

# TROUBLE IN THE RUINS



C. L. SMITH

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BOOK THREE OF  
THE STONES OF GILGAL



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# DEDICATION

To my brothers—a priceless gift of belonging and family roots

To Jim, the close companion of my childhood who passed away in 1994. Before a word of the Stones of Gilgal saga was written, Jim gave me a book on the culture of ancient Canaan and encouraged me make my story idea a reality.

To Gary and John, two previously unknown brothers who were adopted out at birth. In an astonishing and delightful twist to my life story, they discovered me and each other in 2017. Although each man is a unique and wonderful person, I frequently catch glimpses of Jim, my mother, and a favorite aunt in their expressions and gestures. My cup overflows with brotherly love.





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I want to begin by thanking the many friends and readers who have encouraged my writing. I feel honored and honestly humbled. The accolades of friends might be expected, but a number of perfect strangers made the effort to find my contact information, then followed through with an enthusiastic call or note. One such note read: “How you could make a story that is thousands of years old come alive is beyond me. The people were drawn with such realism they seemed like neighbors or family.” Those words touched a chord in me. My characters seem more like another set of children than fictional creations. Some days I can hardly wait to get my fingers on my keyboard to see what they will do next.

I want to thank the publishing team at Mountain View Press (Redemption Press). The talented Marcus Park sets the mood for *Trouble in the Ruins* with another fabulous cover painting. Graphic designer, Zac Calbert, updated the close-up insert for the map, hand-drawn for my first book by Marjorie Moran. My sister-in-law, Heather Smith, organized and formatted my list of characters. These competent behind-the-scenes people helped transform my manuscript into a beautiful book. Thank you all.

Above all, I am thankful for the loving assistance and insistence of my own family during this entire writing venture—especially my husband Eden, the greatest encourager of my life. Since finding my “new brothers,” I have thought a lot about the importance of family and realize more than ever how Eden’s love and stability over the years have helped repair the damage caused by my fractured birth family.

Thank you, also to my children Eden III, Melissa, Melinda, Michelle and their families. You mean the world to me. Not only are they each making a positive difference in the world, but their critiques and encouragements have improved each of my books.

*Trouble in the Ruins* is a book about belonging, the bonds connecting members of a community who live and worship together. It's about friends helping each other face troubles of all kinds, and outsiders struggling to find belonging. Fortunately, Rahab the Canaanite refugee did not have to face her post-rescue transition into a foreign culture alone. The ancient text does not tell us anything about her parents and siblings, but they must have been remarkable people—the only family in Jericho who didn't cling to the prevailing fear and hatred of Israel, the only family willing to humbly accept the demonstrated superiority of Israel's God.

As I write of family and belonging, I feel a pang of sorrow for those reading this from a place of loss or abandonment. There are no easy answers for the pain and loneliness in our world, but I can tell you with absolute certainty that God is immeasurably wiser and more compassionate than any human being. His ways are higher than our ways. His desire is to make you (and others influenced by your story) “mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2–4).

*Sing to God, sing in praise of his name,  
 extol him who rides on the clouds;  
 rejoice before him—his name is the LORD.  
 A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,  
 is God in his holy dwelling.  
 God sets the lonely in families,  
 he leads out the prisoners with singing;  
 but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.*  
 (Psalms 68:4–6)





# PROLOGUE

*I will make the Valley of Achor  
a Door of Hope.  
My people will respond to me there  
with singing and dancing  
as they did on the day when I led them out of Egypt.*  
—Hosea 2:15, author paraphrase

## *Abihail*

Abihail caught Acsah's eyes over a rumbling river of wool. This was a childhood dream come true. Herding sheep. Together. She and her dearest childhood friend, feet solidly on the Promised Land. And the crossing of the Jordan could not have been more glorious. Like the stories of the Red Sea crossing after her parents left Egypt. Abihail hummed the melody of Miriam's victory song while scores of little hooves pounded the triumphant rhythm into Canaan soil.

*Who among the gods is like you, Yahweh?  
Who is like you—  
Majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glory,  
working wonders?<sup>1</sup>*

It was an old song, but everything else was new. It was Abib. The first month of a new year. A new start. A new land. She breathed in the earthy-sweet fragrance of freshly cut wood and smiled at the memory of her husband working side by side with Caleb, building a sturdy new enclosure for their combined flocks. Like father and son. For as long as she could remember, she and Acsah had been as close as sisters. Now, Acsah's father embraced her and Eliab as family. New family . . .

## TROUBLE IN THE RUINS

Did she dare hope? New family in both directions. That would be the best *new* of all. New life in her womb. She had not told anyone yet. Not even Eliab. And even now she pushed the dream aside, choosing to enjoy the solid realities of the day. Even Yahweh's covenant with Israel was beginning anew after the forty-year training in the wilderness. The men were newly dedicated to the covenant by circumcision this very day. And on the fourteenth day of Abib, Israel would celebrate Passover for the first time since Sinai. The annual cycle of feasts beginning anew.

