



SONS OF

The
PRINCE

a novella

ENCOURAGEMENT



FRANCINE RIVERS



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Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

Designed by Alyssa Force

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“WE have no weapons!”

“We’ll have to find a way to make them.”

“How? There isn’t a blacksmith in the whole land of Israel to make them. The Philistines made sure of that. Those they didn’t murder, they took captive.”

Jonathan sat with his father, Saul, beneath the shade of an olive tree. His uncles, frustrated and angry, bewailed the latest Philistine raid.

“Even if we could make swords, what good would they be? Whatever the Philistines’ swords and spear tips are made of, they’re far superior to ours. Bronze isn’t strong enough. It shatters against their blades.”

“I choke on my pride every time I have to go down to Aijalon and pay hard-earned shekels to a stinking Philistine so he’ll sharpen my plowshare and sickles!”

“If I need an ax sharpened, I have to answer question after question.”

Another laughed bitterly. “I need my pitchfork repaired this year, and new points for the ox goad. I wonder how much that will cost me.”

Saul stared off toward the fields. “There’s nothing we can do about it.”

The Philistine outpost at Geba was only a short distance away, and it was the duty of Saul’s tribe, the Benjaminites, to keep close watch over it.

“Kish says what we need is a king!”

Saul shook his head. “You know what the prophet Samuel says about having a king.”

"The Philistines have kings. That's why they're organized."

"If only Samuel were like Samson. Instead, all he does is blame us for what's happening."

Jonathan looked at his father. "Grandfather Ahimaaz said the Lord our God is more powerful than all the gods of Philistia."

The uncles exchanged sallow looks.

Jonathan leaned forward. "Grandfather Ahimaaz said when the Philistines killed the high priests' sons and took the Ark of the Covenant, God went to war against them. Their god Dagon fell facedown before the Ark, his head and the hands breaking off. And then the Lord cursed the Philistines with tumors and a plague of rats. They were so afraid they sent the Ark back on a cart pulled by two milch cows and loaded with gold!"

Saul shook his head. "That was years ago."

One of Jonathan's uncles flung a pebble. "God leaves us alone now to defend ourselves."

Jonathan felt confused. "But if the Lord—"

Saul looked at him. "Your mother tells you too many stories about what her father said."

"But they're true, aren't they?"

Another uncle snorted in despair. "It was years ago! When was the last time the Lord did anything for us?"

Saul put his arm around Jonathan. "There are things you don't yet understand, my son. When you are a man—"

"Saul!"

At the sound of Kish's angry shout, Saul removed his arm from around Jonathan's shoulders and stood. "What now?" he grumbled. "I'm here!"

Jonathan's grandfather strode across the partially

plowed field, his fine robes billowing around him, the red tinge in his cheeks betraying his temper. His younger sons scattered like chaff before a strong wind, leaving Saul alone to face their father.

Saul came out from the shade. "What's the matter?"

His question fanned the flames. "What's the matter? You have to ask me?"

Saul's face darkened. "If I knew, I wouldn't ask."

"You're out here sitting in the shade, and my donkeys are missing!"

"Missing?" Saul frowned and looked off toward the hills.

"Yes! Missing! Have you no ears that you can hear?"

"I told Mesha to watch over the donkeys."

Jonathan gulped. Mesha was an old man, easily distracted. No wonder the donkeys had gone missing.

"Mesha?" Kish spat in disgust. "Mesha!"

Saul spread his hands. "Well, I can't be in two places at the same time. I've been plowing the field."

"Plowing? Is that what you call sitting under an olive tree, talking with your brothers?" Kish shouted for the rest to hear. "Will we have enough food with all of you sitting around talking?"

"We were making plans."

"Plans for what?"

"War."

Kish barked a harsh laugh. "We would need a king to lead us into war, and we have no king. Where are my donkeys?" He made a fist.

Saul stepped back out of range of a blow. "It's not my fault Mesha didn't do as he was told!"

"You'll lose the oxen next! How long do you think

you'll manage without animals to pull the plow? I'll have to put *you* to harness!"

Saul's face reddened. He stalked back into the shade.

Kish followed. "I put you in charge! I didn't want a servant watching over my donkeys! I wanted *my son* watching them!"

"You have more than one son!"

"You're the eldest!" He cursed. "Mesha is an old man and a hireling. What does it matter to him if my property is lost? You're the one to inherit. If you had to put someone over those animals, why didn't you send Jonathan? He would have kept close watch over my property."

