sword and the bow himself.

By the time I was a woman, Yahweh had abandoned Saul, and rejected him from being Messiah over Israel. Certainly, he still ruled, he still had the respect and love of his people, he still won victories for them against their enemies. But it had all become hollow for him, the taste of it was bitter as wormwood in his mouth. The heart had gone out of him, and the joy had departed from him just as much as if a man's true love, the only woman he has ever desired, has faithlessly fallen into the bed of his rival, and given herself to him like a trull. Yahweh was the love of my father's life,

even more than my mother Ahinoam, or any of my siblings, or me; and Yahweh had betrayed him and given his love to the son of Jesse.

Chiefly, my father was afraid of David because Yahweh was with him, even more than he had ever been with my father. I think he did not always want to kill David. He was too righteous a man for that, and it was only in the blackest of his fits, when the evil spirit possessed him most terribly, that he actively sought to take the life of the man who was supplanting him as Messiah in the affections of Yahweh and the people. The rest of the time, it was merely too much agony for him to have David around him, so he gave David command over some of his picked troops, and would send him wherever there were reports of enemy raiders. Did he, perhaps, hope that David would fall in battle, and he would be free of him? It did not happen. The more David went into danger, and led the army on hazardous missions, the more Yahweh blessed him with success.

The old song of the women, which had so distressed Saul when he first heard it, continued to be sung everywhere: "Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands." Men as well as women loved David; children longed to grow up and be like him; stories of his prowess, many of them going far beyond the truth of the matter, were told in every house, by every fireside. Some of the king's most trusted counsellors, his cousin Abner among them, began to advise him that he would be politic to unite the house of Saul with the house of Jesse, by giving his daughter to David in marriage. At that time my older sister was not yet married, so my father sent word to David, proposing such a union: "I will give you my elder daughter Merab to be your wife, if you for your part will be valiant in my service, and fight Yahweh's battles for him." Perhaps he hoped that if David were his son-in-law, he would be bound to him so that there would be no fear of him conspiring against the king. Or perhaps he hoped, that if David continued to go into battle, the Philistines would kill him and save Saul the trouble.

David returned to Gibeah to see Merab and discuss the forthcoming marriage with Saul and with his own father Jesse. And that was when my eyes were opened, and I saw David as if for the first time. Oh yes, I had seen him before, many times, but always as if from a distance, and in a detached way in which he was always my father's captain, just another young soldier, David son of Jesse whom my father distrusted.

David came into our house at Gibeah, hot from the journey. He took off his helmet and shook out his hair, laughing with animal high spirits because he had arrived, and come into the shade, out of the heat of noon. He was shorter than my father, and not as handsome. Instead, he was beautiful: his hair dark and curling above a perfect brow, his face clear and open, his skin smooth, his teeth gleaming white as he flashed a disconcerting smile around the room, the muscles of his whole body trim and taut with youth.

"Peace be upon this house," he exclaimed, "and on all who dwell in it!" His searching eyes came to rest on me. "And is this the lovely Merab?" he asked.

"No," said my father, pointing to my older sister. "That one is my younger daughter.

This is Merab."

David laughed at his mistake. "A pity," he said, looking again at us the two of us sisters. In that moment my bowels turned to water. I yearned for this beautiful man with my whole body and soul. I loved David, and hated the thought that he might marry my sister instead of me.

"I am nothing," said David. "My kinsfolk and my father's family are nothing among the tribes of Israel. And shall I have the honour of being the Messiah's son-in-law?"

My father was flattered, to have this upstart accept his offer of a daughter!

After this it became the sole aim and purpose of my life, of every minute and hour and day, to win David for myself, to change my father's mind so that he would give me, and not my older sister, to the sweet psalmist, this young son of the gods who had come into my life. I smiled at Saul, talked winningly to him, told him a thousand times that I loved him best of all, showed him my daughterly devotion by special attentions. Most of all, begged him to give me what I desired, told him I would undoubtedly die of grief if Merab had David. I would die in my maidenhood, like Jephthah's daughter in the days of the judges, weeping for her virginity, with her companions, in the mountains of Gilead.

Fortunately my older sister was happy to fall in with my wishes, for she had already fallen in love with some clod from Abel-Meholah in the land of Manasseh, a youth by the name of Adriel. She must have been the only young woman in all of Israel who did not sigh for David, and her face had fallen when she thought she would have to marry him. She was as relieved as I, when our father listened to me, his favourite daughter. When the right time came, Merab was given in marriage to Adriel the Meholathite, and my father promised me that now he would offer me to David.

It was, in fact, an offer with a poisonous sting in the tail, though I knew nothing of this until long afterwards. Saul, of course, would not tell me about it, because it was clear that I was head over heels in love with David. My father reasoned that if I loved David as intensely as I obviously did - and my father was one who understood passion and responded to it when he saw it in others - then David must love me with equal passion. My father was mistaken in this, for though everyone loved David, I do not believe that David ever loved anyone but himself. He used people, men as well as women, and would feign love for them, as he did with my brother Jonathan, so long as it suited him. He lusted after women, and was always ready to sleep with someone new if it would bring him political or diplomatic gain, or flatter his ego, or just because he could. So Saul thought he could use my love as a snare for David, to force him to take yet greater risks against the enemy, and bring him into such danger that he would fall in battle against the Philistines.

He sent trusted messengers to David, promising me to him as his wife, and requiring only one thing. It was a bloody bride-price: he demanded that David should show his loyalty, and avenge Saul against his enemies, by bringing him the foreskins of a hundred of those uncircumcised dogs of Philistines. David laughed out loud when he heard it. I do not think he saw it as a trap, or was even able to think of it as danger. He thought I was cheap at the price, and relished this new opportunity to show how

much he was superior to every other fighting man in Israel, or any other captain of Saul's army. He took with him a mere two dozen or so of his picked warriors, the men who fought shoulder to shoulder with him, who later came to be known as the Thirty, and marched through the night to the gates of Ashdod. It was just like David not to be satisfied with killing a few raiders into Israelite territory, or picking off a weak isolated settlement somewhere. No, he had to prove his prowess and devotion, to show just how much he was able to avenge the king against his enemies, by striking at the very heart of Philistia.

In the blackest of black nights, David and his men crept into one of the villages closest to the enemy's chief city, and murdered not one but two hundred of the men of the place. I do not know who then performed the grim task of cutting off their foreskins, though it would not surprise me in the least, if David insisted on doing it himself. It was the bride-price he had to pay, the sacred task he had to perform in order to win the king's daughter: how could he ask it of another?

Then, somehow evading the hue and cry and the pursuit of the enraged Philistines, he and his men returned to Gibeah of Benjamin. He marched into my father's house, saying "My lord Messiah, I come from Ashdod of the Philistines. Here is the bride-price you asked, for the hand of your daughter Michal."

And kneeling before Saul, he held out a small pouch of goatskin, already stained with the blood that was seeping through it. He placed it in my father's outstretched hand,, and closed my father's fingers around it. Saul stared at it for a moment, as if he was uncomprehending. Then he opened the pouch and looked inside. His face became paler than I have ever seen, and I thought for an instant that he would vomit or faint. But instead, with a mighty effort of will, he stood up, raised David to his feet and embraced him.

"Welcome, in Yahweh's name - my son," he said. And reaching for my hand he placed it in David's.

Torn between horror and the love which still turned my bowels to liquid, I could think of nothing to say but the words that Moses' wife said to him in the stories, when Yahweh tried to slay him on the way to Egypt and she saved him by circumcising their son Gershom with the sacred flint knife, and touching his genitals with the bloody foreskin.

"Truly, you are a bridegroom of blood to me."

David laughed out loud, and looked around him smiling, like a naughty boy who has stolen the cream. He took it as a compliment, not as an expression of amazed horror.

II

And so we were married, David and I. The ceremonies were carried out as soon as was ritually possible, after all the requisite cleansings and offerings, and after the feasting and the rejoicing, we were led to our marriage bed.

I thought my heart would burst with joy, my whole body would explode with the

pride I felt. No longer the daughter of the Messiah Saul, but the bride of David the champion, David the giant-killer. I gave myself to him not as a shy and timid virgin, but with the ardour of the most sensuous, profane dancing woman. Not that David seemed in the least surprised by my passion. He took me as if it were no more than his due, leaving me gasping and crying out in an ecstasy I had never known or dreamed of; then, when I was looked for more kisses and embraces, and for him to enter me again and again and possess me utterly, he turned over with his face to the wall, and fell fast asleep.

I loved him. That is my boast, and that is my shame. During those first months of our marriage he was often away from me, carrying out the king's business. But whenever he was at home in Gibeah, and provided that I could tear him away from my brother Jonathan, whom I began to see more as a rival in love, than as my husband's closest friend, I would cling to him. Take him to my bed. Pour my kisses and caresses upon him. Open my secret garden to him, and let him take his fill on the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.

David was flattered by my ardour; what man could fail to be, so long as he was able at least in part to satisfy my needs? Yet he knew what I did not know, for I was no longer able to sit near and overhear the councils of the king, as I had done when I was his unmarried daughter. Saul was coming to realise more and more that Yahweh had not only rejected him, but was favouring David more and more. And some of those who had previously loved Saul above all others - my brother Jonathan and myself, especially - were now giving our love to David instead. To Saul, it felt like yet another betrayal. First the God he loved, then his own son and daughter, had betrayed him and lent their support to the man he feared - or knew - would supplant him. Now he thought of David more and more not as his captain or his son-in-law, but as his enemy, a traitor and rebel.

As David's victories and successes continued to mount up, and the songs that were sung about him, the stories that were told, became more and more extravagant in their praises, Saul resolved again that David must die. He sent men to watch our house, when David came to me at night, planning that before first light they would break in, drag him from our bed, and put David to death before anyone knew of it.

By the merest chance one of the men charged with this murderous deed loved one of the maids in my house. Probably, too, he loved David better than Saul wanted his servants to. At any rate, he talked to my maid, who came in turn to warn me that my beloved's life was in danger, and would be forfeit that very night.

When David came to our bed, thinking I would make love with the same eagerness that he had come to expect, I pushed him away from me.

"No, my dearest, we cannot pleasure ourselves tonight. You must flee, for if you do not escape before morning, my father plans to have you killed. Even now there are men in the street, watching the house."

A quick look through the crack in the door confirmed my words: in the shadow of the house opposite, the figures of three or four armed men could be recognised. We crept to the room at the back of the house, and after one last, tearful embrace, I let my love

down from the window. Down in the street, David still looked like a boy excited to be caught up in some risky adventure. He kissed his hand to me, then disappeared into the blackness of the night.

Back in our room, I took the household idol, the figure of Baal of the Harvest, which was closest in size to David, and laid it in the bed. I covered its head with a mat of tangled goat's hair; it didn't look much my lover's hair, that I loved to run my fingers through, but in the semidarkness it might serve. Then I covered it with the bedclothes, and sat all night at the bedside, wondering when my father's men would come, and dreading my father's wrath.

I must have dozed off for a few minutes, only to be awoken by my maid screaming as the wooden door was broken down. Three men, swords drawn, entered the room.

"In the name of the king!" they cried. "We have come for the traitor David."

"I beg you, sirs, keep your voices down," I whispered, astonished at the ease with which I could play the weeping woman, in the hope of deceiving them and gaining an hour or two more of time for David to get away. "My husband is seriously ill, he cannot come to my lord the king."

They looked suspiciously past me, their unbelief mingled with fear in case there was some infection in the house which might spread to them too. They could just make out, in the gloom, the shape of a figure under the bedclothes, and at a word from the man who was obviously the leader, they left the house to take word to the king.

In a little while my father sent other messengers, with a more experienced and trustworthy officer in charge of them, one less likely to be distracted by the tears and entreaties of a princess.

"This is my master the king's order," he announced. "We are to take David to him, on his bed if necessary, so that he can face the king's questioning."

He pushed past me into the room, took hold of the bedclothes and threw them back. The goat's hair wig fell away, and there lay the idol of Baal!

The officer looked at me in fear and sorrow. "I am sorry, lady. I cannot take word of this to the king. I must bring you to him."

So I was led, trembling with fear, to stand before my father the Messiah, as if I were a criminal and a traitor, the aider and abetter of his enemies. Saul looked at me with mingled anger and grief, the two emotions struggling for mastery of him. "Michal, my daughter, why have you of all people deceived me like this, and helped my enemy to escape me?"

