

SONS OF GOD

CHRISTINA LA CROIX

c. 1000 BCE

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.

— *Genesis 6:1–4, King James Version*

The Peleshet people were the greatest of all the peoples of the land of Kihanhhu. They had come over the sea in their swift ships, and as their armies were the most powerful, and their civilization the most splendid, within a few generations they had quickly overtaken the land.

And as they were by far the most superior of the peoples of Kihanhhu, they soon began to hope to purge that fertile land of all the other peoples who dwelt there.

Above all, they hoped to rid the land of the contemptible Shashu people, who were, in the Peleshet estimation, a lowly wandering people of no account. The Shashu, who had been hardened by fighting for generations in the barren desert, had held off the Peleshet for years, but now, it was said, they would soon be no more.

For the Peleshet had a champion. And not just *any* champion, but an undefeatable champion, said to be a son of one of their many gods. This champion would, it was said, finally lead the Peleshet to victory over the hardscrabble Shashu, and the Peleshet King now swore he would drive the Shashu back into the red desert from which they came, and if they did not go willingly, he would slaughter them all like the vermin they were.

In battle after battle the Shashu were destroyed, until the Shashu people implored their king to surrender. But Shama'el the Shashu Seer had prophesied that despite all their greatness, the Desert God would bring the Peleshet to defeat, for the Desert God had promised victory and, with this victory, a cleansing of the land.

So despite the grumblings of the great warlords, the Shashu king had called up a large army, and not retreated, but instead for forty days and forty nights the Shashu had fought even up to the high proud walls of the Peleshet city of Gath, only to be driven back by their champion, with many deaths, until it was said, that even the King would have surrendered had the continuation of the war not been ordered by the Desert God and his Seer.

Shama'el the Seer, on seeing so many dead on the plain, went into his tent, and went into one of his trances where he spoke to the Desert God, and the Desert God answered him, for Shama'el came from his tent and informed Yoav, the commander who led the King's armies, that he, Shama'el, would send for the man who would kill the Peleshet champion.

Yoav was astonished at this, for in his army was reckoned the greatest of all the fighting men of the Shashu, including the King's great Thirty, his trusted men-at-arms, but he knew not to question the word of the Desert God's Seer. So he only bowed to the Seer and walked away confused as to what great warrior would be summoned.

Yoav was therefore not amused when, a few days later, one of his men told him that a farmer in a cart was asking entrance to the camp, not with food for the fighting men, but stating that Shama'el had summoned him to fight the Peleshet champion.

"He is a madman or a spy. Send him away," Yoav spat, ill tempered as he had lost many men, and was not in the mood for strange practical jokes.

"He insists, my General," the young fighter who had approached him now obviously regretted bringing it to his leader's attention.

Yoav sighed. He was bitter from the loss of many men, but he was not a cruel man, and humble, he still did not consider himself much above the young warrior who fidgeted in front of him.

"Very well, I shall deal with him myself," Yoav replied, sighing again.

The young man was still outside the camp, in a small wooden cart being pulled by a donkey. He was in a plain brown homespun robe like most of the peasants wore, and had bare feet hardened with calluses. He had a hood on to

shield his head from the sun, so Yoav could not see his face clearly, but he was obviously very young, and did not look obviously mad.

Yoav was a little less irritated to see that his farmer had brought with him vegetables and sacks of grain, so he spoke less sharply than he had intended.

“See here, young man, we will pay for the food, but stop your foolishness,” Yoav said.

“The food is a gift,” the young man said unexpectedly, “from my mother and father.” He then suddenly laughed.

Yoav was wary, a laugh for no reason perhaps hinted at madness.

“Why do you laugh?” Yoav asked, exasperated, and at the same time his hand was on the pommel of his sword.

“I laugh because it occurs to me that I too, am a gift from my mother and father,” the young man replied, “Do you not recognize me, Yoav son of Zeruya? It has been a few years.”

The young man threw back the hood of his robe so that Yoav could see who it was. It was a young man of no more than twenty years or so, handsome in the way that many of the farm people of the hills were, as they were accustomed to fresh food and hard labor. The young man resembled many of such young men, with regular features, tanned skin, and straight white teeth.

But he did not entirely resemble the farm people, for his brown eyes were surprisingly warm yet seemed wry with intelligence. Yoav, however, was not stuck at first by the beauty of his eyes, overwhelmed as he was by the young man’s exceedingly long hair, braided down his back, and the color of silver.

At the sight of his hair, Yoav swallowed, his mouth dry, for he now knew not only *who* this young man was, but more importantly *what* this young man was.

“Elhanan son of Jair-Oregim,” Yoav said, bowing to the young man, despite his own high status, “I apologize, I did not recognize you.”