She began singing Miriam's song aloud.

*The people of Canaan will melt away.  
Terror and dread will fall on them—  
Baa . . . baa*

Abihail laughed at the throaty obligato. Old song, new embellishment. Even the sheep were excited about their new home.

*By the power of your arm  
they will be as still as a stone—  
Baa . . . baa  
until your people pass by, LORD,  
Baa . . . baa  
until the people you redeemed pass by.  
Baa baa, baa baa*

"Hey, hey, Naggai," Acsah crooned to the fat ewe waddling into the sheep pen. "I expected you to be coming in with twins this evening."

"Naggai?" Abihail's attention snapped back to the task at hand. "How did I miss the signs? Her udder is definitely filling. In here, old girl, where we can check on you." She diverted the pregnant ewe from the larger enclosure to the birthing pen adjoined to the side.

"Don't worry about getting up, Acsah. Get your rest tonight. I will come back to check on them by myself. All three of these old girls have done this before."

"I don't think so. How could I sleep knowing Naggai might have unexpected trouble? The possibility of losing our childhood playmate just when she arrived at the pastures of her dreams would give me Promised Land nightmares."

Abihail giggled. "I wonder if *she* remembers our Promised Land dramas."

## PROLOGUE

Acsah caught her eyes with intense scrutiny. “In all our dramatic plots and plans of Canaan, we never even dreamed of such productivity, did we?”

*Did Acsah just scan my abdomen in search of a bump?* “All these new lambs?” she asked innocently.

“And kids and calves,” Acsah added with an enigmatic smile. “It is as if the grass or the air in this valley breeds fertility.” The quick lift of her brows said more than her next words. “I suspect we’ll see a bumper crop of human babies in the next few months too.”

“Flocks and herds *and* people benefit when they follow the Shepherd of Israel,” Abihail responded quickly. She launched into the victory song again.

*In your unfailing love you will lead—*

Baa!

*the people you have redeemed.*

Baa! Baa, baa, baa!

*In your strength—*

Baa, baa!

“Hodevah! How can I sing?” she scolded with a laugh. “You are off key and not keeping time.”

Baa! Baa! Baa!

Acsah bit her lip as the plaintive bleating continued. “My father chose Hodevah’s yearling for the Passover feast. She is still looking for him.”

Abihail lovingly patted the grieving mother as she followed the others into the fold. They had been blessed with half a dozen newborns in the one day since crossing the river, but that did not make losing one sheep any easier. Hannah, the next ewe, nosed through the gate with an adorable, hours-old lambkin following close behind. Abihail reached out, brushing Hannah’s wooly back just as the gangly little one broke line. Before she could think to react, Acsah hooked the lamb with her toe, aborting the exuberant leap for freedom.

“Quick footwork!” Abihail scooped the lamb up in her arms and nuzzled the fuzzy head with her nose. “You are too cute, little girl. We refuse to lose you to the wolves of Canaan.” She released the lamb at the threshold of the fold, and this time the little one scrambled between her mother’s legs, disappearing beneath the jostling wooly mass. “I am so glad most of our sheep waited to give birth on this side of the river. We were able to enjoy the glory of the miracle instead of watching for and

arresting scores of breakaways like that during the crossing.”

Acsah exaggerated a yawn. “Now it’s sheep instead of sleep. Three birthings last night and a string of sleepless nights to come.” She ran her eyes down Abihail’s abdomen. “But when *you* are ready to deliver . . . I will not bemoan any lack of sleep.”

A blush crept hotly from Abihail’s neck to her crown. With all her being, she hoped it was true, but she was not ready to voice a hope that might end in disappointment. “I know I have missed my cycles in the women’s purification tent ever since I was so sick during the plague,” she mumbled. “It doesn’t necessarily mean . . .”

Acsah tilted her head and looked at Abihail from the corner of her eye. “Being fruitful and multiplying is in the air here. Don’t be surprised if it’s twins.”

“Don’t—” Abihail started to protest.

Acsah’s lips stretched in a self-satisfied smile. “And I will come to check on you day or night as needed.”

Abihail nudged the last ewe inside the protective palisade. She could not express how desperately she wanted Acsah’s prediction to be true. Summoning faith and hope, she shut the sheepfold door with all her strength. The booming crash shook the enclosure, shushing the bleating flock into total silence.

“Oh dear,” she whispered, wincing as she slid the lock bar into place. “I hope they won’t be too terrified to sleep.”

Acsah touched her arm. “Listen.”

Abihail leaned into the unnatural hush. It wasn’t just their flock silenced. There was no soft lowing and bleating of any neighboring flocks or herds. Not even the sound of birds. She scrunched her face in an exaggerated expression of regret. “I even stopped the evening bird chorus.”