I wanted to take him in my arms as if he were a sick child. I wanted to kiss him, hug him, make his sickness better. I wanted to tell him I loved David more than I loved my own life. I wanted to tell him David could never betray him or prove a traitor, for he of all men, who had himself received Yahweh's anointing, knew what it was to be Messiah, and would never raise his hand against Saul. I wanted to tell him all his fears of David were a bad dream from which we longed for him to awake.

But I was afraid. I said to him, "My lord king - father dear. He threatened to kill me if

I did not let him go. How could I resist my wedded husband when he commanded me?"

Saul looked as if he wanted to strike me, or shake me violently like a child's doll, but he controlled himself, and merely did what was even worse. He sent me away from him. He had not believed my lie, in his mind I had become David's creature, David's whore. I was damaged goods in his sight, and he would never receive me back into his household, never extend to me the love and protection he gave to all his other children.

Some months later, when Saul wanted to reward one of his officers for some service or other, he gave me to him. The man's name was Palti son of Laish, from Gallim in Judah. He took me away from my father's house, and I never returned, or saw my father and my brothers again.

III

But the story of my life as the Messiah David's wife, was far from over. I still loved David and longed for him, at the same time as I was bound to another man, forced to share his house and his bed, to let him make love to me night after night, though it felt more as if he was using my body like a thing that had no feelings or sensations of its own. I felt nothing for him; yet Palti, like the senseless goat that he was, adored me with the same sort of devotion I had shown for my first husband. He would follow me around with a face like a motherless calf's, and when we sat together, his eyes never once left me. I had never before felt the sheer, exhausting tiresomeness of being wanted or loved, when you feel nothing in return.

The years of my second marriage were like a harsh and tedious servitude. But like all things they came to an end at last, after my father and brother Jonathan were dead, fallen in the battle of Mount Gilboa. David had had himself proclaimed king in Hebron, over his own tribe of Judah, while the other tribes remained loyal to Saul's family and had made my brother Ishui, now called Ishbaal, 'Baal's man', by his followers, but Ishbosheth or 'Man of Shame', by his enemies in David's camp. When my father's cousin Abner realised that Ishbaal was too weak to rule, and his own power was growing weaker as the kingdom fell apart around him, he sent messengers to negotiate with David, offering to bring the other tribes to him as his part in a covenant of friendship. David agreed, but said, "On this condition: give me my wife Michal, whom I married for the bride-price of one hundred Philistine foreskins."

Did he ask for me because he still loved me? Because he was grateful to me for saving his life all those years before, and wanted to restore me to the place of honour at his side? It was none of these. In the intervening years he had taken other wives: Ahinoam of Jezreel, Abigail, the lovely, intelligent widow of Nabal of Carmel, Maacah the daughter of the King of Geshur, Haggith, Abital, Eglah - to name only those who had borne him sons already. He needed his Michal because I was the Messiah's daughter, I was one more sign of the legitimacy of his kingdom, since for those who did not believe his claims to be Messiah in his own right, he could claim to be the heir by marriage of the first Messiah-King.

When the messengers came from Abner to Palti, demanding that he surrender me to them, my doting fool of a husband shamed himself and me by breaking down and weeping on the floor of the house. As they led me away, he followed us still weeping, tearing his clothes and flinging handfuls of dust on his head, scratching his face with his nails. By the time we got to Bahurim, Abner had had enough. He turned back to Palti and struck him a mighty blow with the back of his fist, lifting him from his feet and felling him to the ground.

"Now go home, you son of a bluetongued ewe!" he commanded. Palti slunk away, dishonoured, and I was relieved never to see him again.

David received me back as his wife, and even made love to me from time to time, when he did not prefer the charms of his other wives or concubines. In the years since we were together he had become more like the kings of the other nations, than my father Saul had ever been. He had not one but many houses, and the house in which his wives and concubines and children lived, was the largest of them all. Still I loved him, though the flame of my first passion did not burn as bright as it once did, smothered as it was by neglect. David did not love me, but perhaps there was still some tenderness when he remembered what we had once been to each other.

Even this came to an end on the day when they brought the Ark of Yahweh up to David's new capital city of Jerusalem. The Ark of the covenant was the sacred chest that contained the tablets of the Law of Moses, and Aaron's sacred staff, the most holy artefact of our religion, the symbol and centre of Yahweh's living presence in the midst of his people. In the days of Eli it had been captured by the Philistines, in the most traumatic defeat that was ever inflicted upon our fathers. But Yahweh sent pestilence upon his heathen enemies, and they sent the Ark back to our territories, with ransom gifts to placate our angry God, so that the plague would cease. Since that time, the Ark had not returned to its former place at Shiloh, but remained first at Kiriath-Jearim, then at Baale-Judah, and finally in the house of Obed-edom, whom Yahweh blessed abundantly all the days that the Ark remained with him.

David's great desire, which would set the final seal on his kingdom and Messiahship, was to bring the Ark to Jerusalem and keep it there, even to build a house worthy of the Ark of Yahweh. When the first step towards this dream was taken, the great day on which the Ark was brought to the City of David, the whole city was in holiday mood. There were sacrifices of oxen and fatlings, more than you could count. Priests marched in solemn procession, parading in their elaborate vestments and intoning prayers and praises. Maidens and women scattered flowers along the way. The musicians sounded the trumpets, while singers sang psalms and there was a great shouting from all the people, who had been commanded by David to make a joyful noise unto Yahweh, so as to bring his blessing on David and his descendants in perpetuity. To encourage them, David distributed food to the crowds: to every man, woman and child a loaf of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins.

And there, in the midst of the crowds, the Messiah-King danced before Yahweh with all his might. Girded with a simple linen ephod, my great husband leaped and pranced, cavorted and bowed and whirled, like a man possessed. In front of the very servants and dregs of the people, he made himself look like a man who had drunk too

much wine.

I watched from a window of the palace, as the procession wound its way past, and I saw David. It was as if I had never seen him before, and now my eyes were opened and I finally saw the man I had loved all these years. The man I had begged for, and thrown myself at, even though my beloved father had felt it as a betrayal, and a blade stabbed into his heart. Saul the Messiah had been a man worthy of the name, deserving of Yahweh's anointing: a hero, warrior, and leader of men. But this David was nothing but a clown. A low-born singer, a womaniser who could not keep his own body under control, a joke in the eyes of the lowest harlot in Jerusalem.

When David came back, playing the priest and the holy man by bringing a blessing to his household, I went out to meet him. I had put on the robes that I wore on our wedding day, as the daughter of a Messiah. I said to him, "How the King of Israel did himself honour today! Exposing himself in front of the servants of his maids, making a fool of himself in front of the beggars and street urchins! You made a display of yourself as if you were a vulgar drunkard!"

David was clearly cut to the quick. After so many years in which I had worshipped him, in which he could never put a foot wrong as far as I was concerned, I had turned and spoken my mind to him. Oh, he blustered for a while, some tale of how he had not done any of this to gain glory and honour for himself, but only for Yahweh his God. How Yahweh had chosen him, rather than my father, to be prince over Israel, and if I thought it shame, there were many women of Jerusalem, high and low, who would honour him for it. But he could see I was right about him.

So at last he showed his true mind. He did not raise his fist against me; God knows it would have been better if he had only beaten me as other men do their wives.

"You dried up, miserable old bag," he said to me. "May your womb wither, just like you."

There is nothing more terrible, more real, more immediate, than the Messiah's curse. I felt my womb become cold and hard and dry within me, even as he spoke, and I knew that now I would never bear the child I had hoped and prayed for, for so many years. I went back to my room and knelt on the birth-stool that would now never be mine, rocking backwards and forwards in dry-eyed grief.

David never came to my bed again, and to this day I sit alone in this lonely room in his palace, and embrace his curse of barrenness like a bitter, evil nurseling gnawing at my withered breast.

9. Massacre of the Priests

Doeg the Edomite, that's me. You might be wondering what a man like me, an outsider and a non-Israelite, was doing, working for the holy Messiah-King of Israel. That's easy, actually. It suited Saul to have a non-Israelite in his household. As a heathen, a man who worshipped my own gods (when I felt like it, or absolutely had to), and was not a slave to their God Yahweh, I could do all kinds of things which Yahweh's worshippers could never do on account of their blessed Law. On their precious Sabbath, for example, they weren't even allowed to light a fire, or cook a meal, or do anything else that the priests might count as work. They could eat their damned meals well enough, if someone else cooked them. Not that I was employed as a cook - they had foreign women around for that kind of thing, those who could afford it. What I was there for, was a fixer. A hard man. Someone who would do whatever needed to be done, when it needed to be done, without always having to be told, so that the people I did it for didn't know anything about it and wouldn't be held responsible. No questions asked, that was my business. What, you think anyone can run a kingdom, even one partly governed by priests, without men like me? When anyone did ask what I was doing, the official answer was that I was the chief of Saul's herdsmen, hired in when his original workforce became full-time soldiers. Soldiers! Most of them would have fainted at the thought of doing some of the close hand-to-hand blade-work that I did all the time.

There was sometimes a price to pay, even for a non-Israelite. Every so often the priests and busybodies around Saul's household would start to complain that I had gone too far, and Saul had to make a show of punishing me. That business about the wife of the headman of Hazor was pretty typical. Gods, but she was a beauty! Not yet twenty, but married off to an old greybeard without enough life in his loins to get it up for her and give her a bit of pleasure in her dull life. She didn't take much persuading to open her thighs for me that first night, and after that, whenever I was anywhere near Hazor, we had a good few frolics when her husband was snoring blissfully away to himself.

But we got found out; some sneaking servant girl who probably wanted a bit of it for herself, told on us. According to their precious Law, we should have both been stoned to death for adultery; but I was too valuable to Saul, and in any case, the headman was too starry-eyed in love with his young wife, and too afraid of the ridicule he would suffer. So it was all hushed up. Saul bought the man off, or 'ransomed me' I think they called it, with a sacrifice and a money payment, and I was sent to do six months' hard servitude for the priests in their holy city of Nob. 'Detained before Yahweh', is what they called it, po-faced and mealy-mouthed as ever. A living hell of slavery, I called it; 'cause the priests were hard masters. Their leader Ahimelech, also known as Ahijah, son of Ahitub, son of Phinehas, son of Eli, was the worst of them all, and most inventive when it came to new punishments and humiliations. He had something to prove after all, for it was his grandfather and great-uncle who had lost

the Ark of Yahweh to the Philistines, that time they took it into battle thinking it would make them invincible, but their God had different plans. Slavery to him was a living hell all right; but thank the gods it was only temporary.

Anyway, I was serving this sentence just at the time when David, gods rot him, finally showed his true face and revolted against my master, running away from him and more or less declaring open rebellion. Jonathan warned him, and David fled with a handful of his lads, and came straight to Nob, the city of priests, to try and get the God-botherers on his side, and maybe milk them for some money and equipment while he was about it.

Ahimelech was in a total blue funk about it, and no mistake. I could see him trembling as he went to meet David.

Why are there so few of you? and where is the rest of the army? he says; and I could see how his mind was working. He'd caught wind of how David wasn't exactly in favour with my master at the time, that there might be trouble brewing, and if it came to a head of course he didn't want the priests to end up choosing the wrong side. There was something in the air about Saul not being the only Messiah any more; some people were claiming that David was Messiah too. Well, it was all religious mumbo-jumbo as far as I was concerned. I'd say any man was the Messiah, if he paid me, and switch just as easily to another, if he paid me more. Right now, Saul was the man who paid, and David's prospects were looking none to bright. Besides, I liked Saul. He was straight, the kind of man you could do business with.

David looked the priest right in the eye, and lied. Anyone could tell it was a lie, you'd have to be a the kind of holy man with his head so much in the clouds he couldn't see the muck under his own feet, not to recognise it. The Messiah has sent me on a mission, he says, a secret mission that requires haste. What have you got to spare? Can you give me five loaves of bread?

Ahimelech coughed his dry priestly cough. He didn't have any 'common' bread, meaning, the sort that ordinary men could eat. Only the holy bread, the 'shewbread' they called it, that was set out as an offering to Yahweh - though at the end of the day the priests ate it anyway.

That'll do nicely, says David, and he's obviously not going to take No for an answer.

So there's lots of ahem-ing and aher-ing, and the priests muttering among themselves and casting worried glances at David and his men. Then Ahimelech tells him it might be permitted in these extraordinary circumstances, only providing the young men have kept their vessels holy.

