

Chapter 16

Several days later, Solomon's personal advisor, Zabud, called for Simon, leading him to the palace courtyard. "Wait here, I will find the king."

With its tower, stone walls and army-style tent, it looked more like a fortress than a palace. The judgment hall appeared empty, but in the northeast corner Simon thought he heard snorting. He strolled over.

The rumps of half a dozen horses protruded from the shadows. Simon knew them at once. "Wow. Arabians," he said aloud. A young, dark-skinned groom was scooping manure into baskets with a wooden prong. Simon smiled at the lad. "Whose are they?"

The boy stood at attention. "Sir, these belong to the king."

"Does he ride?"

The boy pointed to a larger pair, coats gleaming. "These are for the king's chariot. They are very fast."

"These others?"

"Oh, sir. The king rides them like camels." He

snickered. His gaze shifted and he stood straight. "But few can do that."

"Aren't they fine?" The king's voice approached from behind.

Simon turned to find the king alone. "Shalom, my lord."

"These are the best from Egypt." Solomon stroked the rump of the nearest. "I rode my first horse when I was six years old. They have been used for chariots for centuries, but a Mitanni slave taught me to ride. I fell many times." He laughed. "Do you like horses?"

"I love them. I had one once." Simon's heart closed at the memories. "I used to ride her for hours. She died."

"Then we must ride together. It will be a joy to have a companion. Now we have a meeting to attend, and it is good of you to come."

They crossed the court to a room on its western side, where a small group awaited the king. Simon smiled at Zabud. He recognized squat Jehoshaphat and the giant Benaiah.

Zabud led him to an elderly, bent man with a white beard, leaning on a stout stick. "This is my father, Nathan."

Nathan searched Simon's eyes until his face clouded. "You will see the rising and the falling of Israel."

Zabud glanced sideways. "Falling, father? Are we not rising?"

Next to him stood a small man Simon struggled to recall. Zabud introduced him. "Shobab, brother to the king."

"Shalom. Didn't we meet in Ezion Geber? Oh, but of course—that was in seventeen years' time."

Shobab laughed. "Is that so? And what was I doing there?"

"You were governor of that district, building a fortress."

"You see, my brother," King Solomon said, "why we have him here, when he knows the future so well?"

Behind the king stood his half-brothers, Shephatiah and Ithream.

Shephatiah cleared his throat and spat. "Why do we need this maggot to tell his version of the future? Can we not use common sense?"

Simon glanced at Solomon. *How powerful are they?*

But the king had begun to pray. Afterwards, he motioned for them to sit. "Brethren, we are here to find

the best way to negotiate with Pharaoh." Solomon turned to Jehoshaphat. "Remind us of what his envoy requested."

Jehoshaphat looked straight ahead and spoke in a level voice. "The envoy, Iuwelot, brother of Pharaoh, came four days ago. He is forty-six years old. Thirty-one people came with him."

"Thank you, Jehoshaphat, but what did the envoy request?"

"They brought fifty-three camels and fifteen chariots. They brought their own food. We met the envoy two days ago at the time of the evening sacrifice. Iuwelot said, 'Pharaoh is unhappy that we have taken his land as far as the *Shur*, the wall of Egypt by the eastern branch of the Nile, called Pelusiac. The Sinai of the Amalekites has always belonged to Egypt. King David of Israel defeated those trouble-makers, for which Pharaoh is grateful, but who are you to keep the land of Amun?'"

The king stroked his young beard. "Did he make any threat of war or offer of compensation?"

"He made neither," Jehoshaphat said.

Shephatiah lifted his arms in disbelief. "Surely, he will negotiate. What is—"

Jehoshaphat reddened. "My memory is accurate."

"But that cannot —"

"My memory is accurate. I do not forget."

Shephatiah blustered, his face red. "How dare you speak to me in that—"

"Please, Shephatiah." Solomon held up his hand. "Let it pass."

Benaiah leaned forward. "Pharaoh's army is weak. He is afraid of ours." For such a big man, he spoke softly. "The Lord has been with us in all our campaigns, and Egypt is not willing to risk further loss."

Jehoshaphat barked, "Iuwelot said, 'Pharaoh would make an alliance.'"

"Ah, you mean marriage." Solomon raised his eyebrows and looked at Simon and Ahimaaz.