“I said *listen*, not blame yourself for the silence. Listen to the rushing sound.” Acsah paused again with her eyes focused far away. “It may only be the wind in the trees . . .”

“But it sounds like the Jordan,” Abihail breathed. She pictured the *Zor*, the dense thickets of the ravine, mostly submerged by the raging torrent. She could hear the surging water biting at rocks along the margin, pulling up trees and driving them like battering rams against the riverbanks.

Acsah laughed out loud. “God’s timing is never what we expect.”

“Timing?” Abihail looked at her sideways. *If this conversation was heading toward the topic of childbearing again, she needed to deflect it.* “You mean Caleb and Eliab getting this sheepfold finished before the circumcision?”

## PROLOGUE

“No, silly. We’re talking about the river. No one in his right mind would have dared a crossing now—but Joshua did.”

“True.” Abihail paused thoughtfully. “The victory over Sihon and Og came in such a blaze of glory that we all expected an immediate, victorious march into the Promised Land.”

“That timing would have made sense. But one crisis after another . . .” Acsah began ticking them off on her fingers. “The rebellion. The plague. The Midianite War. The death of Moses . . . and then the rain. Not until the flood rose and fords were impassable did God say, *Go*. And Uncle Joshua was listening. He commanded the priests to carry the ark into the middle of the river.” She held up a hand, signaling *Halt*, ending her narrative with great drama. “The waters surged and roared in protest, but they obeyed the command of Joshua.”

“Joshua *is* amazing. How many men would have had the faith to believe they heard God right as Joshua did?”

“I would never tell my father this, but as much as I admire the heroic spy story of my father and Joshua from forty years ago, Joshua seemed to me a poor substitute for Moses. I don’t think any Israelite felt confident about following him across the Jordan into alien territory.”

“We were like lost children,” Abihail agreed.

“But the miracle changed everything.” Acsah’s eyes danced with the bold announcement. “A hesitant assistant no longer, Joshua shot into the dark skies of our despair like a comet, the word of the Lord in his mouth as powerful as Moses’ rod. We follow a mighty conqueror.”

The force of Acsah’s words shot through Abihail like lightning, melting and fusing every unstable sand particle of her life into faith as rock-solid as the new gilgal. Taking a deep breath of sweet Canaan air, she lifted one arm, pointing prophetically toward the Valley of Acacias east of the Jordan. “You terrors of the past, your shadows no longer touch us.” She pivoted toward the west. “O Canaan, we fear nothing you can throw in our path.”

Suddenly a withering, demon-like laugh cackled across the stillness of the evening.

“Only a night bird,” Acsah whispered.

“A night bird,” Abihail agreed. An icy finger of fear traced down her spine just the same. She clutched Acsah’s hand, not letting go until, running and stumbling through the gathering darkness, they arrived safely back at camp.

## CHAPTER ONE

# PREPARATIONS

### *Pallu of Gibeon*

Low-slung rays of sunlight beamed across the open-air forum, pitching forlorn shadows of empty stone benches across the pavement. Pallu remained on his seat on the dais along with his three companions. The assembly had ended. The senate disbanded. Only he and his companions remained. Through many years, many crises, they had served together as the high elders of the Federation of Gibeon, but never had this fellowship of four faced anything like this.

Pallu listened to the thunder of scores of donkey hooves pounding away in every direction, retreating into the distance, fading until they were indistinguishable from the leafy rustlings of the breeze. “We should follow,” he said softly. Or perhaps he only thought the words for no one answered. No one moved.

In less than an hour, the sun would drop behind the coastal mountains. Although his own house here in Gibeon was not far, Pallu’s companions faced journeys an hour or more in three different directions through forest and rough terrain—Ibzan to Kiriath-Baal, Likhi to Beeroth, and Meshullam to Kephirah.

Gibeon and her sister cities crowned the hilltops of central Canaan. Four glorious cities, well-nourished by springs and bejeweled with pools of water. They were surrounded by fine forests of cedar and oak, teeming with deer and other wild game. Fruitful orchards and gardens covered the slopes close to their cities, but it was the terraced vineyards, luxuriant with grapes year after year, that ensured the great

wealth of the Federation through its wine trade. And, because the Federation had long ago cast off the notion that rule by kings was a desirable state, there was no greedy monarch to impoverish the populace with his extravagant whims. Justice prevailed, more often than not, as the people governed themselves through their assembly of elders. Most importantly, although wars frequently broke out between the scrappy kings surrounding them, peace reigned in Gibeon. The fine combined army of the Federation, undefeated for as long as anyone could remember, was highly respected.

This long senate session had been emotionally draining. But in the end, the assembly voted unanimously against war. Gibeon would seek to negotiate a covenant of peace with Israel and do all in its power to convince the other kings to join them. Couriers with news of their decision were already racing to each of the power centers of Canaan—northward to Hazor, southward to Jebus, and down the eastern slope to Jericho.