I couldn't help laughing: real priest-talk, that was. It meant, as long as they hadn't dipped their wicks. That was just the kind of thing that would make them unclean, you see, as far as the priests were concerned. Ye gods! as if they didn't know how their precious God did his creating. But terrible things would surely happen if men with anything that came out of a woman on them, should eat the holy bread. The end of the world, probably, or at the very least the Ark getting captured by heathen Dagon-worshippers again.

I'll give David this much: he could talk the priests' lingo when needs must. He even kept a straight face while he was doing it. Indeed, my lord priest, he says, we always keep ourselves from women when we are on a mission. The young men's vessels are holy even when they set out on a common journey; how much more today, on this holy mission, will their vessels be holy?

So they handed over their sacred bread to David and his men.

Then David says, Don't you have any weapons you could let me have? We had to leave the king in such haste, there was no time to arm ourselves fully, and I had to leave my sword and spear behind.

He knew damn well what weapons they had there, and the priest knew he knew.

Well, yes, says Ahimelech. The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the valley of Elah. It's wrapped up in a cloth behind the ephod, where we offered it to Yahweh. Take it if you want, it's the only sword we have here.

And it was the only sword David wanted: the weapon he'd taken away from the mighty warrior he killed by trickery, when he made his name at the first. An iron blade that could slice a man's head from his shoulders at a single stroke, if it was wielded by a swordsman who knew how to use it.

David took it, and left. He and his men headed west, and made straight for Gath of the Philistines, where he offered his services to the king. I don't know if he thought he'd be welcomed with open arms. If he did, he was sorely disappointed. Wasn't he the man who had slain his tens of thousands of them, according to the popular song the women used to sing? They can't all have been men with no one to mourn them, you can bet; and some of those whose friends or brothers or cousins David had killed came and told the King of Gath they weren't going to accept David among them.

Upshot was, David didn't dare hang around and he pretty soon left Gath and hid out in the wilderness of Judah, living as an outlaw. Pretty soon he started attracting debtors and malcontents, the dregs of society that Saul had been making things too hot for in the cities. They were good enough for David though, and he was more than willing to be captain over them. Before long he had four hundred men with him, quite a little army. It was about that time he got his old father and mother away from Bethlehem, 'cause he was afraid Saul might take them and hold them as hostages. David took them to Moab, and large as life asked the king of Moab to give them sanctuary and a pension. Which he did! Talk was, it was because he thought the wind was blowing David's way by now, and he wanted to ingratiate himself with the man who would be king. But more likely he just wanted to stir things up for Saul, who had defeated the Moabites more than once. And then there was all that talk about David's family themselves having a touch of Moabite blood: so much for a Messiah having to be true-born Israelite with not even a suspicion of the heathen anywhere in their family history.

By the time this had happened, and David came back from Moab and was hiding out in the wilderness, I had finished my time of being 'detained before Yahweh' and was back in Gibeah as one of Saul's right-hand men. One of the spies brought the news that David's whereabouts had been found: he was somewhere in the forest of Hereth,

a nasty tract of scrubby woodland down in the hills of Judah.

Saul was sitting in council, under the tamarisk tree at Gibeah, with his spear in his hand, and all his chief officers and advisers were standing around him. When he heard about David, he was suddenly filled with rage, it was one of his black fits coming upon him. He began to shout and swear at his men, accusing them of being in the pay of David, or hoping for the rewards that David would give them. Why else were they conspiring against Saul? He raved about Jonathan having betrayed him, and sold himself to his enemy like a common whore; and how none of us cared about any of this, or was sorry for him that his son had turned against him.

I felt sorry for him, and even if the result held back in shame and embarrassment, I stepped forward to tell him so.

My lord king, I says. You remember when I was serving my time at Nob in the house of the priests. I saw David son of Jesse when he fled there, and came to Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech inquired of Yahweh for David - yes, he not only prayed for your enemy, but he gave him supplies and provisions; and the sword of Goliath the Philistine.

So Saul sent for the priests, to have them arrested and brought to him. Nob was only about three miles from Gibeah, so by mid-afternoon the men had returned with about eighty-five of the priests they had managed to round up.

Saul began to interrogate them at once, turning on Ahimelech, asking him why he had conspired with David, given him supplies and weapons, and helped him to break out in revolt against his king.

Ahimelech was clearly terrified, but he was not chief priest for nothing, and he obviously thought his rank and holy orders would protect him even against a charge of treason. He underestimated Saul's anger.

None of your servants is as faithful to you as David, my lord king, he says. He's your son-in-law, he always carries out your orders, and he's honoured by all the people. Sure I've prayed for him and inquired of Yahweh for him, and I'll go on doing it. Don't suspect me of plotting against you, my lord, or anyone else in my family. We have always been your loyalest subjects.

But Saul didn't believe him. He studied the priest through narrowed eyes, and then passed his sentence: Die, Ahimelech, you and all your family.

There was a stunned gasp from officers, advisers and guards, they could hardly believe what Saul had just said.

Come on, you men, he says to them then. Kill these priests when I tell you to; don't you see they're in league with David? They knew that he was fleeing from me, but still they helped him, and then didn't tell me that he had gone, or where.

But not one of those true-blooded Israelites raised a finger to carry out the Messiah's orders. They were too frightened of Yahweh to lay a hand on his priests.

I was itching to do it. My hand was clenched around the handle of my sword, ready to draw it at a nod or a word, but I could not do it, or take precedence over my master's

own fellow-countrymen, until he gave me clear permission. Saul had often talked to me about his God Yahweh. How he loved him and hated him and feared him. He loved him, Saul said, more than anyone else in Israel did, certainly more than the priests who were passionless time-servers, and only did their holy duties for the pay and the power it gave them. But my master had loved Yahweh, still loved him, with every fibre of his being, heart, soul, mind and strength. And Yahweh, he thought, had set his love on him, when he chose Saul to be Messiah and sent the old prophet Samuel to pour holy oil on his head. When Saul talked to me about that, it was like when a comrade tells you about the love of his love, the woman who means more to him than any other, more than life itself. That same look came into Saul's eye, when he tried to make me understand what it was like when the spirit of Yahweh came upon him and possessed him.

And then Yahweh had turned against him. Saul never understood why. It was something to do with the holy war against the Amalekites, when Saul spared the women and children and old men, and only killed the warriors and brought back their king Agag to be slaughtered before Yahweh. He was sure, in his own mind, that this was what Yahweh wanted, even though Samuel had demanded total annihilation. Saul, as a soldier, knew what that meant. Knew what it would mean, to command his troops to commit a massacre that would mean wading through blood, through the whole land of Amalek. But to his horror, Yahweh betrayed him and agreed with Samuel. He took his spirit away from Saul - and it felt as if his bowels were being slowly pulled out through the flesh of his belly - and Saul was left empty, desolate, forsaken. Then Saul began to hate Yahweh and fear what he might still do, at the same time as he still loved him and cried out night after night for pardon, for his Love to return and take him once again.

I didn't know anything about the love; but I knew I hated a god who would treat his most devoted servant that way. And I hated the priests who didn't love him themselves, and yet stood by while he tormented my master. Oh yes, I longed to get back at them, for that, and for the hell they had made of my life during the six months I was their slave.

You, Doeg, says Saul then. You strike the priests for me.

I didn't need telling twice. I drew my sword and set about the bloody work with a will, I and a couple of the other lads from Edom who were always at my side, no matter what dirty business the king commanded me. We killed all eighty-five of the priests they had brought from Nob, then we went back to the city of the priests and put it to the sword: men, women, children and livestock, we slaughtered the lot of them, and the blood sang in my veins while I did it, every blow a blow struck for my master to avenge him against the so-called men of God who supported this God who had rejected him.

I loved Saul, and was always faithful to him. But my loyalty didn't help me much in the end. Though Saul had commanded the massacre of the priests, his conscience tore him to pieces afterwards, and Yahweh tortured him even more with the certainty that now he would never, could never have Saul back. Saul would always be his victim, now.

A few months later, my master paid me well and discharged me from his service. There was nothing for it but to go home to Edom, where I bought a bit of land and became - don't laugh - quite a successful farmer in my own right.

10. David in the Wilderness

Shammah is my name. Shammah, son of Agee, the Hararite. As long as I live, the greatest pride and boast of my life will be, that I was with David the Messiah from the beginning. I knew him by sight when we were both lads, growing up in the hill country of Judah; but we only became close after he took service with Saul and became his greatest captain. Those were days of glory and excitement, when it seemed that no enemy, no force on earth, could stand against us. I was with David when Saul sent him out to get the bloody bride-price he demanded for his daughter Michal. I was with him at the field of Lehi, when we fought a pitched battle against the Philistines, and the whole Israelite army was in flight from them, with David trying desperately to rally them and get them to stand their ground. In the middle of a plot of ground where a crop of lentils was growing, I turned to face our pursuers and took my stand; and Yahweh gave me the strength of twenty men. It was as if my right arm was charmed, instructed to teach terrible things. I struck again and again, and with each blow, my opponent fell before me; I have never known such facility in the work of killing as that day. I defended that plot of ground and killed the Philistines until my comrades realised that the day was won and rallied to join me. That day became known as the Victory of the Field of Lentils, and I was honoured as one of the Three, the mighty warriors who were the Messiah's most valiant, picked men of war.

And then, when David heard - from the king's son Jonathan, no less - that Saul in his madness was determined that David was a threat to his kingdom, and resolved that he should die for it, and he fled from Gibeah for the last time; I was with him then, too. We laughed at the crusty, withered old priests in their holy city of Nob, when we rested there and David begged provisions for us, and weapons for himself. They actually asked if we had kept ourselves from women, because if we hadn't, we were not holy enough to eat their day-old bread! The laughing stopped some time later, when we heard about what they suffered for helping us that day. Saul the king accused them of treason, and had them hacked to death by his Edomite butcher, Doeg. We vowed that day, that we would never rest until Ahimelech and his fellow-priests were avenged, and the man who had decreed their murder was dead. But David shook his head grimly, and said only, Who would dare to raise his hand against Yahweh's Messiah?

And after that, we were with David all through his outlaw years, in the hill country of Judah! It was bliss to be alive in those days, but to be young, with David, was like walking the heavens, together with the sons of God themselves. We breathed the air of joy and freedom, and walked tall in spite of the hard times we often went through, when rations were short, and the nights cold. We knew in our bones that Yahweh was doing a new thing in Israel, that a revolution was in progress, we were about to triumph over all our ancient enemies once and for all, and the new age of the Messiah was about to dawn.

David was our man of destiny, the one chosen by Yahweh to bring in that new age.

But for the first years, he was very much the man of destiny, waiting on the sidelines. For Saul was still Messiah, as we well knew because it was told and sung throughout the Land, the tale of how Yahweh's people begged the prophet Samuel for a king, and God heard their cry and gave them: Saul.

How was it that this Messiah, the first one, the one they were given in answer to their prayers, was not the one who was going to bring in the age of the Messiah? We did not know, and the stories did not tell us, either. Perhaps Yahweh had made Saul Messiah, because he loved his people, but he wasn't prepared to deliver all the blessing of the days of the Messiah, by the Messiah they had asked for on their terms? Perhaps he would only do it, through the Messiah he gave entirely on his own, mysterious, unaccountable, terms?

I had loved Saul, so had we all, from the time I was old enough to know anything about him. Our king! The man who would lead Israel, like other nations that had their kings. The man who would give us the victories, the glory, the prosperity we craved and had so long been denied. And a man, moreover, who was tall, handsome, a mighty warrior, a leader of men.

But after we had served and fought with David, we began little by little to think differently. Oh yes, the women's songs may have had something to do with it: "Saul has slain his thousands; but David his tens of thousands." It was a catchy tune, as well, you couldn't help singing along, and every time you sang them, the words seemed to go deeper and ring more true. You seldom stopped to think that David hadn't really slain any more men than Saul had; it was his men, men like me and Josheb-basshebeth and Eleazar, and Joab and Abishai and the rest of the Thirty, who had notched up the kills in his name. But David was our captain and our inspiration, so we did not mind that he had the credit.

David seldom spoke about his destiny, and just what he thought about being a Messiah-in-waiting. He didn't have to, for we all knew the stories that were told about him, though we listened to them and told them only when he was out of hearing.

