

## Chapter 14

*Jerusalem, 1014 BC*

The table Simon was lying on felt rough. It smelled of hay. The men's voices were now beneath him, but he hadn't heard them move. Were there other rooms below? Something covered his shoulders.

Simon opened his eyes. It was half dark. The ceiling had become a thatched roof close to his head. He seemed to be in a small loft. He lay on straw under a coarse blanket, and below him, a lively discussion—in ancient Hebrew.

He must be back in history. At least he'd escaped Shabak, but where on earth was he? While his heart slowed, he lay still, listening.

The first voice was sonorous and slow. "I am ashamed that I bowed before Solomon. But what else could I have done? He would have had me killed."

"Adonijah, you are right." An older voice, rough. "But all is not lost. We will see you on the throne yet. But you can do nothing without the people, even less without the army."

The loft covered only half the room. The floor ended just beyond Simon's head. A ladder leaned against it. He inched forward and peered over the edge. Five or six men sat around a table, lit with oil lamps. The shutters were closed.

The rough voice continued. "Did not that traitor Absalom sleep with the king's concubines? Then we shall use the same strategy." The man had a grizzled head on massive shoulders.

"But, Joab, how can this be?" a thin man said. "They are old now, and . . . unclean."

"What are you proposing?" Adonijah, the first voice, was tall and lean. With thick black hair and beard, he looked like an Indian film star.

"Whatever you propose, we must get rid of that filthy adulteress, Bathsheba." This came from a squat man with a long white beard. Unlike the others he wore a long, blue robe with sleeves. He spat on the floor.

"Abiathar," said Joab, "guard your tongue. She was the wife of my lord, King David. May he rest in peace."

"Did you not kill her husband so your precious King David could marry her?"

Joab raised his voice. "And did you not also follow the king, as closely as the smell follows a bear?"

“Until he betrayed us with his adultery.” Abiathar glared at Joab. “That was a black day in the history of Israel. What have we fought for all these years? To fall into sin like the nations around us?”

“Peace, brothers, shall we tell the entire world?” A new voice came from under the loft, out of Simon’s view. “Let us hold our tongues. Joab, what is your proposal?”

Joab took a deep breath. “Let King Adonijah,” he looked at the tall man, who preened, “let him approach Solomon’s mother, Bathsheba, asking a favor of her. She will not refuse you. Then ask her to plead the usurper Solomon to give you Abishag as your wife.”

Some gasped, some murmured assent. The thin man frowned. “How will that help?”

Joab sounded impatient. “Abishag was chosen because of her beauty, to warm King David in his old age. The people love her. Everyone knows that to own the concubines is to own the kingdom. For Adonijah to marry her is tantamount to gaining the throne.” He turned to Adonijah. “You will win the favor of all Israel, and I shall see that the army is with you. Then we need only concern ourselves with Benaiah and his royal bodyguard. They are the last danger now and

few in number.”

The conversation filled Simon with increasing alarm. Not only was he witnessing a plot against Solomon. He'd also read this same story at the *beginning* of Solomon's reign—at least fifteen years *before* his previous trip.

Perhaps Shabak had drugged him? Is that how time had moved backwards? *Well, if it's all in my head, there need be no logic to it, anyway.*

Simon felt vulnerable lying naked in a straw loft. A rough tunic hung from a peg on the wall, but he daren't move. Neither could he stay here. Somehow, he had to warn Solomon of the conspiracy.

A sliver of straw pricked his nose and Simon sneezed.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the ladder. A head appeared. “Who are you? What are you doing?”

The man clambered into the loft and pulled off Simon's covering. He saw his white, naked body, and turned away. He grabbed the tunic and he threw it at Simon. “Put that on. Then come down.”

A new voice came from below. “Shephatiah. Is he a spy?” High-pitched, strident.

“Yes, Ithream. A spy, and not well dressed.”

Shephatiah was fat, but surprisingly nimble up the ladder.

"Kill him." squealed Ithream.

Simon descended into a roomful of angry men. They pressed around, all talking at once. Simon's heart raced. He might have escaped Shabak, but this was worse.