But would the kings of Canaan swallow their pride and do the only sane thing? Pallu sighed a deep shuddering breath. Not Nahari. The message was certainly not needed to inform that deranged monarch of the invasion. The Israelites occupied the valley not five miles from the famed walls of Jericho. Prior to the crossing, those ill-equipped desert dwellers defeated every ally King Nahari had on the other side of the river. Then they defeated the floods of the Jordan. A king would be insane to believe he could stand up to them and be victorious. But Nahari was not known for his sanity.

A sense of dread rose in the depths of Pallu's heart. Everything he knew and loved would change if they went to war. "We must not let Nahari start a war with . . ." *The God of Israel*, he started to add, but his mouth was so dry the words refused to slide from his tongue. Fear beyond any he had known in battle rose from deep within, but he willed it back with an audible groan.

Ibzan, the eldest and highest of the high elders, looked at Pallu sharply as if reading his thoughts. "There is absolutely no other explanation for such an extraordinary crossing. It had to be the act of a powerful god."

"A powerful god who promised to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Jacob," Likhi snapped. "Our land!"

"But their land before it was ours," Meshullam countered, wagging the forefinger of his plump right hand. "It was the inheritance of the descendants of Shem until wrested from them by Canaan's armies."

Ibzan nodded his agreement. "The four-hundred-year-old prophecy given to Abraham. Judgment will fall on Canaan for its overwhelming violence—just as it did on Sodom."

Grief contorted Meshullam's pleasant face. "Will war be our fate in the end?"

What say you, Pallu?”

“It will if one of our kings attacks first.”

“Exactly the point,” Likhi barked. “Too many hot heads and egomaniacs. War is inevitable.”

“But our federation has Pallu.” Ibzan’s right hand clapped the muscles of his shoulder approvingly. “My dear commander, your arguments today were brilliant. The gods blessed you with great wisdom.”

Pallu snorted a half laugh. “How fortunate that wisdom attended me *today* rather than at some gathering of lesser importance.”

Meshullam chuckled warmly. “Wise words are never rare on your lips, my friend. Every man in Gibeon knows that.” The beaming smile was brief, then the round, soft face grew serious once more. “The kings of Canaan will be more difficult to convince, I fear.”

“If only we knew the intentions of these people.” Ibzan tugged at his whiskers.

“No matter what Israel does next. No matter how powerful the god who brought them here—Jericho will not tolerate their presence,” Likhi said brusquely. “Nahari will attack.”

“Then I don’t see how the rest of us will avoid getting tangled up in it,” Meshullam added with a sigh.

“It was difficult enough to quell arguments for a preemptive strike among the younger members of our own assembly this morning,” Ibzan said somberly. “A stranger would not have guessed that we are normally negotiators.”

“Our spies have seen nothing since the ceremony with the river rocks, erecting that *gilgal* to commemorate the crossing.” Meshullam’s round eyes brightened with a hopeful gleam. “Since then, Israel has been curiously quiet.”

“Surely they intend to claim the inheritance promised to their ancestor, Abraham.” Likhi snapped. “Why else would thousands of men of war cross over as a vanguard for the rest of Israel, leaving their women and children alone in the conquered lands across the river?”

“Indeed. Livestock also left behind.” Pallu slumped in his chair. The thought was like a fist slamming into his gut. “*Why* would they leave family and wealth unprotected east of the river, unless they plan on war? A war they expect to be sudden and short.” He exhaled loudly as if to expel the discouraging thought.

“What if Nahari decides to attack and asks for our aid?” There was a quaver in Meshullam’s voice.

“Nahari would never humble himself to do that,” Likhi growled.

Pallu leaped from his chair and began pacing. “If he does, we must summarily reject his proposal. A needless attack, a response driven by panic, will certainly bring

## PREPARATIONS

about our undoing just as it brought the mighty empire of Egypt to her knees forty years ago. We must not let that happen.”



The first Gibeonite messenger pressed down the steep, rough road to Jericho all through the night with his urgent message. Dawn was just touching the clouds with rosy fingers of hope when he arrived. The gates were still barred. No sentries in sight.

“Ha-loo,” he called loudly.

A crow pecking at a decaying head fastened high beside the gate cawed irritably and flapped off to observe from a nearby palm.

“Ha-loo,” he called a second time. “Official message from the Federation of Gibeon.”

“It does not matter who you are,” a sullen voice from above announced. “We have direct orders from King Nahari. These gates open for no man.”

The messenger sighed wearily. There would be no food, no drink, no rest before he made his return trip. “Please deliver Gibeon’s message to the king,” he called, craning his neck upward.

A movement on the high bridge overhanging the entire span of the gatehouse caught his eye. A lone sentry thirty feet above him, began nocking an arrow menacingly as he peered over the parapet. The courier noted three massacre holes in the floor of the overhead bridge. Picturing a rain of boiling water, fiery coals, or rocks pouring from the one directly over his head, he determined to deliver his message quickly and leave.

