

UVI POZNANSKY
THE DAVID CHRONICLES
VOLUME I

A marble bust of a young man with curly hair, shown in profile facing right. The bust is set against a background of abstract, colorful brushstrokes in shades of blue, yellow, and red.

*Rise to
Power*

UVI POZNANSKY
THE DAVID CHRONICLES
Volume I
Rise to Power

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Contents

[Prologue](#)

[First Audition](#)

[Larger than Life](#)

[Choose Your Enemy](#)

[Crossing Swords](#)

[The Valley of Elah](#)

[A Last Request](#)

[Down the Path](#)

[The Making of History](#)

[The Mystery of a Pebble](#)

[His Head is Mine](#)

[Fame](#)

[How Much for a Princess](#)

[Michal](#)

[The Kish Clan](#)

[Even to the Wall](#)

[I Go, and Flee, and Escape](#)

[Why Should I Kill You?](#)

[Son of a Perverse and Rebellious Woman](#)

[The King of the Land](#)

[In the Wilderness](#)

[The Sanctity of the Crown](#)

[Abigail](#)

[A Question of Betrayal](#)

[The King is Dead](#)

[The Grand Lament](#)

[A Tribal Coronation](#)

[A Peek at Bathsheba](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About this Book](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About the Cover and Artwork](#)

[Books by Uviart](#)

[Apart From Love](#)

[Rise to Power](#)

[A Favorite Son](#)

[Twisted](#)

[Home](#)

Prologue

I hear the jingle of keys. To my ears, it is such a lovely sound...

“Come,” I cry out, “crack it, crack open the door! Step into my chamber... If my memory isn’t playing its tricks on me, you must be the first to visit me here for quite a long while...”

No one answers.

“Come in,” I plead, hoping that no one could catch the shaky tone of my voice.

My fever is gone. In its place, now come severe bouts of shivering. I try, as best I can, to control myself. I slow down the chattering of my teeth as I call out, “Of one thing I’m sure: Reading what I’ve been working on—which, for lack of a better term I would call a memoir—you would think me a madman.”

Suddenly I suspect there is more than one of them out there. Putting my ear to the iron door I hear them shuffling their feet on the other side, without uttering a single word. To make them speak to me I let myself admit, out loud, “You’re right. Perhaps I am.”

There, through the keyhole—I can somehow sense it—an eye is observing me.

There are limits to power. When afflicted by an unexplained illness, even a king can be placed in quarantine. The words freeze on my lips, Heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony... My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?

I am tempted to kick the door, to startle them—but the isolation in this place is such that it forces me to talk, because I need to hear a human voice, and I need someone to listen.

So I call out, “Perhaps it’s me who’s confused,” but I refuse to believe it.

The door creaks on its hinges, only to reveal two shadows stirring out there, one blurring the other. They let silence reign over me, so in spite of myself I start wringing one hand with the other.

I hang my head over these knuckles, over these pale, veined wrists which I hardly recognize as mine, finding myself overcome by a new enemy, one I never expected: the chill of old age.

In my youth I became famous for being a fine, eloquent speaker, with a particular talent for eulogies—but now it seems that my listeners have left me. Why write another psalm? Who would read it? Who would take it to heart?

Being abandoned is not something I take lightly. I want to tell the crowds to come back to me and not only to take a listen—but to adore me, too!

Glancing at the shadows, “Come in,” I beseech. “Let me see, let me touch you. Talk to me... And let me tell you my story.”

Where will I start it? From my childhood, from the first time I came to the court. The moments of my life are vivid in my mind, too vivid to be dismissed as merely the wishful thinking of a locked up old man. My fingers still carry the sense, the cold touch of Saul’s crown, when at last I laid my hands on it. And I know, in a way that no one else can begin to imagine, how heavy it is.

This was the thing—or so I thought, back then—the very thing that would make me what I wanted: larger than life.

Larger than life? I start laughing, at myself most of all, only to be startled by echoes. I listen in alarm to the way they peel, peeling away from the walls.

“Listen,” I say, “whoever you are: I am a poet, a bard. For me, reality is a hard thing to grasp, at least *your* kind of reality: one that’s confined, as if by a straightjacket, to the task at hand. Trapped in such a life I would feel... Oh, what’s the right word? Condemned.”

Somehow I catch them, out there, holding their breath. They must be astonished by my unstoppable chatter, and by the unstoppable echoes of my chatter.

“Yes,” I stress. “Being a Philistine, you may think that such a reality sets you at ease, that it removes any doubt in your head as to your purpose here.”

One shadow separates from the blackness behind it, and all of a sudden he cannot help himself and his voice bursts out, “Don’t call me a Philistine!”

I say, “A bit touchy, aren’t you!”

And he says, “I’ve killed my share of those bastards, out on the battlefield. Everyone knows I’ve earned my medals, being in your service for so many years. I’ve bloodied my hands for you! So now, listen to me: you owe me.”

I am in no mood to offer an apology. Instead I tell him, “You bloodied your hands for your own sake, for the thrill of the kill.”

He says nothing. Over his silence I say, “Now then, consider this: even as you’re trapped here in this reality, your mind—just like mine—would misbehave. It would fly, swinging wildly to and fro, far away from this place. But enough about you. It’s me we are talking about.”

I can hear him taking a step back. In a minute he will slam the door shut.

To hold his attention, “True,” I grant him. “My grasp on life is somewhat looser than yours. For an isolated man it may be a strange thing to say—but trust me: it sets me free.”

“Ha!” he sniggers.

“Oh, stop it!” I wail. “What, you think I’m deaf? Don’t you laugh at me. It makes me doubt myself, question my own sanity.”

Then I bang, bang, bang the wall. I close my eyes. Here I am, a child again... And at once my ear catches a thud. Then come the echoes, shrill echoes singing all around the royal court, as the spear has hit the wall, missing me by a hair.

“Wake up,” says his voice, a bit softer now.