Jonathan cringed. Why did his grandfather have to pitch him into the fray? His father's pride was easily pricked.

Saul glared. "You always blame me when anything goes wrong!"

"Father, I'll go look—"

"No, you won't!" both men shouted.

"I'll send one of the servants." Saul turned as if to leave.

Kish yelled, "No, you won't! You'll go yourself. And don't give me excuses! You're not going to sit out here on your backside and wait for someone else to find what you allowed to wander off. Take a servant with you, and go look for the donkeys!" Kish strode back toward Gibeah, still shouting. "And don't even think about riding a donkey. There's only one donkey left, and that one stays here. You can search on foot! And take someone other than *Mesha* with you!"

Saul kicked the dust and muttered. Eyes blazing, he stormed across the field toward home. Jonathan followed.

His mother, Ahinoam, stood in the doorway, waiting for them. The whole town had probably heard Kish shouting out in the field. "I've filled two water bags and stuffed two packs with bread."

His father scowled. "You're so eager to have me go?"

She put her hand against his heart. "The sooner you go, the sooner you will be back."

"I'll go with you, Father."

Ahinoam followed Saul inside the house. "Jehiel knows more about donkeys than any man in Gibeah, Saul. Take him with you. Jonathan can continue the plowing."

"But, Mother—"

She gave Jonathan a quelling look. "With both of you gone, nothing would get done."

"Father, the Philistines may have stolen the donkeys and taken them to Geba." The garrison was not far away. "We should go there first."

His mother faced him. "You're not going. Your father has enough to do without having to watch out for you."

Jonathan's face went hot. "I can use a bow better than any man in Gibeah."

"Your father is going out to find donkeys, not start a war."

"Enough!" Saul snarled. "Pack me enough bread and dried fruit to last me a few days. There's no telling how far the donkeys have wandered."

His wife moved quickly to do his bidding.

Saul muttered and stormed around the room, kicking things out of his way. When he saw Jonathan still standing there, he jerked his chin. "Go and find Jehiel. Tell him to hurry up!"

"I'll go." Jonathan backed toward the door. "But what if the donkeys are in Geba?"

Saul flung his hand into the air. "Then they're gone, aren't they? And Mesha will wish he had done what he was told!"

"They've wandered off." Ahinoam spoke in soothing tones. "That's all that's happened. You'll find them before the sun sets, my love." She shoved more bread into a sack. "The Philistines have more donkeys than they need. Besides, they covet horses."

Saul shouted after Jonathan. "Tell Jehiel I'm ready and waiting on him!"

Jonathan found Jehiel hard at work repairing the wall of an empty sheepfold. "Kish is sending my father out to find some stray donkeys. My father wants you to go with him. He's packed and ready to go."

Jehiel straightened and brushed his hands off. "I will gather what I need and come."

Jonathan followed him. "You could tell my father that the sheep might escape if you don't complete your work. You could say I can serve him as well as you." He had explored the hills and valleys all around Gibeah and even dared go close enough to the walls of Geba to hear the guards talking.

"The sheep are out to pasture, Jonathan, and there are two shepherds to watch over them."

"What if you run into Philistines while you're searching for the donkeys?"

"You needn't worry about your father. We will avoid the Philistines. Even if by mischance we crossed paths with them, I doubt they would bother with two men on foot with little more than some bread and water to steal."

Jonathan sighed.

Before the two men left, Saul gripped Jonathan's shoulder. "Finish plowing the west field. Keep watch over your brothers. You know how they tend to wander."

"I wish I were going with you."

Saul looked past him to Ahinoam. "Soon."

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Jonathan went out to work in the west field. Not long after his father and Jehiel had left, his mother came out to him. It was not her habit to do so, and he stopped the oxen to wait. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Nothing. Sit with me in the shade and rest a while."

"Father wanted me to plow—"

"I will not keep you from your work for long, my son."

He secured the reins and followed her. She led him to the same tree where he had sat earlier with his father and uncles, listening to talk of kings and war.

Kneeling, she laid out fresh bread, a skin of wine, dried dates and raisins.

Jonathan's brows rose slightly. Perhaps she meant to sweeten words that would sour his mood. His defenses rose.

She looked up at him. "You are still upset that you weren't allowed to go with your father."

"These are troubled times, Mother, and he is too important a man to be guarded by only one servant. What if they meet some Philistines?"

"Your father is looking for donkeys, not a fight."

Women would never understand! "You don't have to look for a fight to find yourself in the middle of one."