The stories about how he was growing up as a boy on his father Jesse's farm in Bethlehem, where David, as the youngest of seven sons, was set to work as a shepherd, watching the flocks in fair weather and foul. How the old seer, Samuel, had turned up one day asking to see all of Jesse's sons. They started naturally with the oldest, as is right and proper. But Samuel rejected each one in turn, said this was not the one he had been sent for. It was only when the youngest was brought in from wherever he had taken the flocks to pasture, that the seer's eyes lit up and he announced the special plan that Yahweh had for this boy. He anointed him there and then with the holy oil of the sanctuary, making David a Messiah just like Saul. How could there be two Messiahs? No one liked to ask.

Then there was the story about the killing of Goliath, the monster champion of Philistia. The giant, who had reduced the whole Israelite army to abject terror, came out in armour, with a huge sword and spear, yet he was laid low by a pebble from the brook, shot from a simple farm-boy's sling.

There were the stories about his wooing and winning of the princess, Saul's daughter Michal, and her passionate love for him. That one had many of the lads dreaming of the princesses they might hope to win, or maybe capture as spoil in the wars against our heathen neighbours. For the princess was a great beauty by any man's standards, and when David preferred spending the night at his house, rather than with the men in camp, there were more than a few good-natured jokes about that, I can tell you.

And then, as each new adventure and exploit took place, there was a new story, a new song, added to the list of tales that were told about him. And day by day his fame grew, and the love that we felt for him, and the love that more and more people all over Israel felt also. And this, in spite of the fact that David and his little rag-tag army depended on the good will of the local people, wherever we happened to be in hiding, to bring us supplies of food and drink. None of them were rich, yet out of their own poverty, they were - usually - more than willing to supply us. The reason we were always moving on from place to place was not just to avoid capture by Saul and his men, but so as not to lay an unbearable burden on the people of any one place.

When I think back to those days, I am amazed at how we were so full of joy and excitement. Every new danger, every new helter-skelter flight through the hills to yet another safe stronghold, was a thrilling adventure. We were very young.

And all the time, when we weren't running away from Saul, we were actually fighting his battles, which were the battles of his people Israel and his God Yahweh.

One time, David heard that the Philistines were attacking the city of Keilah, and told us we were going to go to their aid. At that time, we were very new and inexperienced at this outlaw life. Look, said many of the men, we're living in fear for our lives here in the hills of Judah. And you want us to go and attack the Philistines?

But David was the man Yahweh spoke to, and showed him all his mind. Yes, said David, Yahweh has told me to go down to Keilah, and he will give the Philistines into my hand. He will do this, because it is his battles we are fighting!

His confidence and certainty were so great, that he carried us all along with him, even the grumblers and the fearful. And he was right. We fought the Philistine raiders, inflicted a crushing defeat on them, and carried off all their plunder, cattle and livestock. We saved the people of Keilah; and they were very grateful - for a time.

While we were staying at Keilah, Abiathar the priest, the son of Ahimelech, who had somehow survived the massacre at Nob and was now the head of his family and the chief priest in Israel, came to David, bringing with him the sacred ephod. Some of the men grumbled at this, for there are always grumblers in any group of soldiers. Do we have to put up with this priest and his meddling? they asked. Isn't he just going to interfere with our enjoyment of this life, and of the plunder? But David silenced them. To him, and to the more thoughtful among the men, the arrival of the priest was convincing proof that, however hard our present circumstances, however great the dangers we faced, we were destined to triumph in the end. David would be Messiah in Saul's place, and rule as king over Israel, for Yahweh favoured him.

We shouldn't have been too surprised at what happened next, though; it was the first of many experiences of being betrayed by the very people we were risking our lives to

help. Some people have very short memories, and were quick enough to welcome us when we were fighting to defend their lives and property, and just as quick to start complaining, and want to be rid of us, when they discovered what it cost to feed us for a week or two.

Saul got news that we were at Keilah, and mustered an army to march down on us, besiege the city and capture us. As far as he was concerned, David had walked into a trap by shutting himself up in a city with gates and bars, where he could be surrounded and starved into submission.

David heard the report that Saul's army was on its way, and immediately he sent for Abiathar, telling him to bring the ephod with him.

David was well used to speaking to Yahweh himself, and discovering his will; but while there was a priest in town, it made sense to get him to do the praying and the inquiring of Yahweh.

"O Yahweh," said David, "I have heard that Saul is planning to come down to Keilah and destroy the city on my account. Will he really do as he plans. Tell me, Yahweh, I pray."

Abiathar went off into his priestly trance, or whatever it is the priests do when they consult with Yahweh, and when he came out of it, the answer was: "Yes, he will come down."

"And will the people of Keilah hand me over to him, to save their own skins?"

Again, the waiting. Then, "They will hand you over."

So we left Keilah in a hurry, with David swearing there would be no more hiding in walled cities where we could be caught like rats in a trap. From now on it was the caves and strongholds of the wilderness that we would depend on. And so it was, cold and hunger and all.

The years that followed were a crazy mixture of long tracts of waiting around in boredom, while very little happened - not a happy experience for young soldiers full of strength of purpose, and spoiling for a fight - and the headlong cat-and-mouse pursuits, when Saul came out in search of us. There was more than one very near escape, like the time we were trapped in a defile between two ridges, with Saul and his men just on the other side of the lower ridge, and closing in on us fast. He would have caught us that day, and it might have been the end of everything, if a messenger had not arrived just at that moment with news of another Philistine raid. Saul had to break off the pursuit and go to deal with this new incursion, giving us time to escape to another new hideout.

The men laughed and cheered, complimenting David on his luck, or his charmed life. But he just shrugged his shoulders, as if it was obvious that Yahweh had bailed him out again.

It wasn't long after that, when Saul returned from fighting off that Philistine raid, that we were hiding out in the wilderness of Engedi, on the steep heights to the west of the Dead Sea. It was the kind of arid, desolate region that was ideal for concealing

outlaws, apart from the fact that it was also so inhospitable that you could never stay there for more than a few days until your supplies ran out. Saul came after us with about three thousand men, all heavily armed and carrying their equipment. In those deserted parts you could hear them coming from about ten miles away; so David left it till almost the last minute, then sent most of the men heading off south past Wild Goat Rocks. He kept about a dozen of us with him, and went into a cave we had found up there, to see what Saul would do.

There were some empty sheepfolds by the roadside, where the shepherds used to put their flocks at night for safety, when they were driving them down that way. When Saul and his men reached the place, they stopped for a rest, though there was no water anywhere near. Most of the men sat or lay down, many of them wandered off the road to relieve themselves. By this time, Saul was no longer the ordinary farmer and man of the people he once was; he had begun to feel that it was unfitting for a king to relieve himself alongside the common soldiers. So he told Abner his cousin that he was going into that cave to ease himself. The very cave where we were all hiding.

As Saul clambered up the few yards of slope that separated the cave from the road, we ran back into the cave to avoid being seen. Fortunately, it went back many yards into the hillside, and we were able to get out of sight before Saul came in and squatted down a little way inside.

He was straining and grunting with the effort, for the days of marching and irregular meals had taken a heavy toll on his guts. I heard Joab hissing in David's ear, "Look, sir: Yahweh has delivered your enemy into your hands, as he promised he would. Now is your chance! Stab him through before he even knows we are here!"

David took his short-sword in his hand, and crept nearer to Saul; I was amazed that he did not seem to hear, because to my ears, the sound was almost deafening. When he came within striking distance, he hesitated for a long time. You could almost hear Joab and the rest of us screaming at him in our minds, urging him Go on! Go on! But instead of striking the blow to Saul's heart that would finish him for ever, and give the throne to David, he reached out, took a corner of Saul's cloak that was hanging down on the floor of the cave, and cut off a small piece. Then he came crawling back to us, just as Saul completed his business, stood up huffing and puffing, and walked out into the sunshine.

Joab was furious, fuming with frustration. "In Yahweh's name, David! Why didn't you pierce him through while he was at your mercy? You'll never have another chance like that!"

But David said, "Yahweh forbid that I should raise my hand against his Messiah! I repent that I even lifted a finger to cut off the corner of his cloak."

He staggered to his feet and lurched to the mouth of the cave. Saul's troops were already almost past, when David stood in the full light of day and shouted at the top of his voice, "My lord the king!"

The sound of marching stopped. Saul turned his tracks, and looked in the direction of the voice, as David fell on his face to the ground. It was one of those moments when

the whole of your life seems to stand still, and everything hinges on that moment: one move can make or mar the whole fabric of the world. I and my comrades had our hands on our swords, ready to draw them and sell our lives dearly if Saul's men attacked. They in their turn faced us with bows, spears and swords at the ready, waiting for the merest word or even look of command from their leader.

David alone seemed calm, as if he thought - or perhaps, knew - that he was invulnerable, invincible.

He stood up and spoke. "My lord king! Why do you listen to the words of those who tell you I wish you harm?" (Was it my imagination, that he looked pointedly at Abner?) "You have seen with your own eyes how Yahweh gave you into my hand just now, when he led you alone and undefended into the cave where I and my men were hiding. Some of my lads urged me to seize the opportunity, and kill you while I had you at my mercy. I could have done it, too; I could have struck you down and you would have known nothing. But I said to them, 'I will not lift my hand against my lord, because he is Yahweh's Messiah.' Look: here in my hand, the corner of your cloak. I was near enough to cut it off, yet I did not harm you. As Yahweh is my witness, I have done you no harm, and will do you no harm, even though you have come out to hunt me down. And what is it that you are hunting, my lord? I'm nothing more than a dead dog! A single flea on the hide of Israel!"

Scores of the men smiled grimly at this: after days and weeks of living rough, they knew the biting annoyance of fleas, and the time-consuming daily hunt for them among their own clothes, and over their own hide.

"My lord Saul," concluded David. "May Yahweh be judge between us! If I am guilty of any sin against you, may he punish me. But if I am innocent, may Yahweh see it, and plead my cause, and vindicate me against you."

I was not the only one who looked several times from David to Saul and back again, as we hung on the king's reaction. When it came, it was surprising, disturbing, horrifying. I think that was the moment, the very moment, when many of them, even among Saul's men, first knew that something in the kingdom had changed.

For Saul the king, the leader of Israel, the strong proud hero and warrior, broke down and wept. "Is that your voice, David my son?"

He wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his robe. "You are more righteous than I, for you have spared my life today, and shown beyond doubt that you bear me no ill will, and wish me no harm, even though I have been pursuing you like a wild beast and seeking to take away your life. I have never heard of a man who, with his enemy at his mercy, spares that enemy's life; yet you have spared mine, and let me get away in safety. May Yahweh bless you, and reward you for what you have done today."

He took several steps towards David, as if he meant to go to him and embrace him, but something stopped him. Perhaps it was that he feared, possibly with reason, that one of David's men would interpret it as an attack and strike him. Perhaps it was something else, a sense of the momentous nature of his next words, that halted him in his tracks.

"Now I know," he said, "that you will surely be king of Israel, and Yahweh will establish the kingdom in the hands of his Messiah. Do just this for me? Swear to me, in the name of Yahweh God, that you will not kill my descendants when I am gone, that you will not wipe out my name from my father's house."

And David swore, the most solemn, binding oath that an Israelite can utter.

We waited, to see what would happen next. Could it be that this was a reconciliation between the two Messiahs? That they would return together to Gibeah, that all would be healed, that David would be Saul's son-in-law and chief captain once again, and all would be as it had been? Best of all, that we would be able to give up our outlaw existence, as onerous as it was exciting, and go home to the bosom of our families and villages?

It was a beautiful dream, but all of us knew that it was no more than a dream. Something had been set in motion long before that, and it could no more be halted than a runaway cart on a steep hillside. What had just taken place between David and Saul had accelerated, rather than slowed, that motion. There could be no going back.

Saul and his army turned around and marched back to Gibeah, while David went on to the next stronghold to rejoin the rest of his men.

It soon became clear how little had changed between David and Saul, for the truce between them did not last long. It was about the time that Samuel died, "old and full of years", as the stories like to tell. Some of us younger men thought it would have been better all round if he had died many years before. It seemed to us that the days of the judges and prophets were well gone, when the tribes of Israel had lived together under the guidance of their tribal leaders, until in time of grave danger Yahweh gave us a judge, a prophetic leader or hero, to lead us until the crisis was past. Some of our greatest heroes - Samson, Deborah, Jephthah, Gideon, Ehud - were judges like that. But that was no way to be a nation. That way we only lurched from crisis to crisis, constantly at the mercy of the nations around us with their kings and centralised authority. Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of a new order; but until he was out of the way that new order, uniting at the centre of our people the authority of king and priest, could not fully emerge. And Saul too, Messiah though he was, was a part of that in-between time, in which the old and the new orders limped awkwardly side by side, waiting for something to die so that something else could be born.

