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THE KING'S MEN



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THE KING'S MEN

Voice of the Ancient

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ANCIENT

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For all those who walked beside me through the valley of cancer. You know who you are. You sent notes of encouragement, helpful items, gorgeous flowers, and handmade gifts. You fed my family and drove my kids all over town. You cheered me with your visits and folded my laundry. You gave of your time and your finances. You were my doctors, my nurses, my surgeons, and the ones to welcome me to treatments with an ever-present smile. You were patient with two years of upheaval in my writing process, chemo-brain drafts, major rewrites, and multiple pushed-back deadlines. You kept me going on the toughest days with your calls and texts and unwavering support. You tended to my basic needs when I was too sick to move. And most of all, you did not sit on the sidelines but instead battled alongside me with your prayers, lifting me up to the Great Healer and pleading on my behalf. You heeded the sacred call to fight at my side and on your knees. For all the suffering I endured over these past couple of years, I was gifted with a far greater abundance of love, joy, and peace—because of you.

THE GREAT SEA



So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.” But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey their voice and make them a king.”

1 Samuel 8:10–22a ESV

A Psalm of Ronen ben Avidan

The anointed one shall abide by the counsel of the
Most High,
The voice of the Ancient One to light his every step.

A shield to both the humble and the valiant,
His mighty fortress offers refuge to all who call on the
Name.

From ashes and dust shall his glory arise,
a diadem of splendor to grace the head of the lowly.

His scepter lifted high shines justice across the Land,
Heavenly righteousness, like a river of gladness, flows
from his throne.

Selah.

PROLOGUE

Avidan

1043 BC

MITZPAH, ISRAEL

Today, the first king of Israel would be chosen. And I would see it happen with my own eyes.

“Heads down!” rasped my cousin Zevi from beside me on the ground. My other cousin, Gavriel, and I plastered ourselves to the dirt. The thick grasses atop the ridge hid us well from the gathering of tribal leaders in the valley below, but we could not take any chances.

My heartbeat drummed hard against my ribs as I held my breath, praying the three of us hadn’t been spotted. If we were caught spying on the proceedings, my father would have me hauling water for the women thrice daily for a month. But such a punishment would be worth enduring to bear witness to such a pivotal event.

“What did you—” Gavriel began, but Zevi slapped a palm

across his mouth and gave a solemn shake of his head. The eldest among us at eighteen, Zevi's word usually held sway in situations like these. Even though he was older than me by only a year and Gavriel by nearly two, the horrors he'd witnessed as a child gave him the bearing of someone far older. Gavriel obeyed the silent command but not without rolling his eyes at Zevi's dramatic delivery. However, a scuffle behind us in the brush proved his caution worthwhile.

I sucked in a breath, lifting my eyes only far enough to search the stand of acacia trees that shaded our hiding place. I could almost feel the weight of the shoulder yoke across my back and the sun on my head as I imagined the next few weeks of walking back and forth from the stream. But instead of meeting my father's furious glare, it was our younger cousin Shalem's honey-brown eyes that peered around the trunk of the largest tree.

Gavriel huffed out a low laugh, shaking his head as he muttered, "Of course he followed."

"Shalem, what are you doing?" Zevi hissed. "We said we'd tell you the outcome as soon as it was over."

Shalem's black brows drew together. "It's not the same as being here. Why do you all get to watch and I don't?"

It was a valid question, and one he'd posed many times before. He hated whenever we left him behind. Hated being the youngest of us. But when we were boys running through the woods in Kiryat-Yearim with Zevi's giant dog loping alongside us, Shalem had paid the price for our negligence. The scar that bisected his right eyebrow, where a sharp branch had very nearly taken out his eye, was a constant reminder of that mistake.

None of us would ever forget the gush of blood streaming down his face, nor the tongue-lashing we'd received from his mother for not being more careful with her precious youngest child. Although Hodiya adored all of her children, she favored Shalem above the rest. Perhaps because with his black curls, bronze skin, and light-colored eyes he favored her—and her distant Egyptian heritage—the most.

So, for as frustrated as our young cousin was with our overprotectiveness, there were simply places we did not take him and times we did not invite him along. Sneaking up to the ridge overlooking an exclusive gathering of Israel's tribal elders was one of them. Even my own father, one of the most prominent musicians among the Levites, had not been invited to this meeting. It would be no small thing to be caught spying today.