His mother sighed. "You love your father, Jonathan. In that, I know your heart is ever in the right place. But you must learn to use your head, my son. I saw you stand and watch your father and Jehiel depart. Did they head for the garrison? Did they go armed to accuse and ready to fight?" She folded her hands in her lap. "You would have urged your father to look in Geba first. Would that be in keeping with protecting your father, or urging him to danger?"

"But that's probably where the donkeys are."

"Just because a lamb is missing doesn't mean it's in a lion's mouth. Jehiel will try to track the donkeys. We can hope the Philistines had nothing to do with them. If they did, then they're gone and that's the end of it."

Jonathan rubbed his face in frustration. "The Philistines take everything they can get their hands on."

"I did not come out here to talk about Philistines or donkeys. God knows where the donkeys are. And if it is God's will, He will let your father find them. I care more about my son than a few beasts of burden." She stood and squeezed his hand. "I came out to tell you I am very proud of you, Jonathan. You have courage. I just want you to live long enough to have good sense."

She leaned down and covered the bread with a cloth. "If all Israel has its way, we will soon have a king like every other nation around us. And what else does a king do but draft sons into the army or make them run before his chariot? Your sisters may one day end up cooks or bakers or perfumers in some palace in Judah's territory, since Judah thinks it must be one of their own rather than a Benjaminite to rule. A king will take the best of our crops and herds and give them to his assistants. He

will want a portion of everything we have. These are the things the prophet Samuel told your grandfather and the others who went to Ramah to ask for a king. Samuel speaks the truth. All you have to do is look around you to see—”

“We are at the Philistines’ mercy, Mother. Would you have us sit and do nothing?”

“My father, Ahimaaz, was a great man. He said we must trust in the Lord. God is our king.”

“God has abandoned us.”

“Men who say such things have no faith, and without faith, we have no hope.” His mother raised her hands in frustration. “I know, I am but a woman. What could I know?” She raised her chin, dark eyes sparkling. “But I do know that you are my son. You are the grandson of Ahimaaz. Listen to *his* words, not mine. If a man is going to follow God, he must align himself with men of God. Samuel is God’s anointed prophet. He speaks God’s Word. Listen carefully to what *he* says.”

“I wasn’t in Ramah.” How did she know so much of what was said there?

“I wish you had been. You’d have heard for yourself the words of the prophet rather than hearing your mother repeat what she overheard.” She sighed. “I came to say that many things could change and it could happen quickly. While you work in the fields, pray. Ask the Lord what He requires of you.”

And what did the Lord want of him but to fight, to drive the idol worshipers from the land?

His mother studied him. Her eyes darkened and grew moist. She shook her head slowly, rose, and walked away.



A day passed, then another, and Jonathan's father and Jehiel did not return. His mother said nothing.

The men gathered at Kish's table and complained about the Philistines; then complained about Samuel's corrupt sons, who were now assigned to rule over Israel. Jonathan sat with his younger brothers—Malkishua, Abinadab, and Ishbosheth—and ate in silence, worrying about his father.

Saul's cousin Abner cut off a portion of roasted goat. "Samuel was not pleased when we met with him at Ramah. He took our request for a king as a personal affront."

Kish dipped bread into the bowl of lentil stew. "He is not long for this world, and we need a man to rule before he goes the way of all flesh. There are none like Samuel in the land."

"All too true! But his sons are despicable."

"They hold court in Beersheba and collect tribute like pagan kings!"

One of Jonathan's uncles reached for a cluster of grapes. "They have been helpful in the past."

Kish gave a harsh laugh. "Only because we paid them larger bribes than those who complained against us! Joel and Abijah cannot be trusted. They are greedy and will turn their rulings to whomever gives them what they want."

"And what they want changes from one day to the next."

"How does a man like Samuel come to have sons like those two?"

"Kish, you convinced Samuel, didn't you, my brother? He said we would have a king."

Kish poured wine. "The question is when? And who will it be? A Judean? So it will be, according to Jacob's prophecy."

"There is not a Judean worthy enough to rule over us!"

"Why not you, Kish? You are rich."

Kish's brothers and sons, equally ambitious for the tribe of Benjamin, were quick to agree.

"You are a leader of Israel."

"The greatest among all the tribes."

"You have influence."

"The other tribes grumble, but it is clear their elders look to our house to rule."

Kish's dark eyes glowed with fire. "I know they look to us, but I am an old man. It will take someone younger and stronger than I, a man of stature who will impress the other tribes enough to convince them to stand behind him."