In a flash the wick of a candle is lit. It flares up and then, in an instant, darkness curls away into the far recesses of this space. The flame seems to lick the gilded decorations of the door as it swings open. Having stepped in, a man leads a figure clad in a dark coat into my presence.

He lays a hand on my shoulder, trying to steady me. Then he whispers, “You must be dreaming again.”

“No!” I shake my head. “No, no, no! If this were a dream, I would have forgotten it, the way most of us do come morning, which lets us focus on the task at hand. But what if your task—now that all is lost—is to remember? Reflect on it. Think of the ways the mind works, yours and mine. Perhaps we’re more alike than you wish to admit.”

“I’m nothing like you,” he insists.

It is then that I come to my senses, and by the scars on his hand I know who he is. Joav is my blood, my family, one of the three sons of my older sister, Zeruriah. He is the man I have trusted to become my first in command. But these days, he is a stranger to me. Everyone is.

“I thought you admired me,” I say.

“I did,” says he. “But this I know: it’s a risky place to be, stuck in your shoes.”

“And I thought that risk excites you.”

“No, not anymore. Risk is for the young.”

Thrashing around, I start kicking at this thing and the other. “I’m far from being stuck,” I shout at him over the metallic din. “And the hell with my shoes! Here, see? I’m barefoot!”

Over my words, Joav raises his voice. “Stop that,” he cries, which in any other royal household

would be an unheard of thing to do in the presence of a monarch. He points the candle at the thing I have made fly, with such clink and clank, across the chamber.

Now I catch its glitter, flashing out from the shadow down there, in the corner, reflecting the dance of the flame.

“Why d’you kick the crown?” he grumbles. “D’you even know who you are? Do you? Then, tell me: what’s your name?”

“Guess it, will you?” I narrow my eyes with suspicion, refusing to confide even in him. “Can’t you see? I’m a boy, reaching for the crown.”

Joav bites his lips. Perhaps, like me, he is tired of this game. I know what he wants: recognition which I am too stubborn to give. “No, David. You’re not a boy anymore.” He dares to contradict me. “And the crown is yours. I mean, it’s yours to lose.”

“Don’t I know it,” I sigh, gathering the thing to my chest.

Joav smiles at how hard I clutch it.

“At this point,” he chuckles, “the only power you still have is the power to give it away.”

“What? Give it away? I’ll do no such thing.”

“You’re going to depend on your successor,” he says, and there is a tone of warning in his voice. “Choose well, your majesty. If you do, perhaps he’ll let your legacy live on.”

With that, Joav turns around to face the figure standing there, so quietly, behind him. She is holding a pile of silk sheets and wool blankets. With a firm hand he pushes her forward, in my direction.

“Don’t be angry with me,” he says, removing the dark coat from her shoulders and flinging it aside. “I’m just following orders, and so does this girl. She’s yours to keep.”

“I have no use for a girl. What I need is a woman.”

“Bathsheba is asleep.”

“I see.”

“Really, she is.”

“She is? Is she, really? I haven’t forgotten how hard you fought for me. What have you become, Joav? A has-been war hero?”

He peers into my eyes, surprised to realize that I recognize him.

“In my name,” I press on, “you used to lead our nation into great wars, and now, look! Look at you, doing the bidding of a woman! I suppose my dear wife told you what to tell me. And she instructed you to cover me with blankets, and most of all, to keep me still.”

He gives no answer, other than hanging his head in shame before me.

“The Queen knows me all too well,” I growl. “It’s her I need.”

He holds himself back from repeating, *Bathsheba is asleep*. And I go on to groan, “She knows she should be here.”

“In her place, here’s the girl. Your wife told me to bring her.”

“I’m too cold for that—”

“The girl knows it,” says he, “and she knows her duty. I made sure of it.”

“What’s her name?”

“Abishag. She’s sure to keep you warm.”

With that he sets the candle down on the bedside table, and gives me a sly look under those hairy eyebrows of his, which seem to have thickened even more with age. Then he leaves the chamber, not before breathing in my ear in his coarse, scratchy voice, “Listen, why are you being so difficult?”

“Me? Difficult?”

~~“I went to plenty of trouble to find this one. Virgins aren’t easy to come by anymore.”~~

I am just about to say, They never were—but Joav has already disappeared. So there I am, left standing opposite the girl, and finding myself drawn towards her, perhaps because of the fresh fragrance of soil and fruit emanating from her skin. For the first time I take a close look at her.

This is awkward. I take a step towards her, and can almost guess her thoughts. These words may be on her mind, “Don’t stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun... My mother’s sons were angry with me, and made me take care of the vineyards... My own vineyard I had to neglect.”

She turns her head, and her long, dark lashes flutter nervously over the cheekbone. By the flicker of the flame I can tell that they are unpainted, and so are her lips. She must have been brought directly here, to my chamber, with no proper preparations at the women’s quarters, let alone a dab of perfume.

Thank God for that! I hate proper preparations, and I cannot stand that nauseating mixture of fixatives and solvents they call perfume.

Her face and bare, slender shoulders have been bronzed by the sun. I notice that her feet are large, just like mine, and her toes are still soiled from the long journey, like some farm girls I used to know.

The girl is a long way from home. I know it, because so am I.

*

Later that night, when the girl has fallen asleep, I slip out of bed. The blanket keeps her warm, which you can tell by her moist, rosy cheeks—but it is of no help to me. Her pupils move under the eyelids as she dreams of being somewhere else. She utters a cry in her sleep, and turns away from me. I take a step back. Then I start pacing back and forth across the chamber.

This palace is richly decorated, because such was my ambition in recent years: to show the world the finest of marvels in a new city, which is mine: the city of David.

Here, I thought, is a new center of power, commanding a view of our twelve tribes, yet set upon newly conquered territory, one that does not belong to any of them. With the divisions that afflict us Jerusalem is yet to become a symbol of our nation, our unity.