Nathan scowled. "That is very dangerous. She will be a worshipper of Amun. The Lord warns us against such alliances. The Torah declares, 'Do not intermarry with them. Do not take their daughters for your sons.' It was just such an alliance that led Israel into the sin of worshipping the Baal of Peor. Twenty-four thousand died in the plague. If we—"

Shephatiah was puffing. "Oh, in the name of the

Lord!" His belly wobbled. "Is not the king already married to an Ammonite? What difference can another make?"

"Furthermore," Nathan glared, "only once has any Pharaoh given away his daughter. She reigned over Thera. Within one lifetime, the island burned like Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Then what did the envoy mean by alliance?" Solomon turned to Simon. "Shimon, did you not tell us we were building a palace for Pharaoh's daughter?"

"Yes, sir." Simon nodded. "The Bible . . . the records say you will marry her."

Solomon smiled. "Then what will be, will be."

"Brother Solomon," Shobab said, "the Sinai is a large and valuable buffer between us, should Egypt change her . . . intentions."

The king stroked his beard again. "Is it wise to give up much land for such an alliance? Is there nothing else we could gain?"

Benaiah's eyes sparkled. "There is one thing." All turned to listen. "As you know, Gezer has been a scorpion underfoot for years. King David defeated the Philistines many times, but they still occupy Gezer. From there they continue to raid travelers and traders

on our main highways. We could not dislodge them, for we need chariots . . . and Egypt has chariots.”

The company stared, riveted.

The king grinned. “For Pharaoh to give gifts as a dowry might be beneath his dignity. But it will be to his glory to take a city, and to our profit to receive it. He defeats our enemies, and we win the prize. This is diplomacy that appeals, my brethren.”

Nathan had been spluttering through the whole conversation and stood. “It will end in disaster. Pharaoh’s daughter will bring nothing but harm to my lord the king, to the palace, and to the nation of Israel. Mark my words.” He stabbed his cane on the floor and strutted out.

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Back in his room, Simon puzzled over this strange mixture of men. Solomon carried such an aura of authority. Yet why did he need naysayers like Nathan and his older brothers?

The following morning, Simon again answered the king’s summons. In the palace, Solomon stood beside two of the beautiful Arabians. He patted the mare’s back and grinned. “Come, Shimon.”

They mounted, headed out of the gates, and turned

south. The road ran through an area of open trees between denser forests. Simon was thrilled to be riding again. Jays flitted ahead of them, flashing their blue wings, while eagles climbed the thermals to become tiny crosses.

The sun had baked the track into ruts and ridges. With his horse unshod, Simon had to pick his way with care.

Beside them, six guards sweated to keep up. "Rest here," Solomon told them. "We shall be safe enough and return by midday."

They rode bareback, with a double halter for a bridle. The mare was supple, strong, and responsive. Simon leaned forward. Her musky scent evoked memories of his delight with Buttons.

Without warning, the mare shied, prancing sideways. Instinctively, Simon twisted to adjust. He glanced down at the track. A snake vanished into the undergrowth.

"Well done!" Solomon laughed. "That would have put many down."

"It was lucky. They're well-schooled. Do you train them yourself?"

"I have no time now. The Mittani is old, but the

young Egyptian shows promise. Soon we will come to farmland—then we can try their speed.”

Simon felt a twinge of anxiety. Already his thighs were aching. They rounded a crest, and golden fields stretched before them. He stopped to gaze at this scene from heaven. Harvesters folded over sickles, sweeping their wealth into rows. Others bundled and tied the sheaves with flicks of their hands. A laden oxcart plodded towards the track, while a gentle breeze filled Simon's nostrils with the warm scents of summer.

He wanted to freeze his life right there, all pain forgotten. The old present had become the nightmare, and current history, the paradise. *For how long?* He shook his head.

“Race you to the trees!” Solomon cried and leaned over his young stallion's head.

The mare needed no urging. Simon had to cling tight, the horses astonishing him with their speed. Little Buttons was in a different league. Here on the roof of the world, the wind in his ears, he was both exhilarated and terrified.

Many lengths ahead Solomon slowed, laughing. “You held her neck like a baby holds a nurse. I thought you were down that time.”