Jonathan leaned in to listen. There was no man taller nor of more regal bearing than his father, Saul.

"The twelve tribes must be unified. We need a king like the nations around us, a champion who will go out and fight for us."

Jonathan thought of his mother's words about Ahimaaz. Ahimaaz had been killed by Philistines, and Jonathan had few memories of him, other than that he had not been like Kish. Kish was angry. Loud. Always making plans for war. Ahimaaz had taught Jonathan to say, "Trust in the Lord and the power of His strength." Kish believed God helped those who helped themselves. And Kish ruled the men gathered in this room. They all believed that the Lord had left them to protect themselves, and to stand against the Philistines meant they must adopt the ways of the nations

around them, nations who had powerful kings and large armies. Some even thought the gods of Philistia were more powerful than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How else could they be so oppressed by the Philistines?

Kish tore off another piece of bread. "Samuel said God will give us what we want."

Every man in the room knew who Kish had in mind. The men had talked often among themselves. Saul stood a head taller than any other man in Gibeah, and he had the famed handsome features of the Benjaminite tribe, descended from the youngest son of Jacob's beautiful and favored wife, Rachel. Men—and women—stared every time Saul attended one of the religious festivals, not that he attended often. He would rather plow, plant, and harvest crops than attend religious services, even though he was required to go three times a year. Saul *looked* like a king even if he had no ambitions to become one.

Jonathan knew it didn't matter what Kish wanted. God would tell Samuel whom to choose.

As much as he loved and respected his father, he could not imagine Saul as king.

But if not Saul, who? Abner? He was an able leader, fierce and uncompromising. Or Amasa, Abner's brother? Both were men of courage and strength, always talking over plans of how they would drive the Philistines from the land if God would just give them a king to pull the tribes together. They could talk, but could they lead?

Jonathan looked around at his relatives. They were all eager for a king, intent upon having one whether Samuel liked it or not. If his father were made king, it would change everything. Jonathan felt a rush of apprehension

at the thought that he would then become the heir to the throne.

His mother's words pricked his spirit: "*Trust in the Lord. He is our king.*"

Then why didn't the Lord destroy their enemies? Why did He allow the Philistines to oppress them? If God still cared, why didn't He deliver them? He had sent Moses. He had sent others. Every now and then, it seemed the Lord awakened to their need and sent a man to deliver them. But years had passed and no one had come. The only Word they had from God came through Samuel, who said they were at fault.

What was left, then, but for every man to do what was right in his own eyes? For it was certain no one had confidence in Samuel's sons to make decisions with the wisdom and justice of their father.

Jonathan had heard Samuel speak only once, but still remembered how his heart had quickened when the prophet reminded the people how their forefathers had been slaves in Egypt, and how God had sent Moses to deliver them from bondage. God had sent the plagues to free them from Pharaoh, had given the people water in the desert, and rained manna from heaven. God had opened the Red Sea to save Israel and then closed it over Pharaoh's army. Whatever the people needed, God had provided. All the years they wandered in the wilderness and suffered under the blazing desert sun, they had water and food enough. Their shoes and clothing never wore out. When all those who had refused to trust in the Lord died, their children crossed the River Jordan and claimed the land God promised. Canaan, a land of milk and honey.

Samuel said the Lord their God had driven out many of

the Canaanites before they came, and then commanded His people to drive out the rest. The Lord had tested them to see if they would follow His commandments with single-minded determination. As long as Joshua, then Caleb, then Othniel lived, they had obeyed. But eventually, the people had grown tired of fighting and had given up trying to wipe the land clean. So what if a few enemies survived in caves and crags? God's people had tried, hadn't they? Surely God couldn't expect more of them than that. It was too much work to hunt the stragglers down and finish them off. What harm to leave them alone? It was time to enjoy the crops, the flocks and herds, the fruit trees ready for harvest. It was time to savor the milk and honey!

But the surviving enemy had been like weeds. They grew quickly and spread.

And now, here were the Philistines—a garrison of them—only a few hills away. These people from the sea were powerful, armed, and arrogant. And they moved farther inland every year. No one in Israel did anything to drive them from the land. No one dared, especially now that not a single blacksmith could be found to forge a weapon. And how could twelve disparate tribes with countless leaders unite and fight against the organized forces that moved beneath the command of a king?

“We need a king like they have. Without a king to unite us, we are defenseless.”

“When a king unites us, we won't have to live in fear, wondering from one day to the next whether marauders are going to steal our crops and animals.”

Animals!