At this point, the city has no history yet. Erected log by log, with cedar trees imported from Lebanon, and slab by slab, cut out of the hardest rocks in the Judea mountain range, this city will become my mark, my political statement. It will stand for hope.

Alas, it is so far from where I grew up. Bethlehem seems like a place lost in fog. I have lived in Jerusalem for decades. Still, it does not feel like home.

Without even knowing it, the girl has reminded me how I ache to see the soaring mountains, the rolling fields around the place where I was born. Even the trees smell different, back there. I long to go back. One thing is clear to me: this is not the first time in my life to be locked up—but perhaps it is the last.

I unfurl a papyrus roll, and start scratching minute Aramaic letters in it. The flame has died out some time ago, and already the tip of the wick has lost its glow. I stand up, stare around me, and in my confusion I think, What is this? Where am I?

Hell, I am an old man, it is late at night, and I am gathering my thoughts, somehow...

In exhaustion I curl on the floor, and peer at the darkness, at the way it tumbles over the ceiling

over the stone walls, painting everything gray.

~~It is an uncertain color, which reminds me of certain places in the Paran wasteland, the caves in which I used to hide back then, when I was a fugitive.~~

I remember: I could spot the fingerprints of other fugitives before me, mark upon mark, one blood smear over another fading into the decayed matter, trying to record a forgotten history, the history of those who had been conquered. I used to wonder who they were, and asked myself if I, too, am destined for oblivion...

At other times, these walls remind me of the interiors of burial places in depths of the pyramids. Great artists were summoned there to paint invented scenes, scenes from the lives of entombed monarchs. I tell myself, such is the way to ensure your legacy!

What is at stake here is the virtue of the office, the sanctity of the crown, which I tried to preserve most of the time—but certainly not always... My appetite for sin would get out of control and threaten to undermine my best efforts to establish myself, establish my glory for all to cherish. Even so, future generations must revere my name.

Hell, I made sure of that.

At the time I gave orders to imprison quite a few of my court historians, for no better reason than a misspelling, or a chance error in judgement, for which they tried to apologize profusely. Of course, to no avail. They never saw the light of day again. I knew I was right, because who are they to strive for something as misleading as reporting the bare facts?

Both Saul and I were anointed to rule the nation, which without fail caused a civil war. We fought over something larger than the crown. Ours was a battle between two contending versions of history. The outcome would decide who would be called a hero and who—a villain.

And having won that struggle, I was not about to allow the scribes in my court to report any faults in me, any wrongdoings. My record would be clean. There was, I decided, no truth other than mine.

But now, quite strangely, I find myself in need of telling my story, of reporting it just the way they tried to do, those damn fools: with no spins. Faithfully. Perhaps it serves me right for throwing them in jail.

The tip of my pen is dull, and the ink has dried—but that cannot stop me from writing. Nothing will. I am grasping for power once again, but in a different way than I did back then. This time I can see, with great clarity, that power does not come from the crown. At long last I have no urge anymore to keep my grasp on it.

Now I know, power comes from within, from something else entirely: my skill with words. I wish I would have recognized it a long time ago, on my first visit to the royal court. Perhaps then I would have become a poet. Not a king.

It is still a long time from daybreak, and the girl's breast heaves as she mumbles something, some unclear word. She is so close at hand and yet, so far out of my reach.

When I was first crowned king over my own tribe, I was such a vigorous young man that no illness could keep me away from my dear wives and concubines. If I would catch a cold, all of them would be sneezing. Not so this girl. Unlike all the women I have had since then, she is immune to my weaknesses. She is the one I will never know.

I am here with her, yet this chill is meant for me alone.

I hold my breath until she lulls herself back to sleep. Faint shadows start dancing on the wall. I read the shapes, trying to invent someone, a listener.

You.

~~I whisper, Come in... Call me insane, who cares? Who the hell cares if you refuse to trust me, if you insist on clinging to your kind of reality, which is as dull as it is solid... Mine, I insist, is not a dream.~~

But even if it is... Even so, it is true! How can you deny it? Here is my story. I am opening it up to you.

I can see why at first glance what you see here—these letters which I jotted here, on these papyrus rolls—may seem scattered, even scary. I understand why you step back from my door, why you look over your shoulder to find the guard...

Come in! Will you? Will you read these scribblings? Can you see my sword, which I have drawn here, look! Can you see it the way I do, lifting out of the ink and into the air, turning magically over, around and around, right here in the center of the space?

If you can, then—by the flash of it—I shall take you along, to leap with me into the surface of the steely thing. Down into its depths. Into my reflection.

First Audition

Chapter 1

I am so thrilled! I can barely contain myself. My skin is tingling all over. Oh, what luck! What a wonderful day! I have been summoned to appear before his majesty. Nothing can be more exciting than this chance—truly, the chance of a lifetime—to audition for the job of a court musician.

Being brash and inexperienced I arrive at the front gate brimming with confidence. Rejection? What rejection! I am utterly unprepared for it. A little voice somewhere inside my head keeps telling me that for an entertainer, this may be a mistake.

No one has seen the king in public during the last four weeks, and rumors are that he is possessed by an evil spirit, or something. I am skeptical of what cannot be touched, plucked or squeezed, so I think nothing of spirits, evil or divine. Perhaps I will one day, when I am old, like him.

At this point I cannot wait to play before him. All I crave is applause. Back on my father's farm in the outskirts of Bethlehem, I can make even the most hardened men soften, somehow, to the sound of my music, which convinces me—perhaps foolishly—that I am destined for fame.

Now I knock at the palace doors, and prick up my ears. There seems to be some commotion inside, after which the doors crack open, ever so slightly.

I sense someone looking up and down at me, studying me through the hairline gap.

At last, "Let the boy in," says a voice.

"You searched him, did you?" growls another.

"It's fine, he's been cleared," says the first, with a lazy drawl. "They done him at the front gate already."