"You have no idea," Simon said, panting. "How near you were to being right."

They entered a thicker forest and wove down a path to a small valley. Here a strong spring gurgled, the water tumbling over the rocks below.

Simon reined in. "It's beautiful, Solomon."

Butterflies flitted. A warbler chattered from a thorn bush.

"This is the Saleh Spring," Solomon said. "I love this place. I come here to think and pray. One day I will build a garden here."

They dismounted, tied the horses and drank from the ice-cool stream. Simon waved at the trees. "Plants are my life."

"Is that your trade?"

Simon nodded and picked up a brown cone. "We call this Jerusalem or Aleppo pine, *Pinus halepensis*. It's native here and across the Mediterranean, that is, the Great Sea. It is drought tolerant, but can grow in many places."

"You know how to grow different plants?"

"When I first came to Israel, in seventeen years' time, I had gone to Malaysia." Simon still found it strange to speak of the future. "I think you call it Kalah

Bar? I went in search of a special plant . . . to use for medicine."

Solomon wasn't listening. He gestured across the valley. "If I were to bring plants from different countries, would they flourish here?"

"Yes, if you give them the right conditions."

"Shimon, you can be of great help to us. How long are you expecting to stay?"

Back to Kathy and Ruby at Dursley. Dead greenhouses. Simon couldn't think about it. His arrivals and departures from the real world hadn't been planned—if real this world was. *What is reality anyway?*

Simon weighed the cone and tossed it into the stream. "I've no idea." It bobbed to the surface, twisted to the currents, and disappeared. *Is that it? You bob to the top, are played by the currents of the day, and die?* "Both times I came without warning. I left the same way."

"Shimon, you are welcome to stay as long as you wish." Solomon looked sideways at him. "Something troubles you."

"My lord, I can't explain. Here I am in history."

Solomon chuckled. "It feels very present to me."

"Exactly. Now I don't know which is real. What is reality anyway? All my life I have been searching for

the truth. We study what we see and hear and touch. We are very good at discovering how the world works, but no one seems to know why. What are we here for? Why is the world such a mess?" Simon had asked Reverend Trew the same question. Did no one know?

"We are here for God, of course." Solomon stood and untied his horse.

Simon turned to him. "With all the violence? And hatred? And war? And disease?" It seemed he'd learned nothing since he was twelve. "My lord, forgive me, but there's something I have to ask."

The king smiled. "Do not be shy."

"How can an intelligent, educated man like you believe there's a God?"

Solomon roared with laughter as he mounted his horse. "How can you not?"

They cantered at ease through the farmland near Bethlehem and entered the forest. Here their pace slowed as the horses negotiated the ruts. The soft hooves padded the earth. How surefooted they were.

Simon puzzled over Solomon's laughter. Their passion for religion was totally at odds with the rest of the culture—violence, slaves, discrimination, jealousy, tyranny and treason. It seemed nothing to Solomon to

strike down his own brother in cold blood, and yet to claim to worship God. On the other hand, his wisdom and the way he faced danger were impressive.

Solomon had stopped behind him. "I heard something."

Simon's mare squealed in pain and stumbled. He fought to help her stand, but she collapsed under him. He threw himself clear as the mare rolled onto her side. Only then did he see an arrow, driven into her neck. A second struck her head. The animal screamed. Simon lay flat, sprawled behind her bulk. She quivered in death. A third arrow whistled into the ground beyond him. He was trapped.

Solomon yelled, "Take my hand." He spurred his horse and in one swift movement reached down, grabbing Simon's arm. With surprising strength, he carried Simon at a gallop away from the ambush. Arrows flew past them. Simon tried to hold his legs up. His knees kept banging the ground. After two hundred meters, Solomon reined in.

"Don't stop!" Simon shouted. "You're still in danger."

"It is not me they want."

He pulled Simon up behind him, and they sped

down the rough track until they slowed, panting hard. The stallion's flanks were heaving, sweat frothing his neck.

Blood ran from Simon's wounded knees. "You saved my life."

"You saved mine over the plot. Now we are even." Solomon was still breathing hard. "I am angry about my mare. She was the best in Israel."

"Who did this? And why?"

"Who? I think I know, but cannot prove it. Why? Revenge."

Simon began shaking. "Revenge? What have I done?"