However, like most people, I had a hard time denying Shalem anything. The boy was as charming as he was brilliant. He was also well aware of our weakness where he was concerned and rarely hesitated to use it to his advantage.

"Let him stay," I said with resignation. "What harm will it do now that he is already here? And someone could see him leaving."

Zevi frowned, forehead pinching as he searched for a reason to refute me. Shalem pressed his palms together beneath his chin, begging unashamedly. The small silver patch of hair he'd been born with, just above that scarred eyebrow, glimmered in the sunlight. Somehow the oddity only made his already-too-handsome appearance more intriguing. His mother called it the brush of Yahweh's finger and, much to the consternation of his older siblings, she insisted it proved Shalem was inordinately blessed.

"All right," grumbled Zevi, running his fingers through his mussed hair in frustration. "But keep down and say nothing."

Shalem's smile was a beam of light on this overcast day. Crouching, he scuttled through the grass, then wedged between Gavriel and me on the ground. "What did I miss?"

"Mostly arguing," I said in a breathy tone that even Zevi wouldn't chastise. "They are preparing now to cast the lots, but there were heated words over which set of priests—those who live here in Naioth or those from down in Hebron—had the authority to do so."

From what my father had told me over the years, there was ongoing dispute about who exactly held the divine blessing when it came to the priesthood—something about a shift in power over the lineage in long-dead ancestors. But since Samuel had been the

judge over most matters among the tribes for decades now, and since it was he who'd called this meeting in the first place, he'd ended the argument by announcing that he would be the one to cast the lots.

"This decision will go as Yahweh wills, not men," he'd declared, ending the argument.

Although both groups acquiesced to his authority, it was obvious that the delegation from the southern tribes were less than pleased. My father thought the rifts between the sons of Yaakov were just too deep to mend after all this time, even when this new king was installed, but surely this gathering of all the tribes proved him wrong. Even delegations from across the Jordan River—Gad, Eastern Manasseh, and Reuben—had come to witness this moment. Although their clothing was odd and their accents strangely tilted after so many years of separation from the tribes on the west side of the Jordan, their presence here today would signify to the nations that Yaakov's sons were still one beneath the banner of Israel after all this time.

It was impossible not to feel the gravity of these proceedings, even for the four of us hiding in the brush like a pack of thieves. When Gavriel had come up with the idea to climb the ridge well before dawn so we could witness this decision, I'd been surprised Zevi had gone along with it. Instead of shrugging off the idea, a strange light had sparked in our cousin's eyes and he'd been insistent we get as close as we could so we would not miss a word. To my delight, the rocky cliffs around the gathering ushered the voices upward and straight to our curious ears.

Samuel and a few priests stood at the center of the congregation, and one gray-headed leader from each tribe was called to gather around in a tight circle to oversee the lots. I itched to be among them, wishing I knew exactly what the stones looked like and how the priests determined the answers given by Yahweh. I'd always wondered if it was like when my uncle Natan tossed his sheep-knuckle dice during games. But as I'd been born a Levite, like generations of men before me, we were not of Aharon's lin-

eage and therefore not privy to the secret inner workings of the high priesthood.

With his official priestly garb and his silvery Nazirite braid trailing nearly to the back of his knees, Samuel's special status as a mouthpiece of Yahweh was never more apparent. He raised both hands in the air, a hush falling over the crowd as he supplicated loudly to the Most High before beginning his sacred task.

As Samuel began casting the lots, it seemed as if the entire valley held its collective breath. Even the birds in the trees above us were silent and the breeze went still. When the announcement was made that Naftali was the first tribe to be eliminated, the tension grew even more fraught.

One by one, tribes were ruled out by the stones, those representatives who remained pulling in closer and those who'd been rejected sidling back to rejoin their brethren. Soon, only the elders from Yehudah, Benjamin, and Efraim stood before Samuel. Again, the lots were cast, and Efraim was excused, the leader not looking at all surprised by the decision as he retreated to stand with his delegation.

However, when the tribe of Benjamin was announced to be the winner of the next toss, the men from the tribe of Yehudah exploded, their displeasure with the decision tinging the air with loud accusations that Samuel had somehow influenced the outcome. A few left the meeting altogether, heads shaking and expressions thunderous as they turned their backs on the assembly. And truly, I too was astounded that the wolves of Benjamin had been chosen over the lions of Yehudah. One of the smallest tribes, Benjamin had nearly destroyed themselves by instigating civil war decades ago and there was plenty of resentment left over for their foolishness, even after all this time. And even more than that, it was Yehudah who'd received the royal blessing from his father Yaakov. What could possibly have shifted in the mind of Yahweh?

