

Chapter 15

King Solomon of Israel wore a simple, full-length tunic in white linen. A gold band restrained his heavy black hair. He was remarkably good looking.

Simon copied Ahimaaz and bowed as Hannah had indicated.

The king greeted them and introduced two others. "This is my friend Zabud, son of Nathan, the prophet. Like his father, he can tell us the future."

Not sure of the protocol, Simon nodded. Zabud was thin, with a long nose, and looked clever. He smiled. "Shalom."

"And this is Jehoshaphat, our recorder." Simon recognized him instantly as a middle-aged version of the small, square-shouldered man he'd met in Ezion Geber, fifteen or more years in the future. Jehoshaphat was seeing Simon for the first time and didn't respond.

"He has a remarkable memory," Solomon said. "He forgets nothing. So he can tell us the past." He laughed—a man happy in his own skin.

A servant brought a jug and poured liquid into

silver goblets. Following Ahimaaz's lead, Simon tasted the drink. It was diluted wine, but refreshing and sweet.

A large dining table and gilded chairs dominated the room. On the left, under the light, sat a row of tables covered with scrolls. Embroidered couches filled the right side.

Other servants spread dishes on the table, and Solomon bowed his head. "We give you praise, O God of Zion, for you have filled us with the good things of your house, to provide the people with bread, for so you have ordained it. Amen."

The food was simple but delicious—bread, cheese, olives and fruit. They ate quickly and in silence.

Afterwards, the king looked at Simon. "Ahimaaz tells me you witnessed a plot. What did you see?"

Simon shared the conversation he'd heard beneath the loft. Zabud appeared surprised and Jehoshaphat eyed Simon coldly.

The king nodded slowly. "This is most helpful. Thank you for bringing this matter to us. Now we will also need your assistance this afternoon."

"Of course, sir." Simon prickled with embarrassment.

Solomon leaned forward and raised his eyebrows. "I understand that you have lived in the future. Is that correct? Surely you must be a spirit?"

"I'm afraid I'm very much flesh. I had an experience that in your time was several years from now, when we met in Ezion Geber."

"How intriguing. Tell me."

"We'd come by ship from Ophir, bringing gold. You were there, you said, to erect pillars on the crossing of the Red Sea, to commemorate five hundred years since the Exodus. You were also building a fortress to protect trade to the south."

Solomon smiled. "This all seems very unlikely. How could we achieve such a thing? What else can you tell us?"

"Jehoshaphat was there. With a white beard."

Solomon roared with laughter. "Jehoshaphat, it proves, does it not, that you are both loyal and indispensable."

His aide remained stony faced.

The king raised his eyebrows at Simon. "Go on."

"Sir, you also said you'd completed the temple and half the palace. Pharaoh's daughter would be delighted."

"Did I, indeed? The temple will be a grand thing to the glory of God. Yes, my father commissioned it and the Lord gave him the plans. It will be completed, you say?" Solomon stopped and seemed to be praying. He rose and wandered to the window. "But who are we? Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders surely labor in vain." He wiped his cheek and turned back to his guests. "So, he will enable us. We give the Lord all honor and praise."

"Amen." the company chorused. Simon hadn't expected such religious zeal.

The king turned to Ahimaaz. "Pharaoh will take the bait?"

"If Shimon's words are correct, my lord. We still have much negotiation."

"As the Lord wills. Is this not encouraging, Zabud? Does it not confirm your own prophecies?"

"They are the Lord's," the young man replied. He smiled at Simon. "There's some time to the afternoon session. Shall I show you the palace?"

They emerged from the king's quarters. Abiathar had gone, and Simon breathed in relief. On the opposite corner of the court, a square tower rose several stories above the rest.

Zabud led Simon there, puffing up the steep ladders. "I was never very strong of breath."

Until now, Simon had been buried within the alleys of Jerusalem, paying little attention to the countryside. The views took his breath away.

On the drive from Tel Aviv he'd twisted through scrubby pines growing on bare limestone, like a giant bonsai garden. Now, three thousand years earlier, thick forest mantled the hills.