Jonathan felt a rush of fear. His father had not yet returned. How long did it take to find a few donkeys?

God, please bring my father home safely.

Did God even hear their prayers anymore? *Had* the Lord abandoned them, as some of his relatives claimed? Did the Lord expect them to live by their own strength and cunning?

Samuel said if they returned to the Lord, the Lord would deliver them from their enemies. But Jonathan didn't understand what the prophet meant. How had he left the Lord? The Philistines continued to encroach bit by bit, taking more territory, striking at every weak place, building strongholds. And God did not stop them. He did not intervene and sweep His mighty hand across the land, even though from history, Jonathan knew it would be a small thing for the God who sent ten plagues upon Egypt to send another plague or two upon the Philistines! Why didn't He?

His mother had told him that his grandfather Ahimaaz used to say, "Every trial that comes will strengthen or weaken our faith."

The Philistines increased in number and power every year. They dressed in their fine-colored garments and armor, their thick hair like braided crowns, heads high, armed to kill, quick with mocking laughter and unleashed passion before their idols. They were a sight to see! Did their gods exist? How else did they come by such confidence in themselves and disdain for others? They were the conquerors, making themselves rich off those they oppressed. Israel was stripped while God remained silent.

"The Lord has spoken to Samuel and told him a king will be chosen." Kish put his wine goblet down. "Either he agrees that we need a king, or he no longer plans to rule."

Did Kish mean God or Samuel? Either way, Jonathan felt a chill spread through his blood.

Could his father or any other man effectively rule Israel? Whenever the elders gathered, they bickered. They might believe in God, but they distrusted one another.

Jonathan's mind wandered.

What must it have been like to live beneath God's protection—the cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night? What had the manna tasted like? What must it have felt like to see water streaming from a rock? Jonathan often yearned for days he had never experienced. He felt bereft, soul starved.

He used to dream of studying the Law—perhaps even at Naioth, where Samuel was. The Lord spoke to Samuel. Samuel would know the answers to the questions that often plagued Jonathan. What did it mean to trust and obey God? What action should he take to please Him? Clearly, the offerings did not suffice. God was far off, silent. Did the Lord listen to anyone other than Samuel?

As great a man as Samuel was, as honest and upright a judge, he paled next to stories of Moses, who had brought the Law down from Mount Sinai, and Joshua, who had conquered the land. Those had been days when God ruled as king! God had gone out ahead of them in battle and stood as their rear guard. He had hurled hailstones from heaven! Who could stand against a God like that? He had made slaves into free men and frightened sheep into an army of lions.

But where was the army of Israel now? The mighty warriors who once claimed their inheritance had produced frightened sheep that bleated over scant crops and drying water holes, and lived in fear of Philistine wolves.

What if Kish got what he wanted and lived to see Saul crowned king over Israel? Jonathan felt a rush of fear. His father was a farmer, not a warrior. Even now, he might be dead. It should not have taken this long to find the donkeys.

Jonathan gave voice to his concern. "My father has been gone too long. Can I go and look for him?"

Abner frowned. "Saul *has* been gone a long time."

Kish considered for a moment, then waved his hand. "It is too early to be concerned, my son."

"He's been gone two full days, Grandfather."

Kish gave a bleak laugh. "One day to find the donkeys, one day to sulk, one day to return. If he hasn't come home by the day after tomorrow, then I will worry."

"With your permission, I will go and look for him tomorrow. He could have run into trouble."

"The boy thinks he could take on some Philistines."

Jonathan was thirteen and a man. How long before they saw him as such?

"Be quiet. Should we dismiss a son's love for his father?" Kish's eyes glowed with pride as he studied Jonathan, but he shook his head. "Your father takes his time because he is angry. He'll be home in a few days."

Jonathan wished he could be as certain.

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Jonathan heard the cry of alarm. One of the shepherds came running across the field. "The donkeys are at the well."

Something must have happened to his father! Jonathan took off running. "Grandfather!"

Kish came out. Jonathan told him about the donkeys,

and Kish shouted to the shepherd, "Have you seen my son?"

"No, my lord. I've seen no sign of him."

"Let me go." Jonathan feared they had waited too long already. "Let me go find my father!"

Kish shouted and several men came running.

Jonathan refused to be set aside. "I have to go!"

"Abner will go."

"Let me go with him."

Kish grabbed hold of Jonathan's shoulder. "Go! But do not look for trouble."