“Kindly inform his majesty, King Nahari: The Federation is quite aware of the danger he faces, but we urge restraint. Our elders plan to approach Israel with a proposal of peace within the next few days. War with these people will surely end in disaster for all Canaan.”

“We will crush Israel—and we will choose the time,” the sentry growled. “Our walls are solid, our supplies sufficient for a long siege, and our gates will hold against any foe.”

Two archers pushed their way past the first sentry, aiming their arrows directly at his chest. “We do not need the advice of the cowardly senators of Gibeon,” one proclaimed in an official tone.

“Be gone if you value your life,” the other snarled. He loosed a warning shot over the messenger’s shoulder and quickly pulled a new arrow from his quiver.

The courier dodged to one side, retreating prudently. If he began the long trek

up the road toward Gibeon now, he would reach Ai and Luz by late afternoon. Surely one of those towns would join the ranks of reason. Surely, he would find at least one rational king who would welcome Gibeon's warning.

He thought perhaps he had when he was invited to rest on a stone bench within the gatehouse of the small fortress at Ai. When the humorless sentry returned from King Birsha and they exchanged curt diplomatic bows, his hopes rose higher.

"The king himself will see the messenger from Gibeon," the man reported. With a terse "Follow me" and a nod to certain of his companions, he wheeled and left the well-guarded gate. As the courier scurried behind, the tramping of heavy war sandals surrounded him, a unit of four dour guards marching in lockstep beside and behind.

The courier felt more like a prisoner than an emissary from a friendly neighboring nation as the entourage led him through streets bustling with more soldiers. They led him past a marketplace at city center, emptied of commerce and transformed into a bivouac of foot soldiers. Without a word or friendly glance, the guards brought him to a tower at the center of the fortress.

There were no sentries surrounding the doorway to the stark stone structure, but the courier noted a row of openings below the roofline that could be used in the same way as the massacre holes above Jericho's gate. He imagined the king's guards peering down from that high vantage point right now. They would have an excellent view of the ground below in every direction while suffering little risk of being shot by an arrow.

The courier was fairly certain he saw faces watching him now. He tensed as the lead guard rapped twice on the massive oak door with the butt of his spear, half expecting a lethal rock to drop on him. With no spoken response from the interior, no answering raps, the lock bar rattled and chains clanked. The door swung open as if without hands. Two more guards materialized out of the shadows and joined the grim patrol prodding the courier on with their spears. They passed quickly through the thick-beamed portal into the dim interior of the tower, not hesitating until they reached an expanse bathed in the pale light of a high window. The attending guards forced the man from Gibeon to stop ten paces from the throne.

*What do they think I have come to do?* he wondered as they formed human walls locking him in place, beside and behind. He masked his apprehension with a deep bow before the warrior-king. Six more fierce-faced bodyguards stood behind King Birsha's throne. A tall, thin dignitary robed in black, presumably the king's right-hand man, his *yad rashi*, hovered close to the throne. The king hardly seemed to notice the messenger's arrival, but the hawk-like eyes of the yad never left his.

The messenger of Gibeon waited to be acknowledged, his eyes flicking nervously between the predatory stare of the yad and the king who continued to regard his surroundings absently. The courier stretched his head forward, looking down the line of guards walling him in place on his left and then his right, attempting to catch their eyes and signal openness and honesty. No one made a move to welcome him or signal him to begin.

The long period of silence grew increasingly awkward. At last, he hailed the king with another deep bow. “Your Majesty, forgive me if I address your throne in breach of protocol. I have waited in respect to deliver an important message from Gibeon . . .”

The flat affect of the king did not change until the messenger added, “Regarding Israel.”

Instantly, King Birsha’s face twisted with fury. “Israel! ISRAEL!” he screeched. He bolted from his throne and began pacing like a leopard trapped in a pit. “How could those people defeat a *river*? Who does that?” The monarch pulled off his helmet-crown and raked his fingers through sweat-matted hair. His lips slavered as he glared at the courier, eyes deranged with hate.

The courier chose his words carefully. “Your Majesty, you command a stout little fortress, a very important post in central Canaan. Gibeon believes that the wisest strategy at this time is to wait. Be prepared, of course, but do not initiate war. Perhaps Israel will be content to remain in the Jordan Valley.”

The king did not speak as he paced. Perhaps he was listening. The courier continued. “Spies sent by the senate of Gibeon have been watching Israel closely. They have reported nothing that appears to be preparation for war. We urge restraint. Wait to see what they will do next. Gibeon will send a delegation to them within the next few days proposing a treaty of peace for central Canaan.”

The king groaned and slumped into his royal seat. “Why does Jericho not drive them back across the river?”

“May I be so bold as to point out,” the messenger ventured hesitantly, “that the arrival of these people has been to our benefit so far. The terrorizing raids of King Og and his Rephaim giants will never trouble us again. No longer must we fear attacks by the rapacious Sihon of Hezbon. You know his intention was always to absorb our kingdoms into his empire.”