"Quiet, brothers. Will you not be quiet?" Shephatiah's throat wobbled.

The grizzled Joab loomed over Simon. "Who sent you?"

"No one. I . . . I was here before you came."

The room fell silent at his accent.

"That is not true," said the thin man. "I checked the room carefully. There was no one here."

"He is not one of us," Shephatiah said. "He is as white as a maggot."

"How did you get here?" Ithream was small and dark, like a weasel.

"What does it matter?" Shephatiah shook Simon's shoulders. "Are you not Solomon's spy?"

"No." Simon was stuck for answers. "I . . . just found myself here."

"How much did you hear?" Ithream screeched.

"He must have heard everything," said Abiathar, the old man in the blue robe. "He is spying. He deserves death."

They tied a bandage around Simon's mouth and strapped his hands and feet with rags.

"Jonathan," Joab said to the thin man, "guard him. We cannot kill him now. We need to question him properly away from here. Wait until tonight." The men checked the street and left.

Jonathan and Simon sat on stools in awkward silence. Simon's gag prohibited conversation. He didn't like the sound of being questioned properly. Did they torture people? If he died in history would he die in the present? He wasn't about to take that chance. Somehow, he had to escape.

The room was small. Jonathan had secured the front door with a long rail. A grubby cloth hung in a doorway to the rear of the house. Children's voices filtered through.

*Is there a bathroom?* Jonathan fetched a clay jar.

During the afternoon, Jonathan became restless. After some hours, he disappeared through the cloth. Had he left the house?

"Mmmm." Simon cried through his gag. No one

came. How long would he be alone? He cried again.

A young face appeared around the cloth and vanished. An older child entered.

"Mmmm." Simon sweated with the effort. The boy undid the gag. Simon rubbed his jaw. "Thank you. Please can you untie me?"

The child hesitated. "Why are you tied up?"

"It was a mistake. They tied up the wrong person."

The boy loosed his arms and legs, and Simon stretched his cramped limbs. "Can I go through the back?"

The child nodded. Simon pushed through the curtain to find three frightened faces. Beyond them, a half door led to a muddy alleyway. It was filthy and stank of sewage. A black goat bleated at him. There were people down the street, but they paid him little attention. Most were dressed as he was, in simple tunics. Which way?

He stepped around the gray puddles and turned down another alley. The houses here were smaller, of mud walls and low thatch. He turned again into a wider, cobbled street. The stones hurt his feet. People were driving donkeys heavy with sacks. A woman squatted in front of a small mound of onions. Where

could he hide?

A rounded hill loomed in the distance, with a glimpse of a high wall. It would soon be dark. Anyway, how could he possibly find the king?

Shouts came from the bottom of the street—Jonathan with men carrying swords. Simon started to run, but the cobblestones crippled his feet. He dived left into another black-mud alley, past half a dozen hovels, and pressed himself into a doorway. If they followed he was lost.

Without warning, the door behind him flew open, and he sprawled backwards, legs high. The door slammed. He was trapped.

“Well now. What do we haf here?” An old woman stood over him. “You best hide out the back. Quick, or you a dead one.” He scrambled to his feet and pushed through a ragged curtain. In the gloom, he found himself in a small store. Grabbing a cloth, he squatted behind some large jars. He threw the cloth over his head. It smelled resinous, of balsam. He heard the door from the street burst open, then footsteps.

“What do you want, by Sheol?” the old lady shouted.

“We saw him. He came in here.” Jonathan’s voice.



"Who are you to come barging in like this? I see no one." She sounded harsh, convincing.

Someone entered the dark store. Simon froze under his cloth. Seconds later they left. The door banged followed by thumps of wood on wood. The shouts outside faded, but it was some time before Simon's breathing slowed.

The woman came through the curtain. "They haf gone already." She spoke Hebrew, but with a strong accent. A coarse scarf covered her hair. Gray wisps escaped. "I'll stoke the fire."

A small, clay stove was molded into the corner of the front room. She pushed a few sticks into its side. She had barred the door but Simon's heart still pounded.