When Samuel died, the whole nation was united in grief. All put aside their differences, their feuds and grievances, and came together at Ramah to mourn and to bury him. And among the rest, Saul and David stood side by side, and wept and prayed together.

When the days of mourning were ended, everything was once again as it had been, before the two men met at the cave of Engedi. I used to hear sometimes from my cousin who still lived near Gibeah, and sent me word of Saul and his doings, so that more than once we were warned when some new plot was laid against David. Now we heard that the king's black mood had returned, worse than it had been before. Even though he had not spoken much with Samuel for years, just knowing that the

old man was praying for him, had seemed to comfort him. Now that Samuel was no more, it was as if he suddenly felt alone. They said that he would spend hours, sometimes whole days or nights, in prayer to Yahweh, and afterwards would appear spent, exhausted, burned out like a hollow log. For Yahweh had not been there. He had turned his back on the Messiah, did not answer his pleas and cries, had already left and was miles away where Saul could not follow.

In that emptiness, that utter loss, he became more and more convinced that it was David who was conspiring against him, and planning his murder. He sent messages throughout the land, promising bags of gold as a reward for any information about David's whereabouts, that would lead to his capture. And though, as I've said, David had many supporters and sympathisers, especially within the borders of his own tribe of Judah, there were also those who still loved Saul, or hoped for a quick profit by betraying David. The elders of Ziph and its villages were chief among these, whether for some imagined wrong they had suffered at our hands, or just out of plain avariciousness. When we were hiding at one time on the hill of Hachilah opposite Jeshimon, they betrayed us to the king. As before, Saul gathered an army of three thousand men, and marched south past Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron, to the wilderness of Ziph.

By now it was obvious to most of us who followed David, even if not to Saul's men, that there had been a shift in the balance of this continuing game of cat and mouse. In the past, we had been the fugitives, the fearful ones, the likeliest to be defeated. But as Saul became more and more desperate, David grew ever more confident. The day at Engedi had confirmed for him what before he had only guessed at: that being Yahweh's man, Yahweh's Messiah, meant that he was unassailable, virtually indestructible.

When Saul and his army reached the hill of Hachilah, David and a few of us were perched among the rocks higher up the slope, looking down on them and spying out their strength and dispositions. It was pretty much as Saul always set up camp when he was campaigning: his tent was in the middle of the camp, with Abner his commander, while the rest of the army were encamped around him.

David suddenly looked at us all, with a strange, wild, joyful light in his eyes, as if he were a young boy who had thought of some particularly mischievous and amusing prank. "I'm going down to Saul's camp tonight," he announced. "Who's coming with me?"

We all volunteered, without hesitation. There was not one of us who would not have given our lives for him, if he asked. But he didn't want us all; for whatever it was he had in mind, he needed only one companion.

And so he took Abishai, the son of Zeruah and brother of Joab. Those two were reckless, violent hot-heads who caused David a lot of heartache later on, but back then they were just high-spirited young men like the rest of us. David and Abishai went down to Saul's camp at dead of night. It was the dark of the moon, and with their knowledge of the lie of the land and their experience of surviving in the hills, they were able to creep, unchallenged by the sentries, into the midst of the camp. Standing in Saul's tent, David looked down at his sleeping enemy, who was once

again at his mercy, and he took pity on him. He took the spear which was stuck in the ground at Saul's head, and the jar of water beside it, and crept away again.

Abishai and Joab were furious with David for taking this risk, and then not exploiting his advantage.

"Why did you not kill him, when you had the chance? What is all this nonsense about stealing his spear, and his jar of water? If you didn't want his blood on your own hands, you could have commanded me, and I would have pinned him to the ground where he lay."

David seemed surprised at the very idea, as if he had never thought of it, rather than angry with the brothers for questioning his judgement. "Don't you understand yet, that he is the Messiah? No one can raise his hand against Yahweh's Messiah, without making himself guilty of the worst of sins. As Yahweh lives, Yahweh will strike Saul down; or else he will die at the time appointed for him, or he will fall in battle. As for me, I will never lift up my hand against the Messiah!"

Then I understood that it was because David was so conscious that he himself was the Messiah, and so deeply aware of the sacredness of that calling, that he could not kill another who had received the same holy anointing. It would be like taking his own life; it would be an irreversible, unpardonable sin.

But he was quite equal to humiliating his fellow-Messiah and making mischief for his men. When morning came, and the enemy camp below us was stirring, with men waking up, and rubbing their eyes, and stamping their feet to warm themselves, and rekindling their cooking fires all around, David stood up and hailed them, calling out for Abner son of Ner.

Abner peered up at the place where we stood among the rocks, shading his eyes against the slanting rays of the sun. "Who is that, who calls on the commander of the king?"

David was warming to his task. "Call yourself a man, Abner? And do you really think there is no one like you in Israel, for strength or valour? Why then did you not keep proper watch over your lord? For an enemy came in the night to destroy your master, and you failed him! You deserve to die, because you didn't keep watch and protect the Messiah. Look now: where is the king's spear? And where is the water jar that was beside him in the night?" And he waved both the spear and the jar, tauntingly, over his head.

Then Saul came forth and stood beside his commander, also peering up into the light that seemed to them now to stream around, and from, David.

"Is that your voice, my son David?"

"It is my voice, my lord king."

As they spoke to each other my mind went back to that earlier exchange at Engedi. Their words were similar, yet they sounded very different. At Engedi, David had been pleading for pardon, for life, it seemed. But now, in between his words, there was a different message. No longer pleading, he was actually telling Saul that he didn't

need his pardon and protection. Yahweh was his protector, and he, not Saul, was the one who now enjoyed God's favour. David was enjoying himself, rubbing the nose of his enemies in their inevitable destruction, for the tide of history was ebbing away from them, passing them by.

"Why are you pursuing your servant, my lord? What have I done? How have I offended the king? Listen to me now. If it is Yahweh who has incited you against me, then I pray, let him accept a sacrifice from me, an offering of peace between us. But if it is your men, or any others, who have stirred up this hatred, may they be cursed in Yahweh's sight, because they have driven me away from my home, from the heritage of Yahweh, to live among other peoples who serve other gods. Shall I serve other gods? Never, my king! Do not let my life blood be shed away from the presence of Yahweh! For when you, the mighty king of Israel, hunt me, it's like hunting a single partridge in the mountains."

Saul was unmanned again, even more pathetically than he had been at Engedi; so that Abner had to support him with one arm around him, whispering in his ear as if he wanted to stop him talking, stop him making this display of himself in front of the whole army. But Saul would not be prevented; it was as if he had to walk through that valley of bitter shame, drain the cup of humiliation to its last dregs.

"Forgive me, my son David," he cried, with tears running down his cheeks and wetting his beard, "I have wronged you. Come back to me now, and I will never harm you again. My life was precious in your sight today, though you could have taken it from me as easily as a man wrings the neck of a dove. I have been a fool, let my shame go where it does deserve."

"Here is the spear, my lord," David went on, almost as if Saul had not spoken. "Let one of your lads come up here and get it. You know that Yahweh rewards everyone for his faithfulness and righteousness. Well, He gave you into my hand today but I spared you, for I will not lift up a hand against Yahweh's Messiah. I treated your life as precious; so may Yahweh bless me, and hold my life precious, and may he rescue me from all who seek my life!"

Was it a prayer? Or a boast?

"Amen, amen!" cried Saul. "May Yahweh bless you indeed! I know that from now on you will succeed in all you do, through Him."

And with that he ordered his army to break camp and return to Gibeah, while David went on his way. Again, there could be no healing; David could never go back to being one of Saul's men. But Saul's final defeat, and David's victory, had moved one long step nearer.

Though I loved David - everyone loved David - I was sorry for Saul that day, and for ever after. To see the man I had served, respected, and loved, the Messiah of Israel and its first prince, brought so low before the man whom Yahweh was now preferring to him, left a bad taste in my mouth. Like when you have drunk sour wine, and even before it turns your stomach and you vomit it back again, you know that nothing but sickness will come of it.

And besides, although I followed David still, I was not happy with where he led us next. For he still believed that, though Saul and nothing else could harm him, he was still at risk so long as he remained in Judah. It might be the danger of alienating the affections of the people, by having them support his little band with supplies of food, and protection. It might be the fear that Saul would continue to waste his men's strength by sending out forces to try to trap and catch us. Either way, David made up his mind to move further away to Philistia, where he went once more to the man he had sought refuge with once before, Achish king of Gath.

By this time, the Philistines themselves had come to see that David was no friend of the king of Israel, so they welcomed us when we came, ostensibly, to take service with them. Achish sent us out to raid the southern towns and villages of Judah; but David deceived him. He led us instead to raid the scattered areas further to the south, where the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the surviving remnants of the Amalekites, lived. We brought back their plunder and loot to Achish, but it was thankless, bloody work. For David was terrified that if any of our victims survived, the Philistines would learn of his deception and drive us out. So we left no survivors, and that is terrible, bloody work for any true soldier. It is one thing to feel the stark joy of taking a man's life in fair fight, when he has as much chance of taking yours. But quite another to slay defenceless women or children or old men. My heart was not in it, and I felt soiled by that time of mercenary service.

I knew, too, that our presence in Philistia weakened Saul, and strengthened the position and the courage of our hosts. Even though we were not pillaging and weakening Israel as they thought we were, still it emboldened them, and helped to incite them to that last great invasion of the tribal lands of Israel, which ended with the battle of Mount Gilboa, and the futile death of Saul and his sons. We were not a part of that invasion itself, for the other lords of the Philistines would not allow us to march with them, fearing that when it came to battle we would turn and fight against them, alongside our brother Israelites. But still, in Saul's hour of greatest need, when not only he but so many other of our brethren died, we were not there to help or save them. We were miles away, fighting against the Amalekites who had attacked our city of Ziklag, plundered it, and taken our wives and children away captive. We smashed the heads of those Amalekites, but by the time we returned, Saul's last battle was already over.

May Yahweh forgive me, and those who fought beside me; for I am not sure if I ever can.

11. The Witch of Endor

I did not ask to be what I am.

I am what God made me; and the Gift that I have, as they call it, has been just as much a Curse, and has put my life in danger more times than I can count. And yet, I can no more not be what I am, or not let the Gift do its work in me, than a man can not work, or a woman not desire to be the mother of children.

The ignorant and superstitious think there is some magical or mystical reason for the Gift: they talk about me being the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. This is not true, for I am the fourth living child, and only the first daughter, of my mother, and she herself was the second daughter of hers. The truth is that most of the women in our family, for as long as anyone can remember, have had strange abilities that have seemed uncanny to other folk, which we have sometimes used to help them, but more often tried to keep hidden.

We lived in the Vale of Jezreel, in a village about halfway between Jezreel and Bethshan, a village so small that it didn't even have a name to most people. We called it Home, or sometimes, when we were talking to outsiders, Mishpethayim, because long ago there had been two sheepfolds there, where the drovers kept their flocks when they stopped for the night.

They tell me I was always a happy child, laughing and singing as I played, and popular with all the other children and adults, up to the age of five or six. Then something happened to me that was to become so familiar that I can barely remember the first time, even though everyone said it changed me just as if I had lost a limb. Or maybe, gained a third eye and ear. All I can remember, as the dimmest recollection, is that one day I was out on the hillside above our village of Home, weaving backwards and forwards in a little grove of ancient trees, when suddenly I met the Bright Children. That was what I called them at first sight. Some people have imagined that an experience like this must be frightening, terrifying, but it was not so. In the manner of a child, for whom so many things in the world are strange and new, I simply took them for granted. And they, for their part, did not try to frighten me, but rather were delighted that I could see and hear them, and welcomed me.

They began to sing to me, and tell me things I had never heard before. My heart was singing too, and I longed to hold on to them and to that golden morning, but all too soon they were drawing away from me and passing through a kind of veil into another place, a place that was closer to me than my own hand in front of my face, yet which I would never be able to reach. I ran home, and even as I ran back down the hill, desperately wanting to tell everyone about it and share the joy of what had just happened, I knew that I could not tell. They would not believe me, or they would not understand. And so I held my peace.