They traveled quickly, stopping to ask if anyone had seen Saul and Jehiel. They had been seen, but had gone on. Jonathan and Abner passed through the hill country of Ephraim, through the area around Shalishah, and on into the district of Zuph, following word of them.

Abner looked perplexed. "The seer lives here."

Would his father come all this way to ask Samuel where the donkeys were?

Eyes glowing, Abner entered the town of Naioth.

"We'll have news of Saul here. I'm certain of it."

Yes, Saul and his servant had been there. The town was still talking about him.

"Samuel invited Saul to eat with him." Men were still talking about the feast. "Samuel had saved the best portion of the lamb for him."

The best portion? What did that mean? "Why?"

"We don't know, but Samuel seemed to be expecting him."

Jonathan looked around. "Where is my father now?"

"Gone."

Abner's voice was strained with excitement. "What of Samuel? May we speak with him?"

"He left as well."

"Did they leave together?" Abner wanted to know.

One elder shrugged while the other pointed. "No. Saul took the road to Bethel."

Abner grasped Jonathan's arm. "Let's go. We must hurry!"

"What do you think happened?"

"We'll find out when we find your father."

Saul and Jehiel were not in Bethel. Apparently Saul and his servant had entered the town with three others, were given bread, and had taken the road to Gibeah.

"Maybe he found out the donkeys came back," Jonathan said.

Abner laughed strangely. "Or maybe something else!"

They came upon others who had seen Saul and were full of news about what had happened.

"Your father joined the procession of prophets coming down from the high place in Gibeah. He prophesied with them!"

Jonathan's father, a prophet? How could that be?

Others came near to hear what was being said.

"What happened to the son of Kish?"

"He prophesied!"

"What? Is even Saul a prophet?"

Jonathan pressed in among them. "Where is my father now?"

"He's gone up to the high place!"

But by the time they got there, Saul and Jehiel were gone.

"How long ago did they leave?"

“Not long.”

Jonathan and Abner ran to catch up. Finally, Jonathan spotted a tall man and a smaller one walking beside him on a distant hill. “Father!” Jonathan shouted and increased his speed. Abner was on his heels.

Saul turned and waited. He embraced Jonathan, pounded him on the back, and grinned.

“We were worried about you and came looking.” Jonathan panted. What was that he smelled on his father? Something sweet. His father’s hair was thick with oil.

Saul greeted Abner.

“What happened to you?” Abner demanded.

Saul’s expression closed. “I’ve been looking for the donkeys.”

Abner stepped closer. “You ate with Samuel!”

Saul lifted his shoulders and turned toward home. “When we saw the donkeys were not to be found, we went to him. Jehiel had a little money with him as a gift.”

“And Samuel took it?” Abner seemed surprised.

“No,” Jehiel was quick to say.

“Tell me what happened.”

Saul glowered at Abner. “Samuel told me to go ahead to the high place.”

Jonathan sensed the subtle change in his father’s demeanor. Something momentous had happened, but he was unwilling to explain.

Abner put his hand on Saul. “What did Samuel say to you?”

Saul jerked free. “He assured us that the donkeys had been found.” He stared hard at Abner. “And they have, haven’t they?”

“Yes.”

Without another word, Saul headed toward Gibeah.

Abner turned in frustration. "Jehiel!" He walked with the servant, speaking quietly. The man spread his hands and shrugged.

Jonathan caught up to his father and walked with him.

Saul gave a harsh laugh. "Jehiel knows nothing."

"Is there something to know, Father?"

Saul pressed his lips together.

Jonathan's heart thumped. "I smelled incense—"

Saul flashed him a look. Color surged into his face. "Say nothing of it to anyone. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Jonathan said nothing more, but he was afraid Kish's prayers might have been answered.

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Saul refused to talk about his meeting with Samuel. He returned to work and plowed, while Kish and the others speculated on what had happened. Jonathan labored with his father, waiting for him to say something about what had happened in Naioth. But his father said nothing, working in silence, pensive and nervous. Jonathan refrained from pressing him like the others had.

But he spoke to his mother about it.

"Of course something happened," she whispered. "I'm afraid to think what it might have been. Just stay close to your father. Do whatever he asks of you. When he's ready, he'll probably tell you first before the others. I think he'll need you in the days ahead."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"No, but sometimes a man's silence speaks louder than his words."

Kish came out to the fields. "Let the servants do the rest of the plowing, my son. You are too important to do such work."

Saul glowered. "I'm a farmer, nothing more."

"Yes, we are farmers. But you may be called to something greater than that."

"I cannot live your dream, Father."