There is some exchange of words behind the doors, which is hard for me to figure out, because of the foreign accent. Of course, at this time of civil unrest, none of the locals from Judea or from tribes other than the king's own would ever be hired to guard the palace.

After a while, two guards step out with a heavy thump. They look like apes in uniform.

One says, "Hey you! What's that thing here, in your hand?"

And the other butts in, "You can't bring weapons in here."

"This?" I chuckle. "My flute? You never seen one?"

They study the thing, even poke their hairy fingers into each of its holes, crinkling their noses as if expecting it to explode in their face. Finally they step aside to let me in.

These stone walls play back a quick beat, which answers the clip-clop of my worn-out sandals. They have been kicked down the line to me after each one of my seven brothers used them, each in his turn. The crinkled leather smells of their flesh, but also of the grassy fields back home.

Now I dash eagerly through the long corridor which—to my surprise—has a musty stench. At the far end I spot an arc, which is where a hall opens before me.

The space is enormous. It is lit by two torches: one flickering out of a sconce in the right corner, the other—out of a sconce in the left. Between them lies a flat slab of rock, used as a stage. Above it is a richly draped, raw-silk canopy, decorated by pretty tassels the likes of which I have never seen before. And sheltered in its shadow is a tall figure in a long, royal robe.

There is something about him, something menacing which I cannot begin to put into words. Perhaps it is that thing which he clasps tightly in his fist: an incredibly long spear. Light glances off

its sharp iron head, as if to give a signal of some kind, a warning.

~~It makes me wonder... This is the safest place in the kingdom: his place, his palace. He is surrounded by a dozen or so hand-picked attendants. And yet there he is: a king clinging to his weapon, as if this were a combat zone.~~

To show respect I fall to my knees before him. The floor is cold, having absorbed the damp of a long winter. The surface is porous, even crumbly here and there, cut of rocks from the Judea mountains. So is the surface of the stage, right in front of my eyes.

I cannot help noting the marks drawn by his spear in the film of dirt up there, around his boots. Scratch, twist, scratch again... No wonder he seems to be in such a royal pain: with all these attendants here to serve him, not a single one has managed to come up with the bright idea of sweeping the floor. They all carry weapons, but not one has a broom.

Sitting nearly immobile, Saul seems as chalky as the walls around him. He sits crumpled—in an odd way—upon the throne. His nails keep digging into the little velvety cushions that are stretched over the carved armrests. Not once does he give a nod in my direction, nor does he acknowledge my presence in any other way.

Which agitates me. It awakens my doubt, doubt in my skill. Much the same as I feel in my father's presence. Repressed. On the verge of acting out.

So, rising to my feet I blurt out, "Your majesty—"

"Don't talk," whispers one of the attendants. "Play."

I am pushed a step or two backwards, so as to maintain proper distance from the presence of the king. My name is called out in a clunky manner of introduction, after which I am instructed to choose from an array of musical instruments. I figure they must be the loot of war. So when I play them, the music of enemy tribes shall resound here, around the hall.

I pluck the strings of a sitar, then put it back down and pick up a lyre, which I make quiver, quiver with notes of fire! Then I rap, clap, tap, snap my fingers, and just to be cute, play a tune on my flute, after which I do a skip, skip, skip and a back flip.

It is a long performance, and towards the end of it I find myself trying to catch my breath. Alas my time is up. Even so I would not stop.

Entranced I go on to recite several of my poems, which I have never done before, for fear of exposing my most intimate, raw emotions, which is a risky thing for a man, and even riskier for a boy my age. Allowing your vulnerability to show takes one thing above all: a special kind of courage. Trust me, it takes balls.

So, having read the last verse I cast a look at the attendants, especially the ones closest to me. Their faces seem to have softened. I can sense them beginning to adore me. One of them comes over and taps my shoulder, which nearly knocks me off my feet. Another one laughs. Others wipe their eyes.

Then I glance at Saul, hoping for a tear, a smile, a word of encouragement. Instead I note an odd, vacant look on his face. Utter indifference. It stings me. Am I too short, too young, too curly for the role he has in mind for me?

Wiping the sweat off my brow I bow down before him and turn to leave the court, which is the moment he leans forward on his spear.

"Stop right there," says Saul. "Tell me: what can you do best?"

To which I say, "Recover."

He glowers at me as if to ask, Recover? From what?

~~“From this,” I point out, daring to be honest. “Rejection.”~~

At this, the king sinks into the back of the throne, where darkness hangs from the decorative canopy. It shrouds his face with a lemony shadow, blurs his lips—but not before I spot a strange smile.

He points his spear at one of his attendants, and demands, “You heard him, didn’t you? The poor boy is hurt, he needs to *recover*! Oh fuck, he can’t stand rejection, can’t take that which I give.”

The attendant shrugs, unsure how to respond.

“Don’t you get it? I’m sitting here, sick to my stomach of all this,” Saul waves his hand about. “Yet he’s the one to complain?”

At once the attendant understands. He nods his head, “Yes, yes, no doubt! A regular rebel, is what he is.”

And Saul goes on to ask, “So? You tell me: should I show mercy—or strike him dead? Oh, never mind, don’t answer that, just don’t.”

He rises from the throne and then—before anyone can guess his next move—he leaps off the stage and starts pacing furiously to and fro, faster and faster around the hall. And from all directions his attendants rush to follow.

They come quickly together to march in lockstep behind him, as if this has been practiced at least once or twice before. Their footfalls echo, echo around the space.

At last Saul snatches a torch from the corner, nearly breaking the bracket that has secured it in its sconce. Then he comes back to shine the light directly in my face.

“Now look, look at him,” he tells the others, over his shoulder. “Who, in heaven’s name, is this impudent child?”

One of them leafs through some papers, papers that rustle in his trembling hands. At last “This,” he says, “is David. David, son of Jesse. In Bethlehem, he’s thought to be a rising star—”

“Who cares. Who’s the idiot who invited him?”