Simon pointed north where dust drifted on the breeze. Oxen plodded in circles pulling a sledge. "Is that where Solomon will build his temple?" The barren rock reminded Simon of a bald head.

"How do you know that?" Zabud asked. "Oh, of course. Are you not from the future? Yes, that is the threshing floor Araunah the Jebusite gifted to King David. It is the barley harvest now."

Simon turned right. "What is that hill?"

"The Mount of Olives." From its height in the north the hill descended slowly southward to a patchwork of gardens. "Those are ancient graveyards. It has been used a long time." They turned again, and along the ridge to the south a dirt road disappeared into distant trees. "That leads to Bethlehem, and beyond that,

Hebron.”

Jerusalem itself occupied a narrow promontory. The houses clustered on top of one another. Simon could see only roofs.

Inside the palace walls, beyond the tent in the center of the court, steps led down to a pair of closed gates. “Women’s quarters,” Zabud said. “The tent is where King David brought the Ark. Come, it is nearly time for the session.”

“What is that about?”

“You will see.”

They clambered down the steep ladders and entered a wide doorway directly beneath the tower. After the bright sunshine, Simon’s eyes had to adjust to the dark hall. Oil lamps assisted the meager windows. About fifty people sat on benches against its bare, stone walls. At the far end stood a throne on a raised dais.

“Shimon, come.” Ahimaaz patted a space beside him.

Simon glanced around the assembly. Sitting together were Abiathar the priest, and Adonijah, the pretender. He had no idea why he’d been invited. Were they going to charge him with spying? He turned to Ahimaaz, but a trumpet drowned his question.

Everyone stood.

A procession entered with great ceremony. First came a small platoon of guards, weapons gleaming. Next stepped an old man in a long, blue robe—the man on the hill of Simon's first dream. He bore a large scroll, held high. "That is my father, Zadok, the high priest," Ahimaaz whispered. "He carries the Torah."

The recorder, Jehoshaphat, waddled in, now in a black robe and turban. Following Jehoshaphat, a huge man strode, holding a bronze mace the size of a street lamp. His cropped hair and beard were steel gray.

"Benaiah, head of the king's bodyguard."

Finally, the king entered in the same purple robe Simon had seen on the hill, its gold threads sparkling in the lamplight. He walked erect under a great gold crown, afire with jewels.

Zadok began the session with a long prayer of thanksgiving to God and pleas for guidance. A footman lifted the crown and the king sat, gesturing for the company to do the same. Simon was awed by the dignity of the occasion, despite the plain surroundings.

"Elders of Israel," Solomon began, "I thank you for attending, with little time for preparation. I am a mere child, burdened with the great duty of administering

justice in the nation of Israel. Matters of considerable importance have come upon us suddenly, and we need your wisdom and witness.

"This morning, my mother, the *gevirah*, attended me in this very room. I received her with grace and even found a second throne for her."

This brought a rustle of surprise and a few nods. Others, like Abiathar, looked angry.

"My mother made a request of me that my elder brother, Adonijah, should be given the Shunammite, Abishag, as his wife."

This time the stir was of outrage. Some stood, waving fists. Someone shouted, "How dare he?" Adonijah raised his eyebrows, surprised.

"Peace, brethren." The king waited until they'd settled. "It is well known that the harem belongs to the king, and the king to the harem. It is a symbol of office, although not one I support. However, it may be that my brother made this request in all innocence, merely seeking to marry the girl whom all Israel honors as the most beautiful in the land. Further evidence came to our notice today, and we should like you to hear it." A murmur toured the room. "Shimon, please stand."

The king's request was so unexpected Simon sat for

several seconds before responding.

Solomon's mouth was set, but his eyes were gentle. "Please tell the elders what you told me today."

Hot with embarrassment, Simon recounted the details of the plot he'd overheard. He couldn't bring himself to look at the conspirators. When he finished the room hushed.

Someone muttered, "Spy."

Adonijah stood, flapping his hands. "Solomon, this is outrageous. Who is this impostor? I am the oldest son. Those born before me have died. Now it is my right. All Israel look to me as their king."