Smoke rose from a round hole in the top of the stove, escaping under the blackened eaves. Over the hole she placed a bronze pot of water.

Simon shivered violently from the shock. He held his arms. "I don't know how to thank you. I am Shimon."

"I saw them. Up the road. They're no friends of mine. So that makes you my brother." She grinned a toothless grin. "I am Tatuhepa. They call me Tatu." She

fetches vegetables from the storeroom.

"Why did you rescue me?"

Tatu eyed Simon sideways, then squatted on the floor and began chopping. Onions scented the room. "We're Hittites. Not many of us left now. Our forefathers came down here years before. The womenfolk in my family were all *hasawa*. Priestesses. They followed the rituals. The magic. But I never had the head for it. Too much to remember." She grinned again through the increasing smoke. "I still know the medicines though. That's what I have in there." She nodded to the store and flung the food into the pot.

Simon understood little, but didn't want to interrupt. His shivering eased.

"King David, may the gods guard his soul, he was like a god to us. We used to dance and sing, '*Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.*' I was only a tot then. Yes, he was a soldier, all right. No one could best him. That's why we're still here."

A soft knock came from the door. Simon turned to hide.

"No fuss. That'll be Aksa after her medicine." After she'd gone, Tatu stirred the fire again. "So when the king, David, I mean, says Solomon is the next king,

that's fine with us."

"Are you living here on your own?"

"Sometimes." Her face grew fierce. "That evil Joab killed my brother-in-law. Now he wants the throne for himself." She lowered her voice. "If I could remember the curses, he'd be dead before the Feast."

"Joab!" Simon recalled his mission. "Would you know how to reach King Solomon?"

Tatu cackled. "What do you want with him? In your state."

"I just overheard a plot to kill him. But they caught me. That's why I ran."

She gave him a long stare and shook her head. "Doesn't surprise me at all. You'd better find him, then." Tatu scooped a wooden spoon into the pot and slurped. "That'll do. Plain fare." She fetched a pair of earthenware bowls from a shelf and a few brown disks. "Only a crust of barley bread is all I can do."

She dipped the bread into the stew, and Simon fumbled to copy her. His last meal was dinner at the YMCA. Overcome by the irony, he shook his head and groaned.

The old lady grinned. "Soup's not that bad, is it?"

"Oh, no, it's just that—"

"Well," she said through a mouthful, "they won't let me in the palace. Don't know they will you either. But maybe there is someone can help. Stay tonight, and we'll see in the morning if the gods will favor us."

She fetched him the balsam cloth and a straw-filled bag for a pillow by the fire. "There's a few more sticks if you get cold. You look soft to me. Don't know how you come here, pale as you are. But there, ask no questions, hear no lies." She grunted onto a low pallet and snored.

Why was he shocked at her poverty? It didn't fit with her intelligence. The tragedy of the world seemed to have remained unchanged for three thousand years. Perhaps it was unchangeable, the eternal struggle for improvement a mere mirage. Shouldn't he rather be humbled by her kindness?

A chill filled his heart. How long will I be here this time?

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Breakfast was more barley bread and an earthenware cup. Bittersweet. "This is beer, Tatu. Why are you doing this for me? You treat me like family."

"Perhaps you are. I've seen your kind before, up in Assuwa, from beyond the Northern Sea. They call it

Euxine now. I don' know. Everything changes, doesn't it?"

Simon offered to fetch water, but she refused his help. Afterwards, she passed him the balsam cloth. "Throw this over, case they come looking." With his pale skin he stood out like a slug, but he didn't argue.

She hurried off through the tangled streets, down a shallow valley towards the sunrise. With his bare feet, Simon struggled to keep up. Already they had to weave through crowds. The city reeked of wood-smoke and dung.

Above them rose the walls of rough-cut stone he'd glimpsed the previous night. A wider street turned up the steep hill to the city. They came to a crowded market. Simon marveled at the chaos. They wove through a throng of people carrying baskets of dried figs, citrons, and pomegranates; stalls selling faggots of firewood, clothing, and earthenware.