But I began to explore, and find ways, of being with Them again to hear Their

beautiful song and see Their graceful figures dancing in the light between the light of the sun or moon. At first, I could not find Them again. I could not find Them by looking for them; it was only when I was looking the other way, as it were, that I would catch a glimpse of Them out of the corner of my eye. As time passed, I learned how to look without looking, to focus my gaze without focusing, to hear without listening, and to be able to find Them then, not just in that grove where They had first appeared, but almost anywhere. But Their favourite places were those like the hilltop between earth and sky, or down by the waters of Jezreel, between land and water, or in the early dawn or evening between light and darkness. And just as They lived in places between, so They were found in the between times too. I met Them most of all whenever a baby was being born to any of our family or neighbours, or when people's lives were hanging on the brink of death, or when couples were entering into marriage.

One day I was talking to Them, as I walked along the edge of the stream, when my younger brother Sheal came up behind me.

"Who are you talking to?" he demanded.

"My friends, the Bright People," I answered without thinking.

It was only after his next few comments and questions - Where are they? I can't see them. What are they saying? What do they look like? I think you're mad! - that I realised I had said more than I should have, and tried to pass it all off as a joke, or just as a game I was playing by myself.

But Sheal was not satisfied with this for very long. During the next few days he took to following me when I did not notice, observing where I went and watching me from a distance, out of sight. Then when I came home, I was exposed to the full gamut of his annoying, younger-brotherly teasing.

"Shua has been talking to her ghosts again! She says they walk with her down by the stream, and in the trees, and up on the hills."

My father suddenly became very angry, and gave him a cuff round the head, bidding him never to speak of this again; but my mother quietly took me out to our vegetable garden behind the house, and began to ask me about the Bright People. And so, because she seemed to understand, I told her everything.

A distant look came into her eyes, and I thought she might be on the point of weeping. But all she said, stroking my hair gently and smiling into my face, was "So. Then you have the Gift, too. I want you to listen to me, Shua. Not everyone will understand about this; there will be many who will hate you and fear you if they know about it. You must always be careful who knows about your seeing and hearing. Come with me to your aunt Zebudah, who understands more of this than I ever will, and she will instruct you."

And so it was that I went to live with Zebudah, my mother's older sister, to learn about the Gift that the women in our family often possessed, unless it would be truer to say that it possessed us. It was a Gift that showed itself in many different ways. Some of the women of the family could look into the nature of plants and birds and

animals, and discern what they truly were. Then they could take from trees or plants or herbs, say, their distinctive essences and combine them in subtle ways so as to make medicines or salves, to heal sickness, or to bring fortune, or (which was always most popular) to secure the love of a desired man or woman.

Others, and I was one of these, could see and hear the spirits that dwell in a realm alongside the visible world in which we live, which touches our world at every place, yet we can never grasp it or enter it. Some call these spirits fairies or ghosts or demons, yet they are all of these things and none. Those who know how to talk to them, are sometimes able to communicate also with the spirits of the dead who have gone down into Sheol, the realm of the dead. This was what Zebudah sensed, by some means I did not know, that I would be able to do, and little by little over the next few years, as I grew to be a woman, she taught me how. Thanks to her teaching, I became one of the most skilled of our family at using this particular aspect of our Gift. Yet I did not like to do so, unless there were some special reason. The first time I tried to speak with the dead, was after my father died suddenly of the black ague, when I was only nine. I loved him and longed to get him back from that grim, shadowy world that had stolen him from me. But when I had gone through the rituals of movements and chanting that Zebudah had begun to teach me, and something appeared that seemed to be the ghostly image of my father, I recoiled in terror. He looked to be in such pain, and yet also furious with me for disturbing his rest that was no rest, that I could not bring myself to speak to him. I could only look at him with pleading eyes that longed to tell him I loved him and wanted him; and then suddenly he was gone again with a shriek of anguish, and I collapsed on the ground, writhing on the floor as if half dead. After that I preferred not to speak with the dead, but only with the others, the ones I had first met, whom I called the Bright People, and who often told me things, gave me information or knowledge, which I was able to use to help the women of our village or neighbouring ones with their problems or inquiries. It brought me some small wealth, in addition to what we earned by selling our farm produce in the market at Jezreel.

And most often, even when you are asked to consult the spirits in Sheol, the hollow remnant of those who have passed through the gates of death, it is not necessary. You can go through the motions, and make a show of it, but there is no need to actually face the terrifying reality. People who want you to consult the dead on their behalf are usually transparent enough. You can tell in a few minutes' conversation what they want to hear: that they are still loved, that their beloved dead are not suffering, that all will be well, that it will be all right for them to marry again, and so on. And when you tell them what they want to hear - well, they are all the more grateful, and likely to reward you for telling them it.

Not that I very often played these tricks, for I was no charlatan, and nor were any of my family. We sensed that it would be a kind of sacrilege to pretend to use the Gift when you were not; the kind of sacrilege that could easily end in your losing everything. No, what I mean is, that the real secret of the Gift is knowing when to use it, and when not to. If you can give someone the answer they seek by using only your native intelligence, why put yourself at risk, and spend the strength of soul and mind,

to open yourself to powers beyond those of this world?

Apart from the spiritual risks of our Gift, there were also the merely human ones. The religious leaders, the priests and seers and prophets, were suspicious of women with a Gift like ours, with a suspicion that tended towards outright hostility. They feared that it undermined their authority, that what we did was somehow in competition with their work and calling. Perhaps the more sincere among them truly believed what they taught: that there was something evil, or unclean, about the spirits with which we communed, and that they would lead anyone who came to us, into sin. All I know is, that they could never have met the Bright People, or they could not possibly have believed that of them. And then I wondered further: if they do not know the Bright Ones, how could they really have known their Yahweh, who surely cannot be anything, if not the Brightest One of all? But perhaps those are mysteries for people more skilled than me to discern.

At any rate, the threat of what the priests and religious might do to us, was another very good reason to keep the Gift secret, and only to use it sparingly even among those we trusted. Even that degree of caution was barely enough. For a time came when Saul the king sent out a decree that all mediums and wizards and witches should be expelled from the whole territory of the tribes of Israel. Apparently it said somewhere in the books of the Law that Moses gave to our ancestors, that any witch, or anyone who consulted the spirits of the dead, was unclean and should be put to death. If they were spared, they would bring judgement down upon the whole house of Israel.

This was about the time when we began to hear stories of the king's illness, and the black fits that he would fall into, that could only be eased by listening to soft, sweet music. Sometimes they would lead to sudden, inexplicable acts of violence towards those around him, even towards the young hero David who had become so popular everywhere he went, and was acclaimed as the king's champion, the giant-killer. Saul, Messiah though he was, believed that Yahweh had abandoned him, and perhaps it was to try to win back the favour of a God whom he believed he must have offended, that he began to search the teachings of the priests and their scribes, to see what he might have done, and how to make amends.

By this time my mother and aunt were dead, and I was the oldest of our family with the Gift. Only one of my daughters showed any sign of having it, but I was determined no one should suffer because of something over which we had no control. We did not ask to be what we are. So, rather than wait to be denounced by any of our neighbours, or discovered by the religious authorities, I took my family away from where we were known by everyone, and moved some miles north to the little town of Endor.

Endor is the end of the road. The road leads to it, but there it stops; and it seemed to me that a place that no one passes through, which they will only visit if they have business there, was one of the best places to hide oneself and one's unfashionable abilities. And there we lived peacefully and quietly for a number of years. I never used my Gift for pay, and never spoke to anyone about it; though of course the Bright Ones were still my constant companions. It could not be, nor would I have wished it

to be, otherwise.

Israel at that time was heaving with turmoil and anxiety because of the king's illness, and his long-standing feud with David. It was as if there was constant undeclared civil war, or as if the king were all the while dealing with a rebellion that had not in fact happened. But the Land was weakened by all of this, it had lost its two chief defenders, the king and his champion, in futile contention with each other. It lay exposed to the threat of invasion by any of our avaricious ancient enemies, who were only too eager to attack us when we were at our weakest. And when they became aware of the full extent of our weakness and their opportunity, it was the Philistines who invaded us first.

King Achish of Gath sent out word to the lords of the Philistines, and they raised a mighty army of iron chariots and warriors. Thousands upon thousands, they marched north from their homelands along the coastal plain, with the Great Sea to their left and the mountains of Israel to their right. Then they turned east at Megiddo, in order to come into the Land by way of the Valley of Jezreel, barely five miles from where I was living at Endor. The Philistines camped at Shunem, and began to ravage and plunder the surrounding towns and villages. Saul, meanwhile, had summoned all the fighting men of Israel, that is to say, those who had remained loyal to him, and were not skulking with David, pretending to have taken service with the enemy. He marched them north as fast as they could travel, and was encamped on the slopes of Mount Gilboa to the south of the Vale of Jezreel. The two armies stood and faced each other across a few miles of valley.

Saul was desperate for instruction or advice, desperate to know how this would turn out. He sought the face of his God Yahweh; but Yahweh had turned his back on Saul. He did not answer the Messiah, either by dreams, or by Urim and Thummim, or by prophets.

And so Saul came to me.

He came by night, in disguise, as men always do when they want to consult the forbidden powers which they pretend do not exist, and yet have tried to stamp out. I knew him at once. How could I not? I had seen him when I was a young woman and loved him at once. Besides, there was no other man in Israel like him for height and beauty, though now his hair and beard were grizzled, and his face worn with the sorrows of ruling a kingdom, without the support of the God who had placed him on that high eminence.

I invited them into the one room of my home, where the only light was a dimly burning oil lamp, and asked them how I could serve them?

"I have been told you are one who can consult the spirits," answered Saul. "I want you to consult one for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you."

I had not yet understood how much Saul was teetering on the edge of despair, because of the silence of God. So I was still fearful that his coming might be a trap, that he had only come out - even at this time of night - to trap me and bring about my death. "Surely you know," I said, "that Saul the king has forbidden anyone with these gifts, any medium or wizard, to remain in the land. Why are you trying to lay a snare

for me, to brings about my death?"

The Messiah looked at me like a hungry child begging for bread, the need shone from his eyes. "I swear to you, by Yahweh himself, that no harm or danger will befall you because of this. I myself will protect you."

"Then, whom do you want me to summon for you?" I asked.

"I must speak with Samuel. If you are able, bring up Samuel for me!"

If I was able! My heart sank at his request, and the darkness of doubt clouded my mind. It was one thing to summon up the village smith who had died, or to try to communicate with a still-born child. But to summon up a prophet and seer, a holy man of God! I truly did not know if my Gift was equal to the task, or whether God would strike me down if I tried to do it. Yet to refuse Saul now, when by agreeing to his request, I had admitted I was a medium, could well prove even more dangerous.

"Very well," I said, "I will try. But not here: my daughter is sleeping."

So I led them out of the house, and a little way up the hill to the small thicket where I had most often talked with the Bright Ones. It was a place I loved, one of those in-between places that the Bright Ones also liked to frequent, and my hope and prayer was that they would protect me if the spirit of Samuel should be angry with me. Saul and the two men with him followed me, one of them carrying a torch to light the way.

When we came to the place, I asked the men to gather some wood and light a fire, partly because I did not know how long it would take me to summon Samuel, partly because the night was cold, and I was already shivering with fear. I sat down on the ground, pulled my scarf over my head, and composed myself to enter the great Emptiness. It is like the thinnest veneer between two worlds, like the Silence between two words, like the blackness between the stars, like the stillness between two heartbeats. If you blink, you might miss it and end up devoured by madness and terror. And yet it is immeasurably vast, the fabric of all that holds the universe together.

I walked there in that place, seeking like a child who has lost her mother, and calling for Samuel. All around me, I was aware of my friends the Bright People, moving in and out of the shadows, as if playing among trees. Some of them smiling, some warning me with anxious glances, some helping me with signs and gestures. I do not know how long I wandered there; whether minutes or lifetimes, was all one. For suddenly I found him. He came rushing at me from the darkness, seized me with his thin old arms that were nevertheless as strong as those of the strongest man, as strong as death! mouthing at me words of fury and hate, and glowering with eyes like burning coals. And, clutching me tighter and harder to his breast, he came up with me, rising up out of the spaces between, and into that little wood where I sat with Saul and his companions.

As I saw them with the eyes of the flesh, and the real world around me into which I was bringing this dreadful spirit, I cried out with fear, the first words that came into my head. "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"

I think perhaps he had been dozing while he had sat there waiting by the fireside.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I promised you would come to no harm, and I will keep my promise. Tell me what it is that you see."

"I see a glorious being, like a son of the gods, rising up out the earth."