The king’s face had gone blank again. “How are we to eat?” he whimpered. “These foreigners will seize the barley and wheat harvests from the river valley that we depend on.”

The courier made several attempts to drive home the point of his message, but the distraught monarch could not seem to comprehend it. Pitiful, shapeless sounds

formed in his royal throat and tried to escape, but intelligent dialogue no longer seemed possible.

The flowing black garments of the king's yad rashi rustled as he swooped from his place by the throne. "The king is unwell." Looking down his long, curved nose from an uncomfortably close range, he fixed the messenger's eyes with protective fierceness. "It is best that you leave now."

Deeply discouraged, the courier left Ai and trudged up the dreary road toward Gibeon. He would not bother seeking an audience with the king of Luz. The road led sharply upward through a steep, rough canyon, but he did not slacken his pace. It was mid-afternoon, he guessed, from the length of the shadows and he still had another five hours to go before he reached home.

Not a shadow nor scuffle of sandals whispered a warning. The rough hands of the mysterious assailant pulled him into a headlock, and the blade that pierced his back was cold as ice.

"Jericho? Or Ai?" he croaked as everything around him went black.



The second courier raced up the spiny backbone of the southern ridge from Gibeon to Jebus, to the palace of Adoni-Zedek, undisputed leader of the southern kings. He too was escorted into the presence of an agitated monarch who cut him off before he could state his purpose.

"You lean toward the wrong side, Gibeonites. Hearts of women. Mired in weakness. You have the best army in the region, yet you fight with your mouths. Diplomacy and covenants. The kingdoms of Canaan must unite in strength. We must fight, not prattle like girls. I will crush that nest of hornets before they swarm over our hills with their deadly sting. I will launch firebrands into their midst. Flaming arrows into the heart of Israel. And we will utterly consume their camp with fire."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, that sort of attack is what our senate believes will precipitate a war we cannot win. No one has prevailed against their powerful God."

"The key is to strike first. If we wait for them to come up against us, we will die."

"Our spies are watching the foreigners closely, and the Gibeonite council meets often to keep abreast of their activities. We urge you to wait and see what they will do."

"Gibeonites are traitors in the land. You have a powerful army, yet you would stand idly by while Israel picks off the kingdoms of Canaan one by one."

“But there has been no attack on this side of the river. They are making no preparations for war at this time. Restraint, my lord, restraint!”

“We will give you this much restraint; if Israel attacks even one city, we will retaliate immediately,” Adoni-Zedek howled in rage.

A confident smirk stretched his wide mouth. “We will be prepared.” Turning to his yad, he began issuing orders maniacally. “Pack up my household immediately. Inform all my top aides. Inform the army. We are moving to the stronghold of Adullam. Send for Koz. The high priest must go immediately to negotiate with Libni. If that over-sized white grub will not crawl out to defend Canaan at our side, let him remain in the deep chambers. But Adullam is *our* stronghold, not his. We will not disturb his lair, but we must establish emergency headquarters in the great hall and the upper rooms now.”

The king stopped abruptly, catching his breath, his eyes switching from side to side as if searching his mind for other needful preparations. He cast a quick glance at the messenger. “And you,” he snapped, addressing him as if suddenly remembering that he was there. “Let the senate of Gibeon know that we are moved into Adullam. We will have none of your proposed treaty. Our cause is right, and right will prevail.”



King Jabin of Hazor smirked at the third Gibeonite courier the entire time he was delivering his message. When the messenger finished, the smirk dissolved into a look of bored disdain. “I am not particularly concerned about a ragtag army of foot soldiers,” he said smoothly. “They are no match for my war chariots.”

The messenger stared at the king incredulously. “Those ragtag foot soldiers recently defeated the powerful, well-trained army of King Sihon.”

“Yes. I know.” The king twiddled his thumb back and forth on his jeweled scepter. “Perhaps I should have loaned Sihon a few of my choice chariot units. I will not lend them to that arrogant fool, Zedek. Impossible to fight with chariots in the hills and ravines of the south anyway. I expect Israel will defeat Jericho and all the southern kings. Not a bad outcome, I say. Then Hazor will reap the glory of annihilating the invaders. I will annex southern Canaan as well as the lands of Sihon and Og across the Jordan. I foresee a glorious new empire of Hazor.”

He stared at the ceiling for a moment as if expecting applause, then locked eyes with the courier. “No, I will not attack first. I will lure Israel into coming to me.”

“Sir, may I remind you of the fate of Egypt and of Midian, to say nothing of King Sihon and King Og, whose lands you now covet.”

The king's brow furrowed. "Why Og could not defeat such a puny foe is beyond me."

The messenger tried again to make King Jabin understand. "The kings of this region respect you. Alert your allies, but, exercise caution. We beg you. Can you not see that war against Israel is futile? The fate of northern Canaan lies in your hands."