A shofar sounded somewhere down in the chaos, startling everyone into relative quiet. Samuel stood unmoved in the center,

arms folded across his barrel chest, and a stern look on his face. He waited until all eyes were on him before speaking.

“We’ve come here today to determine the will of Yahweh, my *brothers*.” He leaned into the word—a reminder that despite our tribal differences, the familial bond between the descendants of Avraham remained. “And if Adonai has chosen Benjamin for this honor, that is his right, as king and creator of the universe.”

The revered prophet paused, gaze roving over the leaders standing before him. “And may I remind you that this is what *you* asked for? What you begged me for, even though I have warned you of the consequences? You may question my wisdom, as I am only a man, but do *not* question that of the Most High.”

Satisfied order had been restored, Samuel continued his task, calling forth leaders from the major clans among the tribes of Benjamin and, just as with the tribes, eliminated them one by one, until the elder of the Matrites stood alone. I knew nothing of the family, but Gavriel, whose father was a Benjamite himself, whispered they were a small family but had a reputation for fierceness in battle.

From among them, the family of Kish was chosen by the lots, and I wondered if the man with iron-gray hair and broad shoulders was the one we’d been waiting for all this time. But another flurry of activity brought forth the man’s sons.

“Which do you think it will be?” whispered Shalem as we surveyed the candidates who ranged in age from just a couple of years older than Zevi to one who, like his father, sported a dark gray beard and a regal posture.

To my surprise, the firstborn was the first to be eliminated. And in fact, when after a few more rounds of lots, Samuel called out the name *Saul*, everyone looked around in confusion, while the rest of the brothers appeared stunned.

“I saw him down near our campsite,” replied one of the younger sons of Kish. “Hiding among the baggage.”

Nervous laughter skittered through the crowd, but someone offered to go fetch him. Samuel’s expression was a blank mask

as the congregation below waited while shifting their feet and murmuring to one another.

Who was this man chosen by Yahweh to be king? His entire life had suddenly been redefined, transforming whatever mundane purpose he'd had before into something extraordinary, and I could not help but envy him. Not the weight of his coming responsibilities, or even the glory of such an exalted position, but that his life would not merely be the expected continuation of his father's legacy. My own path had been set in stone by the happenstance of my birth into a particular Levitical line, and into a family whose musical abilities were lauded all the way back to our sojourn in Egypt. What would it be like to have everything flipped upside down with one flick of a wrist?

While I was still knee-deep in my musings, a commotion near the back of the crowd snagged my attention. It seemed Saul ben Kish had been found.

A shiver tingled across my shoulders as I glanced over at my cousins, who were held in rapt attention. Gavriel and I had always been close, and Shalem naturally gravitated toward us older boys since all the cousins his own age were girls. But when Zevi had been adopted by my uncle Natan and his wife, Shoshana, our little pack solidified. We all wore a crosswise scar at the base of our thumbs as evidence of a blood-brother pact we took as children, testifying to our lifelong commitment to one another. I was grateful that all four of us, including Shalem, were here to witness this moment.

The crowd finally parted, and a man came forward, one who stood nearly a head above anyone around him. I'd thought Natan was the tallest man I'd ever seen, but Saul at least matched him, if not exceeded him by a couple of fingers. With dark brown hair, a thick beard along a strong jaw, skin bronzed from the sun, and his shoulders broad and hard-muscled, he looked like a man used to labor in the fields. Now that I saw him, I no longer doubted why he'd been selected above even his eldest brother. He would be impressive on and off the battlefield. Our enemies would think twice before going up against such a man.

A surge of hope swelled in me. Perhaps now our nation would no longer be so vulnerable to the others around us. I could almost see it all unfold in my mind: an army to make knees around us shake; a leader whose might was respected and feared among the nations; and tribes that would finally band together to claim what was ours by divine right.

All eyes followed Saul as he came forward to stand before Samuel. Perhaps it was only shock, but I could not help but think that the man's expression was strangely troubled for someone who'd been suddenly whisked from obscurity to glory, and whose name would be permanently inscribed in our nation's history as the first king of Israel.

As for Samuel, the prophet appeared unaffected by the man's impressive appearance, like he'd already known whose lot would fall before him today. He commanded Saul to turn and face both the tribal elders and the *nassim*, the princes of Israel whose born headship was now subject to a man of Benjamin appointed by Yahweh.