"What does he look like?"

"An old man. An old man is coming up, wrapped in a grey robe, and leaning on his staff."

Saul bowed with his face to the ground, while the men with him covered their faces and turned away. If they could see what I saw, they must have been brave men indeed; for if I had not been held there in the grip of the spirit, frozen by the link which ran through me between the worlds of the living and the dead, I would have fled in terror.

Then Samuel spoke. I heard his voice speaking around me, and in me, and through my throat and lips, in the deep voice of an old man, the voice of one who has lain for many months in the earth.

"Why have you disturbed my rest and brought me up from that place?"

"My lord, my old master, Samuel," cried Saul. "Forgive me! Can you not see my great need and distress? The Philistines have made war against me and are threatening the Land with destruction, and Yahweh God has abandoned me. He has turned his back on me and closed his ears against me, so that he no longer answers by the Voice with which he used to speak to me, nor by dreams, nor by Urim and Thummim, nor by prophets. My lord, what could I do? I have summoned you, to ask you, to beg you to tell me what I must do."

The spirit was relentless and raged through me and around me in its anger. "If Yahweh has turned against you and become your enemy, why do you ask me? Yahweh has done just as he told you, through me, that he would do. He has torn the kingdom away from you, as you tore my robe that day at Gilgal, and he has given it to your neighbour David, a man after his own heart."

"Why? Why?"

"Because you did not obey the voice of Yahweh, that's why! Because you did not carry out his fierce wrath against Agag and the Amalekites, but spared him and the women and children. That is why Yahweh has done this thing to you, this day."

Saul was writhing on the ground like a tortured hare, being torn by hounds. "But my Yahweh is not like that! He is not some bloodthirsty devil, drinking the blood of the innocent. I know he would not command what you tell me he desires -"

"Silence!" roared Samuel. "You are a worm, not a man - and do you dare question The One? Listen to this. Yahweh has given all Israel, the whole army, along with you, into the hands of the Philistines. And tomorrow - tomorrow you and your sons will be with me."

Saul shrieked and became still, lying in a swoon, full length on the ground, and at the same moment I was released from the clutch of the spirit that held me, and Samuel

was gone.

We hurried to see to the king, rousing him from his faint and giving him water to drink. He had not eaten all that day and all that night, and now his men and I urged him to take some food to restore his strength. With difficulty we prevailed on him, and we all returned to my house where I slaughtered the fatted calf and prepared a meal. It was a meal of all the best that I had in store, for you don't often have the Messiah as your guest. Meat, unleavened bread, and wine, I set them all before Saul and his men, and he ate hungrily. I ate with them, though it was not my place, for the normal proprieties had been done away with by what we had lived through together, and I think I was as hungry as Saul, exhausted by the work I had done that night.

When they had eaten, Saul gave me a bag of gold, and muttered a few gruff words of thanks. I thought for a moment that I would refuse, for now more than ever it seemed a kind of sacrilege to accept money for my Gift, and in any case, I did not feel I had really used it - even more than ever before, it had taken and used me. But then I thought of my daughter and her future. Whatever happened to me, I wanted her to be provided for, and to find a good husband who would protect her in the uncertain times that were coming. So I thanked him and took the money.

The men set off down the single track that led away from Endor. The first light of day was just beginning to streak the eastern horizon, but I crawled back to my bed, and slept like a stone for twenty-four hours. When I awoke, the battle was just beginning on Mount Gilboa, which would fulfil the doom-laden prophecy that the dead Samuel had spoken to the Messiah.

12. The Battle of Mount Gilboa

My name is Reu, and from the time I was a boy growing up in Benjamin, I was trained to serve the Messiah Saul, as a member of his household. Those were years of frequent war as we fought against the enemy nations our neighbours, and time and again had the victory over them because of my lord's bravery and courage, and his spirit as a leader of men. All of us young men, even those who spent most of their time as house servants or as stewards of the money and provisions that were needed to supply the king's household as it grew from its early beginnings, were trained for war also. Like every other boy of my age, I longed to be a mighty warrior, like Saul and Abner, perhaps even like the hero David, whom everyone loved. But I did not have the strength, the skill in my right arm, or the uncanny gift of being able to guess an enemy's move and counter it almost before it was made. I feared I would never be able to stand beside my king and his fighting men, in the battle line, but would be fated to wait at home with the weak and the old, the women and children.

I was proud beyond all measure, then, when my king chose me, rather than any of the others, to be his armour-bearer. I served him in this position during the final years that he was king over the tribes of Israel, and I served him to the end, when he fell at the battle of Mount Gilboa, to avoid falling into the hands of the victorious Philistines.

David's storytellers tell that I too died with Saul and his sons on that day; but the truth is, I did not die. I lived, and fled; and though I feared at the time it was because I was too great a coward to follow my lord's example and fall upon my own sword, I know now that I lived so as to tell the true story of Saul's end, not the slanted one that David's people tell.

In those last days of Saul, it was as if the heart and spirit of our people failed. Those of us who were close to the king knew that, if the nation were sick, it was because the head was stricken by some mysterious sickness we did not understand. When it all began, I cannot truly say; some of Saul's older servants said it was at the time of the war against Amalek, when Samuel the man of God still walked with the Messiah and gave him counsel, and Agag their king was captured and slain. Even when I first came to the king's household, there were days when all his servants seemed to go about their business under a cloud, silent, grief-stricken, whispering in corners and avoiding the king's presence. We came to know that there were times when a dark spirit, as black as pitch and as terrifying as the darkest dreams of a night of fever, afflicted the king. Yahweh had taken away his spirit from Saul, who in earlier days had danced and prophesied in ecstasy, along with the bands of Yahweh's prophets. Instead, he had sent an evil spirit, which tormented Saul with doubts and fears, making him believe that everyone was his enemy, especially those closest to him, and

even the people of his own family. Worst of all, the evil spirit was a proof to him that Yahweh had rejected him. Even when the spirit left him, he still could not find the peace, and the blessedness that he had known before, in walking with his God.

And then, the champion David abandoned him also, or else, he forced David to leave him. It was another of those mysteries about which tales were told, and the whole nation spoke of it, but we at the time did not know the whole truth. And so it was like a heartache, an agony that gnawed at us day after day, to see the two best men of Israel at loggerheads. Saul the Messiah-king, whom we loved; and David the hero-champion, whom we loved. They should have been united in standing together in Yahweh's favour, to defend us against our enemies. But some malign fate, it seemed, drove a rift between them. And as long as that division lasted, our people could never be strong or win the final victory against our enemies.

The beginning of the end came, when David fled to Achish king of Gath, and pledged service to him. That was the time when many of us in Saul's household finally fell out of love with David, though he was still the darling of many throughout the Land of the twelve tribes.

David's defection was the final proof to the Philistines, that his sojourning with his men in the wilderness of Judah was not a manoeuvre planned by him and Saul to patrol the Land and keep its foes at bay, but signalled a complete rift between them. They came to see the weakness of the Land, with its chief champion and defender gone, and they began to cast greedy, covetous eyes at our cities and villages and fertile fields. Not since the days of Eli, when the Ark was captured, had they glimpsed such hopes of victory and plunder.

Achish and the other lords of the Philistines raised a great army, and planned to invade us by one of the most common roads by which our enemies had struck at us all through history. Leaving their cities, they marched north through the plains that skirt the Great Sea, and turned east to climb the valley of Shihor-libnath. With so many chariots and horsemen, this was an easier ascent than to try to enter the hill country further to the south. The city of Megiddo was the first to fall to them, and they delayed their advance by several days as they enjoyed the spoils. Then they marched on into the great plain of Esdraelon. There was little resistance. Against such a horde, the small armed bands of the local tribes could do nothing, and for the most part the people of those towns and villages simply fled into the hills, with whatever they could carry.

Word of the invasion had reached Saul, while the enemy were still marching north along the coast. But the king and his army were far in the south, where we had had to deal with another invasion by the Amalekites, who had also seen our weakness and determined to avenge themselves for the defeat inflicted on them, and the death of their king, all those years before. So Saul turned back from pursuing Amalek, judging them the lesser threat, and we set off on the march north.

I have never known such hardship as we faced during those days. Saul urged us and drove us on, mile after weary mile through the heat of the day and over the dry stony hills of the mountains of Judah and then of Ephraim. At the end of each day we lay down where we stood, and slept on the hard ground. One hundred and fifty miles we

marched, in five days, with all our armour and equipment. Though we lost many men along the way, who simply collapsed with illness or exhaustion, we were also adding reinforcements, as men from all the tribes gathered to the king, to face the invaders. And so we came, at the end of that brutal march, to Mount Gilboa, and made camp above the valley of Jezreel, looking across to the Philistine camp at Shunem on the north side.

If the enemy had known how weak we were, they would surely have attacked at once and probably wiped us out, for we were almost too exhausted to fight. But fortunately, they were still enjoying the spoils they had captured, and had no stomach, at first, for a full-scale battle. So we were left some days to regain our strength, and to prepare ourselves. On the second day, Saul took two of his men and left camp in mid-afternoon, heading north. None of us knew where he was going. He was gone all night, and returned to the camp halfway through the following morning, looking more dead than alive, being practically carried by the other two. None of them spoke, but when Saul emerged from his tent towards evening, he was transformed. His hair and beard had turned almost white, where the previous day they had been only streaked with grey, and in his eyes there was a look that was part determination and courage, part resignation.

He ordered me to have his armour ready for the morning, with the metal polished as bright as I could make it shine, and his sword and spear sharpened. I worked far into the night, dozed for a couple of hours, and woke with a start, and the fear that there would not be enough time for what still remained to be done.

I was astonished to see that Saul was awake already, and had left his tent and was standing at the edge of the camp, leaning on a spear and gazing out over the valley. I went over to him quietly, to see if he needed anything. It was not yet dawn, and a faint rim of light was only just beginning to appear above the hills of Gilead far to the east. Down in the valley a light mist hung over everything, like the still water of a pool, and as the light grew, it seemed almost that you could walk over the surface of the mist and reach the Philistine camp on the opposite slope.

Saul knew that I was at his side, it seemed without even looking.

"Reu, my son," he said.

"My lord?"

He was silent for a long time, until I had become sure that he wanted nothing, and I did not know whether I should remain with him, or go back to my work. But as I made to turn he spoke again, "Stay."

Then he began to speak, as if he was thinking aloud, or maybe talking to listeners unseen by anyone but himself.

"It is a thing I never dreamed of, to be the Messiah. It would have been enough for me to live on the land my fathers received from Joshua, when he brought the children of Israel into the Land, and parcelled it out among the heads of the families. I would have farmed it, loved and tended the good soil, watched it bring forth the fruit that Yahweh gives, rejoiced in his good gifts. I would have married Ahinoam, as

our fathers planned for us, and brought up our children, and we should never have spent a night apart; instead of all the days and nights I have left her alone in our home, while I was bearing a sword for Yahweh. I would have watched my sons grow, and taught them to till the soil as I did; I would have seen my daughters grow to women, and chosen good men as husbands for them, and watched them become mothers, and bounce my children's children on my knee.

"But Yahweh had other plans for me. Oh, I always loved Him and was glad to be present at His feasts and sacrifices, I never found it wearisome, or an imposition as some of the others did. But it was not for any of that, that he made me Messiah, for there were holier, godlier men than me. Who can know the mind of Yahweh? or who has ever directed his spirit, or been his counsellor to instruct him? He belongs to no one, but is always, only, ever His own. And out of all the tribes of Israel, he chose the smallest and least important, the tribe of Benjamin. Out of all the clans and families of Benjamin, he chose my father's house, and out of my father's house he chose me. When Samuel poured the sacred oil on my head, and told me that Yahweh had chosen me, I was like a maiden who is told that the youth she loves best in all the world, is to be her husband and lord. No, not even that - I thought nothing at that moment - but it was as if my whole soul and body were flooded with new life. It was like the first rain after the drought of summer, like the water flowing back into the dry wadi, like the breath returning to someone who has been plunged under water and drowning.

"From that time on, I knew Yahweh in a way I had never known him before. It was like living and breathing God, as if his life was the blood that pulsed in my veins, his thoughts were my thoughts, and his words my words. Do you think that would make me proud and overweening? I have heard of kings of other nations, who believe they are sons of their vile gods, and behave as if they owned the world. They order the death of men on a mere whim, or take whatever women they see and lust after, and toss them away as quickly. But to be the Messiah of Yahweh is nothing like that: both greater than being the son of a god who is no god, and humbling, because our God is the truth, the Only One.