King Jabin sat quietly for a long, tense moment. At last, he looked up, his decision final. "Guard, escort this man from the throne room."

## *Othniel*

Othniel shuffled along the path toward the bold, lion-emblazoned banner waving high above the tents of Judah. The sun was warm on his hair and face, the open air unbelievably refreshing after two days of confinement. If he held his robe away from his body and walked slowly, there was little discomfort—and when he did feel the burning of his tender wound, he reminded himself of his dedication to the covenant. Caleb's request for him to run this errand while he was still in recovery from the circumcision surprised him, but obedience proved his uncle's wisdom once again. He could not remember feeling so alive.

"Shalom, Othniel. Good to see you." Salmon's mother continued her work under the dancing shadow of the Lion of Judah, the words drifting over her back along with the sound of the grindstone. It was unusual for Abijah not to turn and welcome him face to face. He could only guess she had noticed his strange gait and politely averted her gaze. Unlike her daughter. Nothing escaped the keen eyes of Salmon's little sister, Ada. The pert little face unashamedly appraised every faltering step of his approach.

Othniel adjusted his carriage self-consciously. "Salmon inside?" he asked casually.

"Where else?" Ada tossed her head and rolled her eyes. "Today is the twelfth of Abib. Day two of your recovery. Humph. My brother is always telling us how *wise* Othniel is."

"Shush, child," Abijah scolded.

"Well, why would a *wise* man have to ask where Salmon would be today?"

"He's being polite, young lady, and you are not."

Othniel laughed. "*I'm* here, Ada. So, we can't simply assume . . ."

Salmon's mother turned and gestured toward the doorway. "Go on inside, Othniel. All this lying around healing gives my son more time for cogitating than is good for a man."

Othniel smirked as he brushed the tent flap aside. *The general consensus has it that walking around while healing isn't good for a man either.* He grunted at the searing

pain as he bent down to pass through the doorway, and Ada's giggle followed him into the tent.

Salmon lay motionless in the semidarkness, eyes closed, a carefully constructed blanket canopy covering his nakedness. Othniel eased himself down on a pallet beside the bed. Not a muscle twitch acknowledged his presence.

"Shalom, friend," he said quietly.

Salmon's eyes opened, black and starkly hollow. "My little sister doesn't give us men much sympathy, does she?" he mumbled.

"She should. You look absolutely terrible."

A hint of a smile pulled at one side of Salmon's mouth. "There have been a lot of days since Abba died when I have felt useless as a child trying to fill a man's place. Now when we need to be preparing for our first feast in the Promised Land, I *am* totally useless."

"And sinking into a pool of self-pity."

Salmon forced a half smile. "I'm a boy missing my Abba more than ever."

In the long period of silence that followed, Othniel watched the dark swirls of anguish twist Salmon's features and felt again the sting of his own loss. "The fangs of a snake, an unfeeling reptile, killed my father," he said after a while, "but yours was murdered by the hands of his Israelite brothers. I can't even imagine how difficult that is to deal with."

"If only he could be here to tell the Passover story. He lived it. I barely can remember any of the details."

"Actually, that is the reason I limped over here. Caleb would be pleased if your family joined ours for the feast."

Salmon's eyes brightened. "That would be a blessing not only to me but to *Ima* as well. Tell Caleb she will bring a large basket of flat bread. The rasping of the grindstone has hardly stopped since we got our camp set up. One would think she was planning to bake up enough bread for an army."

"Your mother's way of dealing with the grief," Othniel chuckled. "We'll have to tell Joshua in case there is an impending campaign and the army needs a good supply of bread." He watched the shadows playing on the tent walls. "Such losses are not easy for anyone. I don't know what I would have done without Uncle Caleb. He has been like a father to Seraiah and me since our father died."

"What is wrong with me? So many have lost their fathers." Salmon rolled over on his side, wincing at the movement. Othniel had to lean in to hear the words muffled into the pillow. "Why is it so hard for me to put on my father's sandals and walk like a man?"

Othniel shook his hair back over his shoulders, giving himself a moment to

think through his response. “Every story is different. Even with Uncle Caleb’s wisdom and advice, it isn’t easy for me to know what to do. And I am not the prince of a whole tribe.”

“My father almost made it here to the land of Canaan . . .” Salmon pushed up on his elbows to engage Othniel face to face. “Every day for the past two months, I have had to beg Yahweh to take away my anger against the men who ended his life. Not only my father, those Simeonites nearly brought an end to all our people. How long do they think we would survive without the covenant protection of Yahweh?”

Othniel raised his eyebrows in agreement. Not just Simeon. It was still incomprehensible to him how quickly the leadership of all the tribes abandoned the covenant and joined the rebellion.