Samuel lifted his voice, the echo of it rolling over the expectant crowd. "Do you see the man Adonai has chosen?" His words rang with authority as he gestured toward Saul, whose strong stance belied none of the fleeting trepidation I'd glimpsed on his face moments before. "Do you see that there is no one like him among all the people?"

The men of Benjamin were the first to shout, but one by one the rest followed suit—even the men of Yehudah who'd been so angry at the unexpected cast of the lots.

"Long live the king!" came the cry from every corner of the valley of Mitzpah, from my own lips, and from my cousins on the ground beside me. "Long live King Saul!"



Avidan

NAIOTH, ISRAEL
1042 BC

The enemy grinned at me, tipping his chin upward as he slapped a flat palm to his chest, daring me to attack again. Although my muscles screamed, I took the bait, barreling forward with my sword raised.

We clashed, weapons tangling, both of us grunting and sweating and determined not to give the other the smallest measure of ground. Sword to sword, we circled each other, taking whatever hits we could but neither able to claim victory. I may have been taller and broader, but he was well-honed and relentless.

I swung again and missed, and he took the opportunity to taunt me, so I dug into whatever reserve of strength remained and slashed, the edge of my sword meeting the top of his shoulder where bone met bone.

He cursed, dark eyes flaring as he lost any hint of civility. He dropped his weapon and charged me, his body coming at me like a rampaging bull. The breath was knocked clear from my body as he took me down and we landed in a heap in the dirt. I blinked

hard, trying to clear the haze from my head, and found a knife at my throat.

“You’re dead,” said my enemy. Then a slow grin spread over his face. “Again.”

“Perhaps, if you’d actually unsheathed your knife.” My gaze was pulled upward where Gavriel and Shalem were leaning over the two of us, smirking. I called them both a foul name and then pushed at Zevi with a snarl. “Get off me.”

My cousin rolled away. “At least it was better than last time. It took me twice the effort to fend you off than it used to. You should never let your guard down.”

For as long as I could remember, the four of us had played war games, sparring with sticks or pine cones or whatever makeshift weapon we could find on the forest floor. But Zevi was nearing the age of twenty, when he would be allowed to stand with his Yehudite brethren. So along the way, our games had transformed into casual training exercises, and we took turns trying to best him by whatever means necessary. I’d even spent extra time lately running the hills and lifting heavier and heavier stones in preparation for his arrival in Naioth, where our families had gathered to celebrate the Pesach holidays in the Levitical community built by Samuel the Seer. Yet, no matter how hard I had pushed myself these past weeks, Zevi was still victorious.

Perhaps it was simply that he spent most of his time in Kiryat-Yearim cutting down trees with his father and hauling timber to help support his family, or because any spare moments he had were spent in training himself for what he considered his life’s purpose. Perhaps it was that he was simply a born soldier whose every thought was vengeance. I was certain that when he finally had the opportunity to join the fight Saul’s men would take immediate notice of his skill.

His father had told him he must wait until after the fall festivals to take up arms against the Philistines, an obvious attempt to stall the inevitable. And because of Zevi’s great respect for my uncle, he’d submitted. But he was like a stallion champing at the

bit, huffing and stamping as he awaited the moment he was finally cut loose.

It had been a decade since he'd been swept up in the destruction of the town of Zanoah and taken into slavery by the Philistines. And while I was glad that he would finally have the chance to stand against our enemies like he could not as a child, it was difficult to quash the envy that had lately dug its claws into me. The next time the enemy reared its head, Zevi would have the freedom to march into battle while I would be stuck here, making pretty instruments.

Frustration boiling over, I sprang to my feet to charge at Zevi again. Thrown off-balance by my surprise attack, my cousin went down with a thud, my forearm locked on his throat. I may not be as skilled with weapons as Zevi or Gavriel, but my uncle had showed me a thing or two from his time as the bare-knuckled champion of Ashdod.

Zevi's eyes were wide as he blinked up at me in shock, but then he began to laugh. Shaking his head, he lifted his large square palm and splayed it over my face, pushing me backward. "Get off me, you big sweaty ox."

"You should never let your guard down," I mocked and then began laughing too. Gavriel and Shalem joined in, the four of us making enough ruckus to set a bevy of blackbirds darting into the sky.

Zevi grinned as he stood, brushing crushed leaves and dirt from his tunic. "That, I should not. Especially against the Philistine half of you."