Someone jostled Simon and he fell against an ox cart laden with sacks of grain. The owner cursed him. Simon picked himself up and stumbled into a pair of camels. His feet were hurting badly. Tatu had vanished.

In panic, Simon elbowed through the remaining

crowd. Without her he was lost. He came to a pair of broad wooden gates. He spotted Tatu and sighed. Soldiers in tunics and leather helmets stood guard. They checked both for weapons and allowed them to enter the city.

Tatu hurried on. "He used to run for our king," she said. "Fastest In Israel once. You should haf seen him."

"Sorry, who was?"

"Ahimaaz. The one we're going to see. Has bad feet, so I help him out a bit."

Inside the walls, the streets narrowed once more, but now both the houses and pavements were of the same honeyed stone Simon had seen when he first came to Jerusalem. They turned right to skirt a newer wall.

"Palace," Tatu muttered. They turned downhill again, and were swallowed up once more in a maze of alleys, steps and doorways. She knocked on one, and it opened to a young teenage girl.

"Mother Tatu. Come in. What brings you here today?"

"Shalom, Miriam. Here's someone to see your father."

"Oh. I'm afraid he's at the palace." Beneath her blue

shawl, Miriam had an open face and wide-set eyes that sparkled like Ruby's.

A surge of longing for his daughter erupted from nowhere. Simon pushed it aside. They walked through a low gateway into a small courtyard, surrounded by rooms. The rumps of a pair of mules protruded from stalls on their left.

From opposite them a woman in her thirties approached, wiping her hands on a cloth. "Tatuhepa. This is a nice surprise. Did you bring medicine for my husband?"

"No, my lady Hannah, but I brought someone. About security, so he says. I believe your master may find of value?"

Hannah clapped and a lad appeared, dressed in a tunic like Simon's. "Padi, their feet. Then go at once and find your master. Tell him a matter of security. Miriam, bring something for our guests."

They sat on benches in the courtyard while Padi washed Simon's feet, drying them with a cloth. It eased the pain.

"Thank you, Padi," Simon smiled at him. Padi looked up and grinned.

"Come." Hannah led them into a small reception

room. The house appeared fairly new, the walls of ivory stone, the floor scattered with sheepskin rugs and embroidered cushions.

"This is Shimon, my lady," Tatu said, "but I know little more, except he has enemies."

"Don't we all?" Hannah wore a blue gown, her hair in a long plait, with broad splashes of gray at her temples. She had kind eyes.

"Forgive me, my lady." Simon found his voice at last. "I don't know where to begin. My story is too strange."

"You speak well for one dressed as you are." Her smile was warm and welcoming. "Where are you from?"

Simon ran through his options. He understood far too little of the culture to invent anything. He must tell the truth, and trust they didn't dismiss him as a madman.

"I come from the future."

Hannah raised her eyebrows. "You are an angel then?"

Simon laughed. "No, my lady, I am no angel. Just a person. I seem to have traveled back in time. I live in a country called England, but it doesn't exist yet."



Miriam entered, and spread baskets of rotis, dried figs, and dates on the rugs. Hannah encouraged them to eat. After Tatu's plain fare, Simon was hungry but restrained his eagerness.

"Do you have a family?" Hannah asked.

The question hurt. "My wife . . . she has found another man, and my daughter is sick."

"That sounds unhappy. Perhaps you will be happier here, in the present?"

Remaining in history had never occurred to him. It filled him with dread.

The door to the street opened, and a tall, middle-aged man entered, walking carefully. The company rose to their feet.

"My husband, Ahimaaz," Hannah said, and the women slipped away.

"What is it you want to tell me?" Ahimaaz spoke with gentle authority.

"Sir, yesterday morning I overheard a plot against the king."

Ahimaaz studied Simon, assessing him with intelligent eyes. He was thin, pale for an Israelite, with pepper-and-salt hair and beard. "Please sit," he said, pointing to cushions. "Tell me the full story."

Simon recounted all he remembered.

Ahimaaz frown grew deeper. "Who were these people? Did you hear their names?"

"There was a grizzled man, Joab, and a tall, good-looking man called Adonijah."