"Do you know, Reu? I never failed Yahweh, or sinned against him. I have searched my heart and my mind day after day after day, since he cast me off. I have asked myself again and again, and I have cried out to him: How have I offended you or broken your commandments? What have I done? And my hearts answers me, Nothing; while he answers not at all. When Samuel came to me and told me that Yahweh commanded the slaughter of the Amalekites, every one of them, men, women and children, I did not believe him. And I still do not believe him. Did not Yahweh create all nations, and not just the children of Israel? And how could he hate such wondrous beauty, such manifold difference, so as to have created it only for destruction? I know Him, Reu! He is not that kind. I made up my mind that the old man was mistaken. He had grown deaf, you know; I had to shout to make him hear me. Could he not have become deaf to the Voice of Yahweh too, so that he misheard, or misunderstood, what the Voice was saying to him? And so I spared the women and children of Amalek, and even many of the men who bore arms; I let them get away and flee into the hills to save their lives. I know I was doing what was in my

own heart to do, so it must have been in the heart of Yahweh, too.

"Yet when we came to the holy place of Gilgal, it was not my voice that Yahweh hearkened to, but the voice of Samuel, speaking hatred and wrath and judgement against Amalek and against me. Why would Yahweh listen to him? I believe Samuel had never seen the true horror of war: what it is like when a man dies of a sword-thrust to his belly, and his blood is poisoned so that even if he does not bleed to death, he dies in agony days afterwards. He had not seen the suffering of women raped or ripped open, of children pierced through to the ground with a spear and left to die and be torn by vultures. That is not the will of Yahweh.

"Yet at the judgement of Samuel, my God took his spirit from me, and rejected me from being Messiah, and prince over his people Israel. He sent an evil spirit to torture me, and the worst torture of all is the memory, every day and every minute of every day, of what I have lost. The radiant beauty of holiness that I knew, the splendour of the love of Him who fills all in all - it was taken from me, and in its place I had Nothing, and I could never forget it.

"And now I have sought out the spirit of Samuel, since my Yahweh is silent, and he tells me that today I will die and be with him, I and my sons. None of them will rule after me; it is David who will be king, he is Messiah now. Do you know, I loved David, too, from the first moment I saw him? Yet to know that he was Yahweh's favoured and blessed one, to see, as it seemed, the holy oil of the anointing still on his curly hair and ruddy face - it seared my soul like a cauterising iron. It was like the hand of another that hurled the spear at him, the voice of another that commanded my warriors to pursue him and seek his death. But I could do nothing to prevent it."

There was a long silence, again. In a few minutes the disk of the sun would begin to appear above the horizon, and the camps would soon begin to stir. Saul shook his head heavily, as if he had slumbered and woken again.

"God, I have tried to pray," he groaned, "but the heavens are shut up against me like gates of steel. I have tried to pray, 'Father, if it is possible, let this cup of suffering pass from me,' and somehow to know whether this is His will, and why? What does it serve? Who is saved? And there is no answer. He is silent. Is it for this, that I have come to this hour?"

Then he threw back his head, so that his great mane of hair tossed behind him, and cried in a loud voice, "Yahweh! Do you hear me? It is not my will that I seek, but yours! May your will be done!"

And still there was silence. I was screaming in my heart, praying to that his God would answer. But there was no answer from the heavens, and there was no answer in Saul's own heart.

"Well, then. Let us arise. It is time to go."

We went back to the king's tent together, and I began to arm him for the battle. I wiped his body with a cloth dipped in clean water, thinking as I did so that it was just like the time I had help my father wash his father's body and prepare it for burial. I rubbed his skin with oil, and fine powder, so that his armour and its leather straps

would not chafe. I buckled on the armour, and placed his helmet upon his head. Around his waist I fastened the belt, and the sword which only his arm had wielded, since the day it was forged. In his hand I placed his spear. Then, while he took counsel with some of his chief officers, I hastily completed dressing myself, so that I would be ready to stand beside him in the battle.

The mist that had filled the valley of Jezreel had dispersed, and the sun was well up in the sky, by the time the two armies had drawn themselves up facing each other. The Philistines had come down from Shunem, crossed the river to the east of Jezreel, and taken position south of the Well of Harod. Saul's army had moved down to the lower slopes of Gilboa, but still held the higher ground, so the enemy horses and chariots would have to climb the slope to attack. It should have been a commanding position which would give us the advantage, and in normal circumstances would certainly have done so. But this day was not normal. It was the day of Israel's destiny, the day of Samuel's sentence, the day that Yahweh turned his back not only on Saul, but on the men of Israel who fought for him also.

A herald came out from the enemy ranks, bearing the traditional humiliating offer of truce. It demanded Saul's abject surrender on terms which no man could accept, with the further demand of such tribute, in perpetuity, that no king could ever consent to.

Saul smiled grimly at the message, and declined it; not with the scorn it deserved, but with melancholy humour. He knew we were weak and outnumbered, just as he knew our position on Gilboa should have been the stronger. And he knew that Samuel had forecast his death that day. But if he was to die, he would die like a man and a king of Israel. Only, his heart misgave him at the thought of all the good men who would go down with him into Sheol.

Then the trumpets and shawms began to sound, giving the signal for the advance, and the Philistines began to move forward. Saul had ordered his troops to hold their ground, maintaining their stronger defensive line while the enemy exhausted their strength in breaking upon them. If we had been facing only men on foot, that tactic would surely have succeeded. But it was the chariots and horsemen, coming fast from the right and the left across the open ground between us, who led the charge. The gradient slowed them down, so that their first onslaught was not immediately overwhelming, but still their weight smashed the first lines of our spearmen, driving them back on the ranks behind and crushing bones and flesh like a merciless fall of rock.

A great noise went up from the ranks, the roaring shout of men drunk with the elation of danger and the shedding of blood, the clash of weapons on shields, and the screams of horses and men as they fell wounded or dying.

I stood beside Saul higher up the slope, where he could direct the progress of the battle. He sent Abner into the front line to rally the men there, and make them stand firm as the enemy chariots began to fall back, and in their place the hard ranks of heavily armed infantry, all with their swords of iron and studded leather shields, began to engage us. He ordered Jonathan to bring the reserves forward, so as to fall quickly into place wherever our troops began to fail, and the line to grow thin. And at the moment of greatest danger, when we seemed to be hardest pressed, he pushed

forward himself and joined the melee. Taking a spear from my hands he hurled it into the enemy, with a great shout of "To Saul! Rally to Yahweh and his Messiah!" From hundreds of throats of our men, thirsty and tired from their work, a cheer arose and they felt new strength flow into their veins. They surged forward again, and it looked as if they might push ahead and force the Philistines to retreat.

But in the end, the enemy was stronger and fresher, had not marched so far and so fast as we had, and had rested and fed better while they were camped at Shunem. They brought forward more reserves, replacing the tired men in their front ranks, long after we had no reserves left. And then, when Saul had withdrawn a few yards from the fray so that he could once again judge the course of the battle and seek to give commands to his hard-pressed men, the Philistine archers found him.

Their watchers had been scanning our lines, trying to recognise the chief officers, and especially the king, whenever they came within range, and just then they spotted my king and loosed a volley of arrows in his direction. Most fell far short of where we stood, but one hit him in the thigh, causing him to stagger, and as he stooped forward, a second hit him in the neck between the strap of his helmet and his breastplate, and bearing downwards, pierced his lung.

I dropped the spear and shield I was carrying, and rushed to his side. His thigh wound was bleeding freely in front and behind, for the arrowhead had passed right through his leg. The wound to his neck and chest was bleeding less, but looked more serious. I did not dare try to pull out either arrow, but helped my king to stand, put his arm around my shoulders, and dragged him limping away from the fighting, and further up the hill. There I laid him down under a scrubby tree. He was gasping with pain and breathing heavily, and already a bloody light foam was beginning to bubble from his lips.

"Jonathan," he whispered, "get me Jonathan or Abner."

I looked around, calling for some of the men to look for his captains and tell them our leader had fallen. After some time Abner appeared, his face and arms smeared with sweat and blood, though not from any wounds he had sustained.

"My lord king," he reported. "Our men are hard pressed all along the line. Many have been killed, others have been put to flight. And your sons Jonathan and Ishui - my lord, forgive me - they gave a good account of themselves, in the thickest of the fighting, but they were overcome."

Saul hung his head, whether in shock or grief or pain I could not tell, then looking up he said simply, "It is the will of Yahweh. And soon I will be with them, as Samuel said."

He ordered Abner back to the fighting, to try once more to rally the remnant of the army, and if that failed, to do what he could to keep the fleeing warriors together and muster them at the city of Gilboa, rather than have them scattered all over the country.

When Abner had hurried away, Saul stretched out his arms to me, and with a great effort we got him to his feet.

"Reu," he said, "you have served me faithfully and well, and now I ask you for one last mercy. I fear that if these uncircumcised Philistines find me alive, they will torment me or make sport of me. If you love me, draw your sword now, and thrust me through so that I may die by the hand of a friend, rather than suffer shame at the hands of our enemies."

But I recoiled in horror and fear. "My lord king," I cried, "I beg you, forgive me, but do not ask that of me. You know I love you, you are my Messiah, my chief. How can I lift up my hand to kill Yahweh's Messiah? Even David, who has become your enemy, would not harm you because you are the Messiah! How much less then can I, who have served you and been like a son to you?"

He nodded grimly, as if he understood, and could not blame me even though I failed him in his last request. "Then give me your sword."

I handed it to him. He took it by the hilt, and signalled for me to unbuckle the armour that covered his torso. I did as he commanded, even now trying to remove it gently so that it did not snag the arrow sticking from his neck, and make his agony worse. With his chest and torso uncovered, he wedged the sword in a cleft of the tree, rested the point of the blade against his belly, and with a sigh leaned forward hard, pushing on it with all his weight, forcing the keen blade into his flesh. Then with a groan, he stepped back, and I helped to catch him as he fell backwards, and sat leaning against a rock.

The blade was still sticking out of his belly, with a stream of blood flowing out on all sides of it. Saul again took hold of the hilt of the sword, with both hands, and before I could stop him gave it a sharp twist and pulled it out. Blood began to gush out, and I knew he would be dead within moments. I cradled him in my arms, trying at least to make him comfortable, or to know that in his last moments a friend was with him.

His lips moved, as if he was trying to frame a question or a prayer, or a dying wish. I leaned forward in case I would not be able to hear, but his words were loud enough, and they were not addressed to me.

The Messiah cried out, in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

And then his head dropped back, falling slightly at an angle to one side, as the mist began to fall over his eyes. But even as his life faded, I saw a change pass over his face. Instead of the haunted pain and doubt I had so often seen there in the last days, instead of the searching, and the emptiness, that he had spoken of that morning as he looked out over the valley of Jezreel, there was a look of recognition, of something understood.

I let go of him and laid him down gently on the ground. Then I took the crown that was on his head, and the armlet from his arm, in the hope that the Philistines would not recognise his body and abuse it for their impious amusement. It was a vain hope, for at the moment a surge in the fighting brought the enemy nearer, and I only just had time to get away behind some rocks higher up the slope. There I hid and watched as the victorious enemy exulted over their spoils, and over the bodies of Saul and his sons, whom they quickly identified. They took them away, boasting that they would

dismember them, and hang the bodies on the wall of Beth-shan as a warning to all. I got well away from the battlefield as soon as darkness fell, and carried the bad news to Saul's friends in Jabesh-Gilead.

It is not given to many men to watch a Messiah die. And why did he die? Why should Yahweh choose him, and have him anointed, and make him Messiah, only to have him die like a felled ox, a sacrificial victim? When the priest offers a beast in sacrifice, it is for redemption; so that the people and the nation may be saved. Was Saul's death for our redemption? After Mount Gilboa, the Philistines ravaged the territories of the northern tribes, and there was no salvation, no peace, until the new Messiah David came into his own, and became king first in Hebron, and then over all Israel, in place of Saul. And now that David is established on the throne, our nation goes on much as ever it did, and in many ways sin, and wrongdoing, and contempt for Yahweh and his word, increase ever more. The court of the Messiah David is scarcely different from those of the heathen kings round about, and his son Solomon, the presumed heir to the throne, seems set to behave even worse.

Is anything ever saved, in the end? Perhaps those of us who love Yahweh, and hope in him, will simply have to go on waiting for some other Messiah.