I grabbed for him again, pulling him into a headlock and scrubbing at his forehead with my knuckles. "You'd best not forget it either."

He pushed me away with a playful growl. It had always astounded me that he never held a grudge against me for my mother's heritage, even after what he'd endured.

"My turn!" shouted Shalem, swinging the wooden sword I'd tossed aside during my altercation with Zevi. Gavriel had made the practice weapon from some sturdy terebinth a couple of years ago and the thing was thicker around than both of Shalem's slender

wrists combined. He'd not yet grown into his gangly limbs, and no matter that he ate nearly as much as Gavriel and I combined, he never seemed to gain even a spoonful of bulk. And much to his chagrin, his face remained as smooth as the day he'd been born.

But whatever our younger cousin lacked in build or physical maturity, he made up for in heart and astounding intelligence. He might not ever be a warrior like Zevi or Gavriel, since he too was of the Levitical lineage, but I had no doubt that someday he would be a force to be reckoned with in one way or another.

Accepting our younger cousin's challenge, Zevi snatched up his own practice sword and met Shalem in the center of the clearing. Of course, he used little of the force he'd employed against me during our match, yet preserved Shalem's honor by making a believable pretense of effort.

"Are you really going to let a boy with no beard beat you up, Zev?" Gavriel called out when Shalem got in a surprise hit to Zevi's shoulder, then hooted in victory. Zevi called the two of us a name for our laughter but also congratulated Shalem for the strike.

"Uncle Natan will never be comfortable with Zevi's choice to fight," Gavriel said from beside me, "but he has to be impressed with how he's prepared himself."

It was true. Zevi was more than ready to be a soldier, even if his father himself had vowed to never lift a hand in violence for anything other than immediate defense of his loved ones. The two of them had had many arguments over Zevi's determination to go to war, but Natan could not debate Zevi's origins. Zevi may call Natan and Shoshana his parents, but they never insisted he forget his heritage among the sons of Yehudah. And neither did they forbid him from pursuing what he felt was his purpose—to avenge those he'd watched suffer all those years before.

"If only I didn't have to wait to follow him," Gavriel said under his breath.

Even though Gavriel was nearly two years from military age, he was almost as restless as Zevi, eager to do his part for our people and even more anxious to be out of his stepfather's home.

Although my aunt Miri's husband was nothing like his drunken abuser of a brother, who'd fathered Gavriel and then died an ignominious death, the man who'd stepped in to marry his brother's widow was far too absorbed in building his business contracts and amassing wealth to care what her son did, or to fulfill his own responsibilities to his tribal brethren.

Instead, the wealthy Benjamite employed a cadre of mercenaries to protect his large home down in neighboring Ramah and trusted that his connections with others—be they Canaanite, Israelite, or even Philistine—would keep him and his family safe, no matter who was in power. He'd even found favor with our new king over the past year, but Gavriel was determined to prove himself in battle, not by filling the royal coffers with silver.

"At least you'll *have* a chance to go," I said. "When the time comes, you'll be gaining glory on the battlefield with your Benjamite brethren and I'll be here strumming a harp."

"True. But just remember"—his brow furrowed as he clapped a hand to my shoulder, his expression solemn—"that means you'll have plenty of time for all the women in town while we are off fighting."

I swung at him, laughing. "As if any of them would look twice at your ugly face, even if you were here."

He dodged my halfhearted punch. "Don't worry, I'm sure Uncle Ronen will beg a few fathers to force their daughters to consider you while we are gone."

"Have you forgotten who I resemble most?" I replied with a smug grin. "My mother said her brother was the most sought-after man in all of Ashdod. They used to scream and faint at his feet like he was a god."

He shrugged. "Well, I've heard Philistines also bow down to snakes and rodents, so . . ."

I growled, grabbing him by the shoulders and yanking him to the ground. We wrestled, pinching and taking easy shots at each other while Zevi and Shalem ignored our antics and continued sparring.

Voice of the Ancient

A distant ram's horn broke through our noise, the sound emanating from the direction of Ramah. We paused our scuffling to listen, the hair rising on my neck as the haunting echo of the rapid bleats died away.

When the shofar sounded again, this time with an even more urgent pitch to the call, the four of us looked at one another for a breathless moment before we were on the move, racing out of the clearing in silent accord to the valley below. We'd be late to the evening meal and the celebration to follow, but I'd apologize later. I had to find out why all able-bodied men had just been summoned to the city gates.