Ahimaaz nodded. "As I suspected. Adonijah is the oldest surviving son of King David, so he thinks he has the right to the throne. But David appointed Solomon to succeed him. Adonijah can do nothing without the army." Ahimaaz looked solemn. "Joab is its commander. He served King David well, but murdered two men in cold blood. He knows his time is short and has sided with Adonijah. This is very dangerous. Who else?"

"Someone in a blue robe. Abiathar? The robe had tassels."

"He is joint high priest, and ambitious."

"Then there was a thin man called Jonathan."

This time Ahimaaz shook his head, then looked away. "Abiathar's son, and a messenger like me." His voice broke. "We were once close friends. Betrayal is the hardest arrow to bear." He collected himself and turned back. "You said there were more."

"I don't remember their names. One was large and

fat, the other small and dark.”

Ahimaaz grunted. “Shephatiah and Ithream are also Solomon’s brothers. As close as thieves, they too are full of ambition. But I had not expected their involvement. Your information will prove most valuable.” He raised his eyebrows. “You say you come from the future? It is a strange introduction.”

“I seem to have arrived here in what is my history.”

“Then you know what is to come?”

“A little, I suppose.”

Ahimaaz’s eyes narrowed. “Then tell me, will Pharaoh agree to our marriage proposal?”

Thankfully, Simon had read the story. “Do you mean will King Solomon marry Pharaoh’s daughter? Yes, he will.”

“That is most interesting.” Ahimaaz smiled. “What will happen after that?”

“He will build the temple. It will take seven years.”

Ahimaaz raised his eyebrows. “This is remarkable. I see you are a prophet.”

“Prophet?” Simon laughed. “Sir, I am neither angel nor prophet. But I have read the Bible stories.”

“What are they?”

“The history of Israel.”

"Until when?"

Simon liked this man and felt able to tell the truth. "I haven't read past the time of King Solomon. I became interested after I first came to Israel."

"You have been here before?"

Simon nodded. "Yes, in fifteen or twenty years' time. In Ezion Geber."

Ahimaaz questioned Simon for an hour or more until Hannah returned and stood in the doorway.

"Hannah, this man is a prophet. He has been telling me our future. Quite remarkable! I think the king will be intrigued."

She pointed with her chin. "Well, he cannot go to the king like that. He needs to bathe, and some decent clothes. Shimon, where are you staying?"

"Nowhere. I mean, I stayed last night with Tatu."

"Then you are to stay with us," Ahimaaz said. "You will be safer here."

"Oh, thank you, but I would also like to thank Tatu. She saved my life."

"I will see she is cared for. I praise the Lord that he has brought you to us. This will be a great blessing to Israel. Now I must return to the palace and warn the king. The Feast of Unleaven Bread ended two days ago,

and the city is still filled with visitors. These are dangerous times."

Hannah clapped for Padi. "Bring water for Shimon to bathe, and I will find him one of master's tunics."

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After his bucket bath, Simon sat on a bench in the shade. The afternoon light bounced around the court, leaving deep shadows. Hannah had given him a fold of cloth as underwear, a clean linen tunic tied at the waist by a soft leather belt, and sandals. He was especially grateful for the sandals.

The mules flicked flies with their tails and stamped their feet. A pair of laughing doves courted on the rooftops, cooing a strange, five-syllable call. "What are *you* doing here?" They seemed to mock him.

The young girl, Miriam, slipped through the shade and sat beside him. "Shalom. I am not supposed to be here, but I had to know. Mama says you are an angel, and Abba says you are a prophet from the future. Which one is true? You do look strange."

"Why am I strange?"

Miriam pushed her shawl back. She wore black plaits, thick and lustrous. Her wide eyes again reminded Simon of his daughter, Ruby. This time guilt

overlaid his longing. How could he have let them go?

"You are very pale. Your hair is light brown and not black. You don't look very strong, and your beard is the color of a fox." She burst into giggles. "Oh, dear, am I being forward? Mama always calls me the naughty one. 'No one will marry you.' she says. My sister Rachel is getting married soon. She's sixteen. She's very righteous. She always says her prayers."