“Your majesty, perhaps you’ve forgotten... You gave the order to send for the boy. Music, you said, might do you some good, I mean, it might soothe the ailing spirit. Forgive me, that’s just what you said—”

“I did, didn’t I,” says the king, acidly. “I must have gotten some exceptionally rotten advice. Should’ve ignored it... What the hell was I thinking!”

Torch in hand, he closes in on me. Now he is at an arm’s length. I can feel the heat. The flame licks my forehead.

Instinctively I take a step back.

“What a fresh face,” he seethes. “What a handsome, fresh face. What a smirk on those lips. What a glint in that eye! Look,” he whispers, this time mostly to himself. “Look at the folly of youth! A mirror of myself, the way I was back then, in the early days... Fucking happy! Thinking myself invincible—better than anyone—and yet pretending, somehow, to be humble. It pleases the crowds... Oh, what a laugh! What a horrible, horrible joke!”

Stealthily I slide back. One step, then another.

“Don’t you dare—stop—don’t leave me!” cries Saul. “Here, take this!” And in a flash, his hand flails wildly and out of it comes a flame, fuming ferociously, directly at me. It tears the air with a shriek—

And before I know it, my hand shoots up and catches the thing, catches the torch by its wooden rod.

In a blink his expression changes, or perhaps this is just an illusion, a shadow that dances across his face.

“I should have known you could do it,” he says.

And I say, “Do what?”

And he says, “Recover.” In his mouth, the word is bitter.

And I say, “Forgive me, your majesty. Recover I must.”

And he says, “You’re *too* good at it.”

And I shrug. “It’s just a skill I have.”

“Alas,” he says. “It’s a skill I’m yet to learn.”

“Takes practice,” say I.

And he says, “Practice? Now that, perhaps, can be arranged. What a better place than here, in the court... I will give you ample opportunity! Recover, if you can... Over and over and over again. You might enjoy it, being who you are, and so will I, being who I am. For both of us, it’s going to be quite a game.”

“Really?” I say. “What kind of a game?”

“Call it survival,” says he. “Never gets repetitive, does it? But somehow I doubt you’d want to stay.”

And without waiting for an answer he turns away. One of his attendants brings him the spear, which he has left up there, next to the throne. Leaning heavily on it, the king climbs up the stage and takes his seat, which is when I realize something truly strange: no longer do I fear him. Instead, I feel pity.

“Go, why don’t you go back home,” he mutters, dismissing me with a casual wave of the hand.

“Please,” I say. “Let me serve you. You’ll find my music soothing, I trust.”

“Trust?” he says, locking eyes with me.

“Just so, your majesty. Trust!”

“There is no such thing, where I’m sitting.”

“But my music—”

“It awakens something in me,” he groans, pressing a hand against his temple. “Something I wish to ignore. An unspeakable sort of pain. There’s a demon in me, and I know—I just know he’ll break loose, he’ll take over, the moment I’ll let myself soften.”

“Perhaps not,” I suggest. “If you soften, the pain may wash over you, heal your soul. You may find yourself rising anew, if only you would listen to me. Let me, your majesty. Let me play.”

The king shakes his head, No. No.

“It’s not the music,” he mutters. “It’s you. I can’t bare looking at you.”

This leaves me dumbfounded, and I stand at his feet, waiting for what may come out of his lips next.

After a while he moans, “Boy—”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever been wounded? Ever been on a battlefield?”

“No,” I say. “My mother won’t let—”

“Of course,” he bares his teeth, belittling me with laughter. “It’s always the mother. Yours must be a smart woman to keep you safe, away from any danger.”

“I give you my word, I’ll follow you anywhere,” I say. “Even to the battlefield. Sounds exciting no matter what my mother says.”

He raises one of his eyebrows as if to say, I know how you feel. She hides the world from you

doesn't she.

“Yes,” I have to agree. “I hate it, hate being protected. Makes me wonder what's on the other side of obedience.”

He pays no attention to what I say. “Listen, boy. Let me tell you one thing: often, when I leave the bloodied scene and ride back here, a long way over the range of the mountains, I don't even realize I've been wounded. My mind wanders, it roams elsewhere... But then...Then I look at myself. And what do I see? A slash, deep across my flesh... And this, this is the time—not a moment earlier—when the pain comes. In a snap, it takes a bite.”

Saul takes a long pause. Then he looks straight down at me. “That's how I feel, right this minute,” he says. “That's what your music does to me.”

There is nothing, absolutely nothing I can say to that. So I take a deep bow and pick up my flute. Then, as a show of respect, I walk backwards from him in the direction of the stone arc, from where I have entered this space.

“Out, out with you!” he barks at me over the distance. “Go back home, back to your mother!”

I bite my lips and turn to enter the corridor, which is where my eye catches a metallic flash.

Hung on the wall is an shiny iron shield. I brush my fingers over the sharp ridges of the engraved inscription, trying to figure it out by touch.

It says, *The House of Kish*. To a naive observer it may seem like an emblem of a highly respected ancestry—but as everyone around the country knows, Saul has no royal blood in his veins. He is the son of Kish, a lowly farmer who owns but a few asses. In his youth Saul used to tend to these stubborn animals.

He may long for those carefree days. Even so, word on the street is that he did a lousy job because the asses got lost more often than not. Everyone hopes and prays that he will do better as a king.

The worst part is, his family comes from a tribe of ill-repute. The tribe of Benjamin is known to be nothing but a rowdy mob, notorious for an insatiable appetite for rape and murder, for which it was severely punished. In a fierce civil war, it was nearly wiped out—not so long ago—by the other tribes.

For the life of me I cannot figure why the first king of Israel should be picked from the poor, the downtrodden. It is a questionable political decision—but perhaps it is better this way. In the back of his mind Saul should know his humble beginnings. He should feel compassion for his subjects, even though at this point all I sense out of him is rage and jealousy.