"Did you not tell my mother, Bathsheba, that the kingdom has come to me from the Lord God?"

"Yes, indeed, but—"

"Then from whom would it come to you?" The elders chuckled at the king's riposte. The younger men clapped. But the somber sense of the occasion overtook them again, and the assembly fell silent.

"Elders of Israel, I ask your verdict. Are these men, found to be plotting against the king, guilty of treason, or are they innocent?"

"Guilty." chorused across the room.

Adonijah was trembling. "No, my brother, this

cannot be.”

The king stood. The footman placed the crown on his head. The company rose, tense. Simon could hear his own breathing.

“May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if Adonijah does not pay with his life for this request.” Despite his youth, there was majesty in Solomon’s voice. “And now, as surely as the Lord lives—he who has established me securely on the throne of my father, David, and has founded a dynasty for me as he promised, Adonijah shall be put to death today.”

The king turned and nodded to Benaiah. Two soldiers ran to Adonijah, who was still flapping his arms. They dragged him in front of the king. Benaiah stepped forward and swung the huge mace in a deadly arc. It struck Adonijah on the back of the skull. The crack echoed off the walls like a whiplash. His body smashed to the floor. Blood oozed onto the stones.

A soldier gathered the corpse, threw it across his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carried it away. A trail of blood spotted the pavement.

Simon retched at the incomprehensible violence. He hunted for a way to escape. *Impossible.*

The crown remained on the king’s head. “Abiathar,

come forward.”

The priest turned white, visibly shaking. He didn't move. Soldiers took his arms and frog-marched him before the throne.

“Go back to your fields in Anathoth. You deserve to die, but I will not put you to death now, because you carried the Ark of the Sovereign Lord before my father David and shared my father's hardships. You are stripped of your office of joint high priest. Take your son, Jonathan, and leave. If either of you returns to Jerusalem, he will die.”

The priest staggered. Soldiers grabbed his arms and marched him out. The elders eyed each other, nodding approval. “Praise God,” they chorused.

“That is a wise decision,” Ahimaaz said softly. “Abiathar served David as a loyal soldier, but he was jealous of Zadok and backed the wrong man.”

A messenger ran into the hall and stood at attention. The king waved him permission to speak.

“My lord. Joab, the commander of the army, has fled to the tent of the Lord in Gibeon and is holding the horns of the altar.”

The king turned to Benaiah. “Go, strike him down and bury him, and so clear me and my father's house

of the guilt of the innocent blood that Joab shed.”

The judgment caused a stir in the hall. Some nodded, while others seemed distressed. Zadok was shaking his head. Ahimaaz explained. “To hold the horns of the altar is to appeal for mercy. King David instructed Solomon to deal with Joab. The Lord has given him into his hands.”

“Elders.” Solomon raised his voice above the hubbub. “You know that without the knowledge of my father, David, Joab attacked two men and killed them with the sword. Both of them were better men and more upright than he. May the guilt of their blood rest on the head of Joab and his descendants forever. But on David and his descendants, his house and his throne, may there be the Lord’s peace forever.”

The crowd settled. This was a prepared speech. Clearly the king had thought through the implications.

“One duty remains. I propose Benaiah be commander of the army, and High Priest Zadok be responsible for the Ark of the Covenant and all the duties of Abiathar.”

People applauded. Obviously moved, Zadok nodded at the king.

“Benaiah, go strike Joab down.”

The session ended. Elders hugged each other, eyes gleaming. "Praise the Lord he has given us such a wise king." Others assented. "He has the wisdom of the aged."

Simon turned to Ahimaaz. "What about the other two in the plot? Where are they?"

"Shephatiah and Ithream? Now that Adonijah is dead, they are King Solomon's oldest brothers, and probably in hiding. If it were not for David's appointment of Solomon as king, they would have a valid claim to the throne. However, we cannot discipline them, for you were the only witness to their involvement. The law says, 'A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' One is not enough. Bathsheba also testified against Adonijah." Ahimaaz took his arm and led Simon aside. "Shimon, be cautious. No doubt Shephatiah and Ithream consider you their enemy—and they are not without power."