"Where is she?"

"She's asleep. She has her uncleanness. There, see, I am not supposed to mention that either. Is it true you're from the future?"

"Yes, it is." Simon was intrigued by her lack of guile.

"What's it like?"

Simon scanned his mind for pictures she might relate to. "When I was your age, I had a horse."

"Oh, I love horses. We have two mules. We had three, but one died. Mostly Abba uses them for riding or carrying. But I can ride them too. He is head of information, you know. He's very important in the palace. But he has to go away all the time around the country. He's even been to the border of Egypt. I wish I could go too." She looked glum. "But women have to

stay at home. 'It's not safe,' he says. It's so boring."

"Do you have any other brothers or sisters?"

"Oh, yes. Azariah is our oldest brother. He is very serious. He is studying Torah under Grandfather Zadok. Aza is going to be high priest. He told me. They live in Gibeon. He was there last month when the king made a thousand sacrifices."

That must be the first dream! Suddenly the blood and the stench of burning flesh returned with such force, Simon cried out.

"Is anything the matter? Are you hurt?"

"No. No, I'm all right. I just remembered the sacrifices. Is there a large tent there? On top of a hill?"

"Yes. That's the Tabernacle at Gibeon. Were you—"

"Miriam!" Hannah called from across the court.

"Oh dear, now I am in trouble again." Miriam threw the shawl over her hair.

"Miriam, are you talking to our visitor? How can you be so brazen? Alone, too? Leave him at once. You are a disgrace."

The girl slunk away.

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Ahimaaz returned that evening, limping. Padi washed his feet and rubbed them with some of Tatu's

oil. Afterwards, the two men sat at a table around shared dishes of lamb stew, fresh bread, fruit, and olives.

After they'd washed their hands, Ahimaaz said, "The king will see you tomorrow."

Simon's heart quickened with excitement and fear. How will Solomon receive me? Will he remember me? No, of course—our meeting was in the future.

"He is still young," Ahimaaz was saying. "He has reigned for six moons and been king for only twelve."

"I don't understand."

"His father, King David, anointed him king six months before he died. We measure the reign from the beginning of the regnal year."

Simon still didn't understand, but this was why he'd come to Jerusalem. To meet the king.

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In the morning, Hannah appeared with more clothing. "You cannot attend the king without a *me'il*." She wrapped a long robe over his tunic and fidgeted its embroidered edges. She threw a white cloth over his head, tying it with a band. He felt like Lawrence of Arabia.

"The king is not greatly concerned with protocol,"



she said. "You only need remove your shoes and bow when you first meet him. Padi, take Shimon to the palace gates. Master will meet him there."

They retraced yesterday's route around the new stone wall of the palace. Two sets of gates flanked a tunnel-like portico. The outer gates stood open, the inner gates closed. Rows of soldiers stood at attention. A small crowd milled outside, awaiting entry.

Padi approached a guard and asked for Ahimaaz. The guard left.

Simon had anticipated this moment for a long time. Was it because Solomon had said Simon lived here once? Or because he'd found the king so gracious? More likely, he just needed to prove he wasn't going mad. If he could take home some undeniable detail, people would have to listen. *If I can get home again.*

Ahimaaz appeared. Simon followed him into a square court twenty meters across, paved with flagstones. His excitement was tinged with fear. Was he safe?

Two-story buildings surrounded the courtyard. In the center was a black tent, a smaller version of the one in Simon's dream. Smoke rose from an altar in front. Beside the altar stood the dumpy figure of Abiathar,

the priest. He saw Simon and froze.

Ahimaaz led Simon across the court past the tent. Abiathar watched every step. They came to a heavily decorated doorway, guarded by two doormen in red tunics, white turbans, and spears.

"These are the king's private rooms. We will eat with him." A slave took their sandals and washed their feet. A third doorman led them into a small entrance hall and into the king's chamber. The room was not large. The paneled walls and ceiling were painted red. Several small windows threw angled light across the otherwise somber space.

And standing before him was the young man from his two dreams.