"We are summoned to Mizpah."

"Summoned?"

"Samuel has sent word that everyone is to gather at Mizpah."

Saul turned ashen. "Why?"

"Why do you think?" Kish was taut with excitement. "Samuel is going to tell us whom God has chosen to rule over Israel."

Saul put his hand to the plow. "Judah will rule."

"Judah?" Kish gave a derisive laugh. "There has not been a mighty man in Judah since Caleb and Othniel died. Judah!"

"It is the prophecy!" Saul didn't raise his head. "Jacob said—"

"And you think that gives Judah the right to rule over us? How many centuries ago was that?"

"Then *you* go! You're the head of our clan! Maybe we'll all get lucky and you'll be king! I'm staying here."

Kish's face reddened. "We *all* go! Samuel has summoned *all* the people. *All* of us! Do you understand?" He shook his head when Saul snapped the reins and bent his strength to the plow. "We leave tomorrow!" Kish shouted after him. He looked at Jonathan. "We leave at dawn!" He strode away.

Jonathan signaled a servant and left him in charge of

his team of oxen. He went after his father. Saul paused at the end of the field, and ran a shaking hand down over his face. Jonathan heard him mutter an angry prayer. Saul stood still, staring off into the distance. Jonathan stood near him, waiting, uncertain what to say. "What's wrong?"

Saul gave a bitter laugh. "Why should anything be wrong? Other than everyone is making plans for *my* life!" He gave Jonathan a stricken look. "A man should be able to say yes or no, shouldn't he?"

Jonathan didn't know what to say.

Saul shook his head and looked back over the newly plowed field. "He can't be right."

Was he talking about Kish? or someone else? "Whatever happens, Father, I'll stand with you."

Saul let out his breath slowly. "You won't have any choice." He handed Jonathan the reins and goad and walked slowly toward Gibeah, shoulders slumped.

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All Israel gathered at Mizpah. Jonathan had never seen so many people in his life! Thousands upon thousands of tents had been erected, and the multitude pressed close, murmuring like the rumble of a storm ready to rain praises on the king God had chosen.

When Samuel came out, not a man, woman, or child spoke. Here and there, a baby cried, but was quickly soothed into silence.

"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, has declared!" Samuel raised his arms.

Jonathan's heart pounded.

"I brought you from Egypt and rescued you from the

Egyptians and from all of the nations that were oppressing you. But though I have rescued you from your misery and distress, you have rejected your God today and have said, 'No, we want a king instead!' Now, therefore, present yourselves before the Lord by tribes and clans."

Samuel watched the clans of each tribe pass by him; the Levites, the Reubenites, the Simeonites and sons of Judah, then the tribe of Dan and Naphtali. The brush and scrape of sandals and bare feet were all that was heard, for no one dared utter a word as the prophet watched and waited for the Lord to tell him who would be king. The Gadites and Asherites, sons of Issachar and Zebulun passed him. Then the half-tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim descended from Joseph. Only the tribe of Benjamin remained.

Jonathan's stomach clenched tight. The closer they came to Samuel, the harder his heart pounded. His father wasn't beside him. He couldn't see his father anywhere. Where was he? He could feel the excitement in the air. Kish strode forward—head high, eyes bright, face flushed. Did he know Saul was missing?

"*Benjamin!*" Samuel called out, and Jonathan's heart leapt into his throat.

A rush of quiet voices rippled like water cascading over rock.

"Come forward clan by clan," Samuel told them.

The men of Benjamin obeyed.

Kish looked around. He grasped Jonathan's arm.

"Where is your father?"

"I don't know."

"*Matri!*" Samuel called out.

Kish looked around again, his eyes frantic.

“Kish!” Samuel’s voice rang out. “The Lord has appointed Saul king over Israel.”

The tribe of Benjamin burst out in cheers and jumped up and down.

“Saul!” Kish turned this way and that. “Saul!”

The voices rose—some in triumph, some in question.

Jonathan looked around, searching. *Oh, Father. Father!* Where could he have gone?

Kish’s face darkened. He grabbed one of his sons and beckoned the others. “Find your brother! Quickly! Go! Before these cheers turn to jeers! *Go!*”

“Has the man come here yet?” some called out.

Samuel looked grim. “Yes. He has hidden himself among the baggage.”

Jonathan felt the blood drain from his face and then flood back until he felt on fire with embarrassment. He ducked his head and wove through the men.

Some began to shout. “Hiding? How can such a man save us?”

“What sort of champion will he be?”