“No apology, it has been a few years since we have seen each other,” Elhanan replied good-naturedly, “But did my Master not say that I was coming?”

“The Seer said that he was summoning someone, but I did not know that you were—*ready*,” Yoav said awkwardly, because there was not an easy

way to say it. If Elhanan had been summoned, things had to be even worse than Yoav had supposed, for to summon Elhanan—considering *what* he was—could be a dangerous thing, which was probably why Elhanan had not been summoned before now.

“I suppose we shall see, won’t we?” Elhanan asked, matter-of-factly. “But I must go see my Master now.”

“Shall I lead you?” Yoav asked politely, shamed of his prior tone to the young man.

“Not at all,” the young man said, hopping down from the wooden cart, “But please, take this cart, full of food, for your men.” He then gave a little smile, “But I’m going to need the cart back, and the donkey, or my father will have my hide. Please remind your men the Desert God forbids the eating of donkey meat.”

“Yes, of course,” Yoav said, before realizing that the young man was joking, but he could say no more as the silver-haired young farmer had already strode away.

Elhanan could sense his Master, so he went to the area where he knew his Master was, and he was not disappointed, for the old man sat in front of his tent, his cheek leaning against his staff, and his eyes closed, as if he was sleeping.

But the old man was not sleeping, for at Elhanan’s approach he said, “Elhanan, son of Jair-Oregim.” There was genuine warmth at his greeting, for Elhanan, when he had been dedicated to the Desert God, Elhanan had lived with him for many years, not merely a student or servant but also a son. Like Elhanan, he had been dedicated to the Desert God, and his long black hair, now shot with grey, was in a braid so long that it touched the ground from his bent head.

Elhanan got down in front of his knees at his old Master, and bowed until the old man finally told him to rise.

“You are thin,” the old man carped.

“I have six brothers and sisters, so there are no second helpings.” the young man retorted.

The old man was not mollified, “Doesn’t the village give you a portion of the first crops, considering what you are?”

“I give it to the poor,” the young man replied.

“You would be better off eating it yourself, as you are scrawnier than the poor,” the old man said, with a wry smile. His left eye was bluish white with cataract, but it seemed fixed on the young man even more than the right eye, which was a warm brown. He then sniffed, “And I have not been invited to your wedding.”

“Because I have not married,” the young man answered loftily.

The old man leaned forward in his seat, “Isn’t your young blood hot? Don’t you want to sire some silver-haired babies to consecrate to the Desert God?”

The young man unexpectedly blushed, but he would have none of it, “And have them trained by you? I shall remain celibate.”

“Perhaps there will be no sons and daughters of the Shashu before long,” the old man suddenly said, becoming serious.

“Are the Peleshet such a formidable people that we cannot defeat them?” the young man asked, not a challenge but more as an entreaty to this wise old man, and his Desert God, who had led the Shashu to so many victories before this.

“They are a formidable people,” the old man said, not answering the question directly.

“So we cannot defeat them?” the young man pressed.

“We can defeat them. Or rather *you* can defeat them,” the old man said.

“I cannot kill an entire army,” the young man replied.

“Are you entirely sure? Did not Shimshon, when the spirit of the Desert God was upon him, kill thousands of the Peleshet?” the old man snapped.

“I am not Shimshon,” Elhanan said flatly, as if it were obvious.

“But you do not have to kill their entire army. I summoned you to kill only one man. . Their champion,” the old Seer said, and then added, “A man, but more a mountain than a man. Their champion Galyut, who comes out every morning and challenges one of our warriors to single combat. No one is stupid enough to take this challenge. But when the Shashu go out to the battlefield, Galyut mows through our warriors as if they are wheat. He alone has killed a thousand of our men. And after he kills them, he rends them limb from limb and mocks us in our weakness,” Shama’el said.

Elhanan knew immediately what the old man was implying, “And I must be the one to kill him.”

“Yes. Because otherwise he cannot be defeated,” the old man said, matter-of-factly.

“Are you saying he is a Nephilim?” Elhanan asked slowly. He knew that others like him had existed at least in the distant past, but he had never in his entire life seen another one of his own kind. He felt a turn in his stomach, not of fear, but of a strange excitement.

“Yes. Like you, like Shimshon, he is one of the Nephilim,” the old man said simply, “no ordinary man can kill him easily. And you, my son, while you *are* a man, you are hardly ordinary.”

Elhanan knew that if he fought another Nephilim, it was very likely he might die, but he looked into the eyes of the man who was more father than teacher, and said only, “I will do it.”

And the old man, knowing that his request might kill this young man, more a son to him than a student, only nodded, as if he did not trust himself to speak.

