

Chapter 1

A Conspiracy of Kings

In southern Canaan, on the fertile plain south of the hill country, yet north of the desert of Negev, lay the mighty walled city of Gath. While many other peoples slept in tents or made structures of wood and mud, Gath stood like solid granite in the flat plain, a monument to the might of the Philistines. Its walls were twenty feet high and ten feet thick. Its gates were two-foot-thick oak beams bound by massive iron straps. And sentinels stood atop the walls, constantly watching the roads in all directions.

Gath was one of five Philistine cities that commanded the fertile plains and coastline of Canaan. Years before, the Philistines had taken the city from the Israelites, and today they protected it jealously. The Philistines—with their heritage of both seamanship and trade—knew its strategic value. They also knew that they had to fight to keep what was theirs.

That was the obvious reason for the parade today. The hot sun baked the parade ground as the three men and their escorts watched the soldiers march by. Armored chariots—their horses protected by sheets of iron; their riders armed with sword, bow, and spear; their wheels tipped with razor-sharp blades—rolled past the small crowd. They were followed by row after row of foot soldiers, their ranks marching in perfect unison, iron-tipped spears rising above them like an advancing forest of death.

“Impressive,” said Nahash, king of Ammon, who stood head and

shoulders above the other two. “Philistine armies are always imposing in a parade. Your numbers, your strength—your *iron*—is intimidating enough that no one would dare attack you here on the plains. Your cities are safe for generations to come.” His voice came out flat, and it was obvious to the other men that he was being cordial without meaning it.

“Oh come now, Nahash,” Agag, king of the Amalekites, said. Where Nahash stood tall and massive like the military man that he was, Agag was a slender man who seemed unassuming, but the other two knew better. Many of Agag’s enemies had underestimated him before—and died regretting it. While Nahash’s physical prowess was imposing, Agag made up for it in guile.

“We’ve seen plenty of Philistine chariots before,” Agag continued. “They roll through the countryside and even our streets every day. They are enough to intimidate every small child from here to Nineveh. But even with all this might, we all know what our common problem is. All that might, and they couldn’t defeat an old man and a group of shepherds and farmers at Mizpah.”

Achish nodded, his eyes still watching the soldiers who paraded before them. “Good old Agag, still as astute as ever, eager to get to the point. Well, let’s talk about it then.” King Achish gestured to them, and they walked away from the procession to take seats in the shade of a stone balcony.

“In the time of our fathers’ fathers,” Achish began, “this land was disputed by the three of our peoples as well as the Canaanites.” Achish paused to let his words sink in. “If you recall the stories, we were all intimidated by them, especially the sons of Anak, giants that they were. As tall as tamarisk trees. They ruled the central hills of Canaan, and we were resigned to living in the lesser land around them. And then something happened.”

“*They* happened,” Nahash said. “They invaded our land from the east and took it from us.”

Agag nodded. “Yes, the people called Israelites arrived. Remember those Canaanites we were afraid of? Where are they today? Destroyed. Defeated. Kicked out of their own country.” Nahash and Achish didn’t respond.

“What amazes me is that these people are like no other tribe I’ve ever

met,” Agag continued. “They have no king. They have no standing army. They barely have towns. They are rabble—and yet they continue to defeat us.”

“What do they have that we don’t have?” Nahash said.

“I’ll tell you what they have,” Achish said. “They have a God who takes care of them. They are disorganized, weak, unprepared. But when they’re in trouble, when one of us threatens them, they cry out to their God, and then a flood happens, or a great wind comes, or we start seeing armies that aren’t there.”

“I can fight a standing army,” Nahash said. “But how do you fight a God?”

Achish paused before responding. “They haven’t always been victors. We’ve won a few battles. Think about what makes those times unique.” The others paused for a long moment before Agag responded.

“It was when they turned away from their God that they became weak,” he said. “It was when they depended on themselves. When they became like us.”

Achish slowly smiled at the other two. “Exactly. My brothers, I have a plan to finally overcome those wretched Israelites in the hills. A fool-proof plan.”

“And what’s that?” Nahash asked.

“I’m going to make them just like us,” Achish said, still smiling. As the others slowly nodded in agreement, Achish looked over their shoulders at the tall, beautiful woman who stood at the doorway watching them.



“I’ve thought about your proposal,” Achish said to Zephan after the others had left. He’d left the parade in the hot desert sun and retreated to the darker but cooler confines of his conference room, just off the throne room. The thick stone wall was broken by tall, narrow gaps, and slits of light broke the darkness. The slits served as both sources of light as well as kill holes to fire arrows at approaching enemies.

“Let me make sure I understand you correctly,” Achish continued, looking at the beautiful woman sitting across the table from him. “You

agree to serve as my agent in the land of Israel in exchange for training by our sorcerers here in Gath. Why would you want that?”