Jonathan ran toward the piles of baggage, as eager to find his father as he was to escape disdain and contemptuous words. Hiding? Surely not! His father was no coward!

Jonathan found his father huddled among the bundles and sacks, shoulders slumped, head in his hands.

“You’re the king, Father. The Lord has made you king!”

Saul groaned in misery. “Tell Samuel it’s all a mistake.”

“God told Samuel it’s you. God doesn’t make mistakes.”

Jonathan hunkered down beside him. “You must come.”

He fought tears, humiliation gathering. What if others saw his father like this? He couldn’t bear it. “The Lord will

help you. Surely the Lord will not abandon the one He's chosen, even if He abandons the rest of us."

Saul raised his head. When he held out his hand, Jonathan grasped it and helped him to his feet. He could feel his father shudder when someone cried out, "There he is!"

Men surged toward them. They surrounded Saul and Jonathan. Saul covered his fear and straightened. He was a head taller than every other man around him. Handsome and strongly built, he stood like a king among them. Saul was swept along like a leaf on a river until he stood before Samuel.

The prophet held out his hand. "This is the man the Lord has chosen as your king. No one in all Israel is like him!"

Jonathan saw men of Judah sneer and whisper among themselves. Thankfully, the vast majority shouted, "Long live the king!"

"Listen to the Word of the Lord!" Samuel called out to the mass. Saul stood beside the seer, facing the people. Samuel opened a scroll and read from it. Some stood still and listened. Many fidgeted. A few whispered among themselves. Samuel looked out over the people.

"The Lord said a day would come when we would ask for a king. He said to appoint a fellow Israelite; he may not be a foreigner." He faced Saul. "The king must not build up a large stable of horses for himself or send his people to Egypt to buy horses, for the Lord has told you, 'You must never return to Egypt.' The king must not take many wives for himself, because they will turn his heart away from the Lord. And he must not accumulate large amounts of wealth in silver and gold for himself."

Samuel took a smaller scroll and placed it upon the altar

he had made of stones, and then handed Saul the Torah. "Saul, son of Kish, son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Becorath, son of Aphiah of Benjamin, you must copy for yourself this body of instruction on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. You must always keep that copy with you and read it daily as long as you live. That way you will learn to fear the Lord your God by obeying all the terms of these instructions and decrees. This regular reading will prevent you from becoming proud and acting as if you are above your fellow citizens. It will also prevent you from turning away from these commands in the smallest way. And it will ensure that you and your descendants will reign for many generations in Israel."

Saul took the scroll and held it at his side like a sword. Samuel turned him toward the people. Saul's jaw locked as he looked out over the thousands upon thousands staring at him. He looked but said nothing.

Jonathan was filled with pride as he observed his father. No one could say that he had coveted the power of kingship. Saul had all the eagerness of a man who had just received a sentence of death. But no man among all Israel looked more like a king than Saul, son of Kish.

Whatever it takes, Lord, help me to help my father, Jonathan prayed. Give me strength when he needs protection. Give me wisdom when he needs counsel. Put mighty men around him, warriors who fear You and will faithfully serve the king.

✦ ✦ ✦

Jonathan thought their lives would change, but as soon as the family reached Gibeah, his father turned to his field, leaving without orders those who returned with them and

were eager to do the king's bidding. They built camps around the town and waited.

"Are you going to copy the Law, Father?"

"The fields must come first."

Troubled, Jonathan went to his mother. "The seer commanded it, Mother. Surely Samuel will be displeased if Father doesn't do it."

"Saul is king of Israel now, Jonathan, and every king does what is pleasing in his own sight. If your father won't copy the Law, there's nothing you can do about it. Do not waste time arguing with him. As strong as Kish is, has your grandfather ever won a battle with Saul?"

"No."

"Your father had no ambitions to be king, but whether he likes it or not, he is. And whether you want to be or not, you are the prince, heir to the throne."

His mother was shrewd. Everything she said meant something. "What are you saying, Mother? I would prefer you tell me outright."

She spread her hands. "Is it for a woman to tell a man what he should do?"

"All I want is to serve Father."

She folded her hands in her lap and smiled enigmatically. "Then serve him."

Ah. If the Law must be written and his father had no time to do it, then he must.

He went out into the field and asked permission to go to the school of prophets in Naioth. Saul nodded. "Finish the task as quickly as possible and come home." He embraced Jonathan, kissed him, and let him go.

By the time Jonathan returned to the house, his mother had already made preparations for his journey.