Salmon looked into his eyes searching for answers Othniel was quite certain did not exist. “In some ways I can understand how Zimri was snared by the idea of becoming king, co-ruler with Cozbi. But did he really think he was the answer to the dreams of a Midianite princess? That she had no other goal than being his lover?” His eyes flashed darkly as the questions gushed forth. “The unfaithfulness of the elders of Simeon is harder to understand. Why were they so eager to become the leading tribe of Israel? What benefit do they think Judah reaps from that responsibility?”

Othniel didn’t reply.

“There I go again. Anger and grief are like weights dragging me down into dark waters. Like the day Jathniel and I nearly drowned. No . . . Worse than that . . . When the flood of the Jordan pulled us under, there was a muddy, murky surface to struggle toward. This is different. I am underwater with no place of light or breath to swim toward.”

“Well, there is now,” Othniel said. “The Passover feast is the light this week. When it seems like you’re drowning, swim toward the light. I’ll be there, brother, and we’ll inhale deep draughts of life-giving air—together.”

“You can be certain I will listen to Caleb’s story very, very closely, knowing I’ll be expected to tell it next year.” There was a long pause before he spoke again.

“Everyone in our generation needs to hear the story again from someone who lived it. We have Moses’ writings, but we must not let the living force of the story be lost. I will organize storytelling convocations that include every family of Judah before Passover next year.”

Othniel flashed an approving smile. “I think you wear Prince Nashon’s sandals quite well.” He took a deep breath and pushed to his feet but could not hold back a soft moan. He hunched over, crippled by the searing pain of the movement.

“You’re a true friend,” Salmon replied. “But don’t expect me to swim toward that light before Passover eve. My groin groaning will stay right here.” He flashed his

teasing, lopsided grin. "I'll send Ada over to help your mother search for bitter herbs."  
 "Thanks, but I'm pretty sure Acsah has that covered."

### *King Nahari*

The sound of brass-reinforced war sandals rang out against the stone pavers of the throne room. Shinab responded to the summons with admirable speed, but as King Nahari watched the loose, gangling gait carrying his captain toward the throne, he felt a deep pang of remorse. The king truly missed the solid tread of Ahuzzath. He appraised the splotchy, pimpled countenance of his new captain with mild revulsion. Somehow even the fearsome spiked helmet looked silly on his new captain and those clapping footsteps evoked the image of a donkey. *But it can't be undone. The change had to be made. Ahuzzath failed.* The king suppressed all lingering regrets. *Shinab is shrewd and faithful. If only he had the experience of the head decomposing beside the city gates.*

The irritation rising from these conflicted thoughts erupted in a question while the young man was still bowing in reverential obeisance. "Captain Shinab, what do you advise regarding these invaders?"

"It is not mine to have opinions," Shinab answered meekly. "I merely await orders."

"You will have opinions if I ask for them."

Shinab looked up with a start. He searched Nahari's face silently for a moment. Then his eyes narrowed, surprisingly cold for one so young. "The invaders are vermin—vermin to be exterminated. Our forces can easily overtake their camp. Only say the word."

"And their god?"

"That is the concern of the priests."

"Get up, Shinab. How am I to respect a captain who remains groveling on the floor while we discuss an enemy as powerful as Israel?"

"As you wish, m'lord," the gangly youth mumbled, scrambling awkwardly to his feet.

"My priests ask for more sacrifices. Always more sacrifices." Nahari drummed his fingers on the carved cedar arms of his throne. "After these desert rats poured into King Sihon's valley and eliminated every inhabitant of Heshbon, my priests bid me sacrifice bulls. When they defeated King Og, it was more bulls. When Balak summoned Balaam to curse them, more bulls. When Jacob defeated Midian, yet more."

Shinab sniffed in contempt. "And now that the vermin crossed the floodwaters and made their nest in our own valley. Let me guess, more bulls."

“No. Now that I’ve all but depleted my cattle barns of sires for new calves, they say that only the blood of infants will stir our Lady Asherah. All the firstborn males under the age of two. The pride of every mother in Jericho, including my wives. The thought of giving up my little princes revolts me—but . . .”

He pinned Shinab’s eyes with what he hoped was an intimidating look. “What do you think? Wait for help from Asherah or attack?”

“Their apparent power must be deceit,” Shinab answered with an icy calmness. “They are the children of Jacob the Deceiver.” He returned the king’s glare with the unblinking gaze of a serpent. “Do not attack until we discover their weakness. While we wait, we must strengthen the defenses of our city. Assign the sharpest eyes to the watchtowers. Rotate the best of our archers and spearmen on the wall day and night. Maintain a full guard at the gate through the night watches.” The specific details gushed from the young man’s mouth with no hesitation. It seemed he had carefully considered every contingency. “But we are *Jericho*,” he concluded triumphantly. “We will not remain cowering within these walls forever. When the time is right, we will attack and destroy.”

There was a semblance of ancient wisdom in Shinab’s words. And power—in sharp contrast to the words of the priests. The king’s confidence was renewed. “Let it be so,” he said.