He is the son of a simple farmer, which makes this emblem quite pretentious. But who cares? By instinct I get it, I understand his need to display the thing, because this is the way to create history, when none is available.

The shield is highly polished. In it, the entire space is captured in reverse, and in an odd distortion. It is so warped that for a minute I have a difficulty to place things properly in perspective.

They say that a mirror lets you face truth, but I wonder: how can it do so through distortions through falsehood? I see a figure—a king—letting go of his weapon. Is it him—or me?

Is this an image of this moment—or else, a premonition?

“Go already! Go home,” groans the crowned one.

And as I go into the dark passage I hear him breathe the words, “Oh fucking hell! How I wish I could go home, too...”

Larger than Life

Chapter 2

I keep telling myself, Listen, just hear me out: this is foolish! It is utter lunacy on your part, and can result in nothing but disaster. You would end up lying there, a barely recognizable prostrate figure on the ground, separated limb from limb.

Oh, you would not know the first thing to do when the time comes, when you set foot on that battlefield, and feel the dirt under your toes sinking, drenched with urine, because other fools before you have lost their nerve right there, in that spot. And so would you, only to find out—by the heavy, pungent stink of it—what it means to be a coward.

On and on I go, pleading with myself. I say, Stop! Consider who you are: a child, who above all enjoys strumming a lyre, not only because it inspires you—but because it brings everyone else around you so close to tears. They cannot help but worship your innocent look, and the heavenly sound of your voice. Yes, they think you an angel! But of course, you know better...

Now, wipe that smirk off your face. Admit it: their adoration is something you need. You must have it in much the same way you need air. It fills a void inside.

So why turn into a fighter, all of a sudden? Beware of yourself. Beware of hasty moves in the wrong direction. War is a bloody game. Not for you!

But the more I try to reason with myself, the more I know: it is all talk, talk, talk—to no avail. I cannot listen, cannot heed any warning whatsoever, because I despise that voice, the meek, cautious voice in me. What is the value of life and limb, when a larger purpose is here, calling me? Oh Lord, how can I resist this pull, this incredible temptation, when thoughts of facing an enemy—the stronger, the better!—have been swelling inside my head for several weeks now?

What challenge could be more thrilling than finding a way to come out of this fight not only alive—but victorious? What better way to define who I am, than defining who my foe is—and having done so, defeating him?

I am lost... I am obsessed. Fame, grandeur, glory!

Up to now I have been playing my humble part around the royal court. Bowing and scraping down at his feet I have been a musician, a player, a dancer before the king. But then, after each performance, I have been studying him from my corner, back in the shadow of his throne.

“Here,” he says, glancing at me over his shoulder. “Take this!”

And with a shriek, his spear comes singing straight at me. Usually I catch the thing. This time I dodge it, letting it hit the wall. It hits hard, then falls bouncing to the stone floor. The entire space fills with echoes of it, ringing.

“Here,” say I, picking it up, returning it dutifully to his hand.

“Boy,” he says, watching me with a crazed look in his eye, as I go back to my place behind him. “What would a king do without his jester.”

Oh God. It is so hard to figure him out.

I often wonder, what was it in Saul, what quality brought people to their knees in his presence even in the early years, before he was anointed? What was it that made so many of them follow him to the point of risking their lives? I have turned this question over and over in my mind, and the more ways I look at it, the more I find it baffling. There must be more to leadership than wearing a

crown.

~~For now, this is what I have come to believe: people will follow, if they perceive that their leader is larger than life.~~

For Saul, this is easy. He is so damn tall!

But stature is only a part of his power. To make his authority even more visible to his subjects—and discourage anyone from doubting it—he adopted some manners, some symbols of high ranking, which he must have learned from hieroglyphic stone carvings of foreign war memorials.

These symbols include not just this court, but the walled gardens, too. Looking at the waterfall pumping here continuously I have to remind myself that it is not the stronghold of some foreign dynasty, dominating the Nile delta or the Babylonian Tigris and Euphrates. Set against the view of a sun-stricken desert in Canaan, where water is scarce, this palace seems entirely out of place.

And looking at the center of all this, at the king himself, I have to pinch myself. He is a striking figure, and not just because of his royal garb. Just like painted icons—those of the god-kings of Egypt, and of the high priests of Akkadian empire—he has a magnificent beard, the likes of which I have never seen on another man before.

It is carefully groomed, oiled and dressed using tongs and curling irons to create elaborate ringlets and tiered patterns. Often dyed reddish brown with Henna, it is plaited with an interwoven gold thread. And in place of the ornamental scepter of the Egyptian monarchs, Saul holds the next best thing: his weapon. A spear.

I collect these details in my mind and examine them at length, all the while growing more restless. It is hunger for success, hunger for what he has, that turns in my guts.

No longer do I ask, what was it in him that allowed him to become who he is. Instead I wonder whatever it might be, is it in me? Do I have what it takes to become a leader? A king, even?

And on my way up, how do I overcome my shortcomings? How does a kid like me—who is too young to grow even a single hair on his chin, let alone a fancy beard like his—find a way to project himself into an iconic role, a role that will become memorable for ages to come?

In short: how do I become larger than life?

Did I ask it aloud? I doubt it—but then, who knows? To my surprise, a voice offers an answer, which it does by way of a asking, “Now, how about killing a giant?”

Startled I say, “Who, me?”

“Who, me,” he repeats, deridingly. “Yes, you! Not afraid, are you now, to risk your life? To sacrifice yourself for a cause, for something bigger than you or me. I mean, for the nation.”

“Afraid?” I say, as if this word is foreign to me—but my voice is shaky. “No, never.”

For a while, Saul glares at me. Then he kicks my lyre to the edge of the stage, clear out of my reach. When at last the strings stop reverberating, he blurts out, “I often spot your eyes, lighting up from the darkness back there, in that corner.”

“I am your humble servant, your majesty—”

“Even so,” he sneers. “Can I trust you?”