"Two have died and two exiled on your testimony."

"If they want the kingship, why don't they kill you?"

Solomon shook his head. "If they assassinate me, the people and the army will rise against them. They would be executed. They are clever and ambitious, but justice requires witnesses. We need further evidence of which they are not unaware." He sighed deeply. "I did not expect they would attack like this, or so quickly. Let us find our soldiers."

They arrived to a commotion at the palace. News had traveled. A crowd pressed around them. Guards held the mob back, swords drawn. Benaiah appeared, looking grave. "Thank the Lord you are alive. Where on earth was the bodyguard?"

"There is no blame. I gave them leave." Perspiration ran lines through the dust on the king's cheeks. Simon's blood smeared his tunic. The stench of horse sweat clung to his clothes.

Solomon dismounted. He passed the halter to the Egyptian stable boy, who was crying. A slave brought water and began to wash Simon's knees. The wound had gone deep and the water stung like a wasp.

An older man in a brown robe pressed toward Solomon. "A judgment, my lord king." He held a scroll in his hand.

Beside him stood a pair of women, one holding a bawling baby. The woman with the child had draped a red scarf around her shoulders, exposing her short hair and grubby tunic. The other wore a gray scarf that fell to her knees. Flies buzzed around them.

"Who are these?" Solomon turned to the man in the brown robe.

Someone in the crowd sneered. "Prostitutes."

"Can it not wait?" the king asked.

The man in the brown robe said, "I think not, my lord, if the life of the baby is of concern."

Solomon looked at yelling baby and the women. "What is it you want?"

The woman without the child bowed. "My master, this woman and I live in the same house. While we were living together, I had a baby. Three days after I gave birth, this woman also had a baby. There wasn't anyone else in the house." She dabbed her eyes with her scarf and sniffed. "This woman's baby died when she rolled on him in her sleep. She got up in the middle of the night and took my son. She put him at her breast and put her dead son at my breast." Her voice rose. Tears streaked her face. "When I got up to nurse my son, here was this dead baby! But in the morning, I saw . . . he was not my son." She burst into sobs.

The crowd had hushed, drawing closer. From the stables, a horse whinnied.

"No," the one with the red scarf said, gripping the child and tossing her head. "The living one's mine. The dead one's yours."

The first woman cried, "You know that's untrue. How can you lie before the king?"

"How dare you try to steal my son, you thieving bitch!" Red Scarf shouted.

People sucked their teeth. Others ran across the court. The crowd had grown several deep, craning their necks. Benaiah stood at the back with arms folded. A guard spat on the ground.

"Give me back my son," cried the first.

"He's not yours!" Red Scarf gripped the baby harder. It screamed.

Solomon's gaze turned from one to the other. "This one says, 'My son is alive and your son is dead,' while that one says, 'Your son is dead and mine is alive.'"

Simon pushed closer, concerned for the king. The baby's screams filled the court.

"Bring me a sword," said the king. Benaiah turned to the guard who handed him his weapon.

The crowd parted. "He's going to kill them," they murmured. "Do away with them. Whores!" All fell silent.

"Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other." Solomon's voice rang with authority.

"No-o-o-o!" The first woman grabbed her cheeks.

Simon's heart sank at the prospect of further violence.

"Yes!" cried Red Scarf and held out the squealing baby.

Benaiah stretched the sword over the child, ready to strike, his eyes fixed on the king. The blade looked like a toy in his hand.

The first woman fell to her knees, grabbing the king's feet. "No, master, give her the whole baby. Don't kill him, please!"

Red Scarf thrust the child at Benaiah. "Cut him in two. Then neither of us shall have him."

The king smiled. "Give the living baby to the first woman. Do not kill him. She is his mother."

A wave of relieved laughter swept the crowd. Some clapped. "Praise the Lord! Thank God for such wisdom." The mood spread. Others began to dance. "His mercy endures forever," they sang.

Red Scarf stood frozen. Benaiah gently prized the boy from her and handed him to his weeping mother. Without shame, she opened her tunic and fed the hungry baby. It muttered into silence. Red Scarf tossed her head again and marched off.

Solomon turned, his face drained. "Shimon, forgive me for putting you in danger today. It would be wise for you to keep low for a while."