“I’m already talented in that respect,” Zephan said. “But there’s a lot more to be learned. Think of it: if you were to have an agent in Israel who not only would keep you informed but was also a powerful witch, well, think of the possibilities.”

Achish smiled grimly. “Without a doubt, you’re motivated by the desire for power. We all are. But you do realize that you would be turning your back on the God of Israel *and* allying yourself with forces more dark and powerful than you can imagine. Are you sure you can handle that?”

Zephan smiled broadly. “Believe me, I can and I will.”

“Then I see no reason why we can’t work something out,” Achish said.



Canaan is the crossroads of the world, situated on trade routes between Africa, Asia, and Europe. Roads follow the coast through Philistia from north to south, as do the roads on the east side of the hill country, which travel through Moab and Ammon. But when travelers needed to go from east to west or west to east, they traveled roads that moved through the hill country of Israel. The Israelite towns and villages were scattered across the hillsides, many located at junctions of these roads. Those Israelites who weren’t shepherds or farmers made their living as merchants at these locations.

Zephan, the woman at Gath, did not live there. Instead, she traveled back to her home in the north, stopping only along the way at the home of a man called Abner, who also happened to be her son. The conversation at Gath would remain secret, for now, but she knew that she had work to do. It was her intent to change history, and in doing so, guarantee a place in that new history for her son.



The old man known to all of Israel as Samuel the Prophet finished his morning meal and completed his morning devotionals. He then put

on his outer robe, kissed his wife goodbye, and exited his humble hut to walk to the gate of Ramah. People came looking for him from all over the countryside, and he'd learned to make it easier for them simply by being somewhere conspicuous. A typical day was filled with him blessing children, watching them play in the field nearby, or helping someone find something they had lost. Today, he knew, would not be a typical day. God had warned him.

Sure enough, he hadn't been seated on his bench for long before he saw a crowd of men walking down the road toward Ramah. He recognized a few of them; Kish was there, as well as Abner, both from Benjamin. He also saw representatives from the other tribes, including Judah and Dan. Some of those he recognized from the battle against the Philistines at Mizpah a few years before. There appeared to be about twenty men, and he might have been alarmed if God hadn't warned him.

He waited until they entered the gates before addressing them.

"Peace be unto you, my brothers," Samuel said.

"Good morning and God bless you, Prophet," Kish said. "We've come to discuss a common need." The men looked at one another as if unsure, but Kish and Abner seemed confident in their address.

"How can I help you?" Samuel said.

"You can help us by giving us a leader," Abner said.

Samuel stared at the young man. "I don't understand. God's our leader."

"We need a king," Abner said, continuing. "We need a king to lead us."

"Why would you say such a thing?" Samuel said, still confused. "Your fathers didn't have a king. Your grandfathers didn't have a king."

"Things have changed," Johan from Judah said.

"What can a king give you that I haven't given you?" Samuel said. "When the Philistines surrounded us with their armies at Mizpah, didn't we have victory? Don't you now live in freedom?"

Kish stepped forward. "Samuel, I was there with you at Mizpah. I remember how you led us. But look at yourself. You're an old man. If we had another battle, could you lead us again? And who'll lead us when you're gone?"

Samuel paused for a moment and then stammered his answer.

“Joel . . . Abijah . . . my sons,” he said quietly.

“Your sons are corrupt,” Abner said sharply. “They take bribes. They have their favorites. We can’t see justice done.”

“They’re not godly men,” Kish added.

Samuel paused again, silently praying to God. Then he began to speak. “But what you’re asking. You aren’t following the path of God either. You want to be like other nations. You seek a man to lead you . . . instead of God? Are you crazy? Do you have any idea what you’re asking?” His voice rose with each question.

“A king will take a tenth of your crops for his own. He’ll take your sons to fight in his armies or work on his roads or in his fields. He’ll take your daughters to serve in his palace. He’ll tell you what to do and where to go and what to say from the day that you crown him king. God has saved you from all of this. And you want to turn your back on God? On me?” He spat the words out. He was offended, hurt, by what they were proposing.

“That’s what we want.” The words came back bluntly, each word like a knife cutting Samuel as if he’d never done a good thing for his people.

Samuel stood and stared at the men who confronted him. Years before, he’d led them in prayer, and then led them in battle. And now they were confronting him, telling him that they no longer wanted him to lead, that they wanted what Samuel had tried to save them from. He looked from face to face, looking for any sign of support for what he tried to do. But he could tell that they were in agreement.

“So be it,” Samuel said. “Go home. I’ll talk with my God, and we’ll call for you to meet again at Mizpah. God will find you a king.”

The men murmured in agreement and turned to walk away. Samuel could tell that they were happy, but he wasn’t. He was hurt that after all he’d done they were rejecting him. But more importantly, he knew that the path they’d chosen would lead to a lot of pain and disappointment and in the end, the destruction of Israel.