And as if to put me into a trance Saul starts pacing to and fro, and drawing circles in the air around me with the sharp edge of his spear. “You think I can’t sense you, how you straighten your back and perk up your ears, just about every time I discuss this or that military maneuver with my generals?” His eyes narrow in suspicion. “Perhaps, you’re spying on me.”

“Please forgive me, your majesty... I can’t help it: I find everything you do, every word you say

so fascinating—”

~~“I’m sure you do,” says the king, smiling coldly at me. “Hell, this is one thing about which I have no doubts.”~~

Desperate to direct his attention away from me I try acting braver than I actually feel at this moment. “So,” I say, perhaps too casually, “which giant, your majesty? I mean, which one would you want me to kill?”

In three steps—clang, clang, clang, bangs the dull edge of his spear against the floor—he closes in on me.

“Which one?” he mimics the way I have said it. “You think I’m going to line them up here, an assortment of giants of all sizes? Shall I point up the one in question—or else perhaps at your leisure, you may take your pick?”

I slide deeper into the shadows and bow down before him. In this place, music is my best instrument to soothe his spirit. Without my lyre at hand I am unarmed. I better say nothing.

He warns, “I can sense you, even when you’re silent. Damn it, boy! I know what’s in your heart.”

Saul is either out of his mind—or else, incredibly perceptive, exactly because of being a lunatic. Either way, it is best to keep my mouth shut. So I take another bow, closer to the floor than the first one. Sooner or later, the king is bound to find it flattering.

Unfortunately, the deeper I bow—the more he seems to be towering over me.

“Well?” he leans over to breathe in my ear. “Hesitation is something I despise. Choose your enemy, boy. And for your own good, choose well.”

I take a third bow, hoping that this time he may soften—but today the king seems to resist me more so than usual. Then, something happens that turns his attention away from me, if only for a short while. An unexpected sound of chuckles starts bouncing against the walls, somewhere behind him. Trotting like horses across the floor, here come his two teenage daughters.

Merav, his oldest, is a lovely, bubbly girl. She is petite—but to compensate for that, her hair and bust point upward. She hops onto the stone stage and prances towards her father. Then she rises on her tiptoes to brush her lips across his cheek, at which time her eyes flutter slightly and turn, almost by accident, to meet mine.

“David,” she curtsies, spreading her silk skirt with a perfectly dainty move, and in a blink, also winking at me.

“Enough with that,” blurts the younger, nudging her sister aside. With that, she gives Merav a look, as if to admonish her for a behavior unbecoming of a princess, especially a Jewish princess.

Like her father, Michal is tall. She is all legs, and has no chest to speak of. It is flat as a board. The back of her hand, when she extends it to me so I may kiss it, is white, and her palm feels clammy.

Then, without a single remark to me or to her father—as if what she has to say is too heavy for words—she turns on her heels and walks away.

Meanwhile, Merav releases the spear from her father’s hold, and with a disarming smile she whispers into his ear, “You love me, father?”

“I do,” he says.

“Then,” she hints at me, “have mercy on him.”

She leans the thing against the wall, and a minute later hops off the stage, and races her sister to the other side of the court. They disappear beyond the stone arc, and the sound of her giggles

subsides, until finally it is no more than a ghost.

~~The king heaves a sigh, raising his eyes. Catching sight of the richly draped, raw-silk canopy over his head, he flicks off the pretty tassels dangling down from it. When they fall back into place he tears them out with a single rip, at which time he turns back to me.~~

“Mercy is useless,” he says. “Merav knows better than to ask this of me. I’ve told her so, many times before.”

Choose Your Enemy

Chapter 3

With the voice of an old man, the king mutters, “Mercy is useless. Worse than useless: it’s a mistake.”

“Tell me, your majesty,” I plead. “I’m your servant. I’m eager to learn from you.”

Saul looks up at the stone ceiling, where torch-light is flickering. It seems to be fighting the shadows blow by blow, trying to chase them away, or trap them into corners. Up there, scenes of battle must be playing before his eyes.

“Tell me,” I repeat, “as if I were your son.”

And Saul goes, “This was one of the earliest wars: the war against the Amalekites. We defeated them handily. But I was charged with a more—how shall I say it?—more complete mission.”

“To annihilate them.”

“Yes. Everyone knew it, my soldiers too. They threw the enemy leader, Agag, at my feet so I could mark our victory, I mean, mark it for all to see—by slitting his throat.”

“And,” I ask, “did you?”

“I knew I should’ve shown resolve. Resolve is something that was expected of me,” he groans. “But oh, how exhausted I was! How tired of the sight of suffering, of death! I had no more fury in me. Alas, I made a lousy decision. I spared his life, and why?”

“Yes, why?”

“Oh, hell,” he cries. Then he tries this for an answer, “Because when your hands are as bloody as mine, it feels good to show mercy.”

“This,” I say, “must’ve cost you dearly.”

His brows gather tightly over the bridge of his nose. With a catch in his voice, he says, “Here boy, is the lesson learned: showing mercy is a mistake. It affected the rest of my life.”

“How so?” I wonder aloud.

And bitterly, the king smiles. “My chief advisor and mentor, the prophet Samuel, whom I loved more than I did my own father, accuses me to this day of being soft of heart—and therefore, unfit to rule.”

Indeed, Samuel is admired, even feared not only by the king, but by all who know him. For my part I think him a moody prophet. Of course, there is no other kind. What he prays for is grace—on so he says. I mean, what grace can you expect of a cruel God?

Forced, by popular demand, to choose a king to rule over us, Samuel looked far and wide searching for a candidate. In the end his decision was—in my opinion—not divine, but political. He chose Saul, the meekest, most humble person he could find. Why? Because being a wise seer Samuel wanted to maintain his power, his own sway over our people.

I glance at Saul. A sad look sets in his eye.

“Unfit to rule? No way,” I say, to reassure him. “Everyone knows: Samuel is a man of God—but you, you’re the king!”

Tormented by doubts, the king goes on shaking his head, till his crown nearly tips over.

“Is it true,” I ask, “that—just to make an example of you, and to show you how to be ruthless—Samuel cut Agag to pieces with his own hands?”

The king glares at me, but then takes time to find an answer.

“This,” he says at last, “is the age of cruelty.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” I hesitate to admit.

He grunts, “Despite my best efforts, neither can I.”

Then I let slip, “I saw him once.”

“You did?” For a second, Saul locks eyes with me.

Which forces me to set up a smoke screen. “Oh, it was such a long time ago, it seems like a haze, complete haze in my mind.”

Saul is so suspicious of me. There is no need to share with him this secret, which is known only to my family, back in Bethlehem: how Samuel the prophet came to our home, under the cover of night; how, to undermine Saul’s reign, he looked for a future candidate for the throne, one who—in his mind—would be as weak as he had previously thought Saul to be. So he interviewed my brothers, starting with the oldest, and rejected each one in turn—until he found the one he wanted: the one who was merely a child, back then. Me.

“I see,” says the king. “You can’t recall a thing, can you.”

“All I remember,” I say, “is his beard. It seemed as white as snow. At the time I wanted to climb up to his knees and brush my fingers through those soft, fluffy curls, and dig in there to find his lips—”

“Damn!” he bursts out. “The hell with him!”

“Why?” I ask. “Is he not a king-maker? Was he not the one to anoint you—”

“This,” he grunts, “is the life Samuel thrust upon me: a life with no hope, no forgiveness. Mistakes are harshly judged, and no rewards given—yet the mission remains: to beat one enemy and before my wounds can begin to heal, here comes another, then another... There is never peace in sight. Don’t you envy me that.”

“No,” I say. “I don’t.”

“Don’t you.”

I counter with silence, so he says, “And now, once again, we’re faced by an enemy: the Philistines, led by that gargantuan freak.”

I stir out of my corner, looking up at him.

“Goliath,” he says, as if to answer an unasked question.

At the sound of that name I rub the palms of my hands together, thinking that laying them on a giant is one way, one great way for me to become what I want. Larger than life.

So, throwing caution to the wind I say, I stammer, “Let me, let me go out and fight him!”

“Hell! I can just see that,” Saul folds over and slaps his knees, unable to suppress a snicker, as if I have said something incredibly hilarious.

So I say, “I promise, your majesty, I’ll find a way—”

“Damn it, boy!” By now he is roaring in bout after bout of laughter. “Goliath will lay his hands upon you, yes he will, before you have a chance to control yourself, control your trembling. For now while you’re still in one piece, do not allow yourself to grow pale—or else, he’s sure to sense how inexperienced you are in combat. And then, then he’ll mince your flesh with his bare, jagged jaws and feed it to the dogs...”

A shudder goes down my spine at the sound of these words.

The king takes one look at me and says, “Seriously now: you’re a boy, and boys stay behind when men go to war.”

With that he passes his hand, which is crisscrossed with scars of battle, along the spear. He curls

his lips with a strange expression: love, almost.

“Tonight, as any night before a battle, I feel no fear,” he says. “In a way, we’re lucky to be surrounded by enemies, because otherwise we may realize the worst. We may see that—alas—we have a dog-eat-dog fight right here, amongst us. One man gnawing at another, one scheming against another, and the one to be feared most of all is the unknown enemy. The one within. So now, boy, you tell me: who’s the enemy?”

I shrug, unsure what answer might satisfy him.

“Perhaps,” says the king, this time without a hint of teasing, “it is you. Yes, you! Your eyes are on my crown.”

So I lower my eyes.

And he demands, “It’s time, boy! Tell me the truth, for once.”

I bite my lips.

In a flash, the king picks the spear, as if to throw at me—but then he controls himself enough to let it fall sideways from his hand, and roll across the floor in my direction.

“Enough!” he cries. “Make up your mind! There are so many God-forsaken, freakish giants roaming this land. Choose, boy, choose your enemy!”

No longer armed, the king rushes down to the arc at the far end of the hall, where his shield is hung for display. He raises the thing up to his chest, and comes right back to face me, shooting a knowing look at me over its rim. “Don’t,” he grumbles. “Don’t you dare give me that blameless look, as if you don’t get what I mean.”

I blink, hoping he does not notice.

“You do,” he charges. “And both of us know it.”

I blink again, so as not to see my own face mirrored in his shield. In spite of my best efforts to cling to logic I find myself superstitious at times. I have a vague sense that looking at myself is a dangerous thing for me, similar to facing the truth. It can mess with anyone’s mind, and especially with mine. It can make me vanish into thought, into reflection.

I would rather look elsewhere.

As if he knows it, the king keeps spinning his shield this way and that right here, in front of my eyes. And he presses on, “Look here, boy! I’m the one standing here, in your way. I am—am I not?—your enemy. On your way to the top, it’s me you would kill. Isn’t it? Me and no other!”

In reply to which I break my silence, at long last.

“Enough,” I tell him, and by God I mean it. Let him pick his weapon and impale me if he must, if what I say enrages him. “I left my father’s house to come here, to play for you. I am David. And I’m nobody’s boy.”

Saul draws back in surprise.

“Indeed,” he utters, now turning to take his seat. “I haven’t been paying attention. But now I can see, son. You’re not a boy anymore.”

I bow to the floor and pick up his spear. It rattles in my hands, steel-cold.

Then I approach the throne, and kneeling before the tall, tormented figure I raise my hand offering the return of what belongs to him: his weapon. He takes hold of it.

For a second—before I release it to him—we are connected.

“It’s time,” says the king, lowering his shield.

Now, the thing is at my eye level. I cannot help but be drawn into my mirror image. It dances in and out of the metal engravings and over the ridges of the royal inscription, *The House of Kish*, as if to suggest new twists in my own story, and new turns in his.

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