Now that the matter had been settled, Elhanan was content to sit in his Master’s tent to eat his last meal and then pray before the following day, but Yoav the son of Zeryura came to the Seer’s tent to offer thanks to the young man, and give counsel.

Elhanan liked Yoav, who he had known since he was a scrawny youth, for Yoav was a simple man, and a brave fighter. However, on seeing the King’s commander approach the tent, he grimaced inwardly, for he felt the need to focus before the following day.

Elhanan also knew that Yoav was not coming to speak for himself alone, but to be the mouthpiece of their King, proud Dawit, who awaited news of the siege of Gath in his great city of Shalim, and who was angry as to how many men who had been lost.

And Elhanan, who was of the blood of Nephilim, of the Watchers who had become one with mortal men so long ago that no one knew why or how, was nevertheless the son of simple farmers, and like simple farmers he was a plain man, and not fond of the formality and two way talking way of kings, so he had little patience with such things.

Yoav again bowed to the young man before he approached, which was remarkable as Yoav was of high rank, but perhaps it was because Yoav did honor not to Elhanan personally, but to *what* he was. And although very few among men were Nephilim, pure atavistic throwbacks to the Watchers, it was often said that certain families had a trace of that blood as well. It had even been said that Yoav's mother, the female warrior Zeryura, could claim Nephilim blood, one of the reasons she was so fierce and feared in battle. To honor this, her sons were called the "sons of Zeryura" as her husband was a mere ordinary man, and mostly forgotten.

It was said that Yoav recalled his mother in his skill in battle and in his cunning at war, so perhaps he too had a trace of that blood as well, but in any case he seemed to remember what Elhanan was, and did not hesitate to give him honor.

"Elhanan, son of Jair-Oregim," Yoav said, "Peace be to you," and he bowed again.

"Yoav, son of Zeryura," Elhanan replied, bowing down as well, "Peace be to you."

"I am sorry to disturb you," Yoav said politely, "on the night before battle, but I have come to bring you gifts." He gestured to a young man, a slave who pulled a small cart silently behind him.

The young slave bowed, not meeting Elhanan's eyes, perhaps as he knew what he was, before taking from the cart a heavy cloth, and then unwrapping it before Elhanan on the ground.

In the heavy cloth was a long sword with a worked handle, a suit of silver-burnished armor, a heavy breastplate, and greaves. Each edge glistened with gold, and there was a heavy helmet too, with ivory cheek plates and decorated with gold as well.

"These are rich gifts," Elhanan blurted, embarrassed by such generosity.

"They are not from me," the general admitted, "but from King Dawit, who seeks to give you every advantage tomorrow."

Elhanan picked up the helmet, which was ridiculously heavy. On the sides, exquisitely worked, were scenes from the life of one of the greatest of the Nephilim, the mighty Shimshon, who had killed thousands of these same Peleshet when the spirit of the Desert God was upon him.

On one side Elhanan could see the famous scene where Shimshon had torn a lion limb from limb, and it was more beautiful than horrible; the lion seemed more astonished than pained.

Above the images, on the crest of the helmet itself shone with pure silver, and gleamed bright like a mirror even in the dim half-light of oil torches. Elhanan could see himself in the high crest, his long silver hair shining more than this fine armor, but still a farmer's son dressed in plain clothes and with dust of the road still upon him.

The same farmer's son replied plainly, "I cannot accept such gifts."

In his surprise, the general also spoke plainly, "King Dawit will be offended."

"I mean him no disrespect," Elhanan said sincerely, "but all my life I have been trained by Shama'el to fight in the manner of the Nephilim. I cannot fight like one of the King's mighty warriors. I would be too slow and too heavy in such things."

"The king will not be pleased," Yoav said, again perhaps too honestly for someone so close to the throne and Elhanan had to hide a smile.

"The king will be pleased if I kill this Galyut, the other things are trivialities," Elhanan answered shrewdly, and now it was Yoav's turn to hide his smile.

"*Can* you kill him?" Yoav asked suddenly.

"I do not know," Elhanan answered honestly.

"Does Shama'el think you can?" Yoav asked hopefully.

"He thinks I have the best chance," Elhanan answered, "as we are both Nephilim."

"I have seen him," Yoav said, "on the battlefield." He seemed to struggle to suppress a shudder, as if it was shameful for him to show his terror. He went on, in almost a whisper, "He was not...a man."

"Nephilim are men," Elhanan corrected him.

Yoav hesitated for a moment, before going on. "He calls every day in his terrible voice, which sounds like the scream of animals and brass gongs, for the Shashu to present their champion. He says every day that we do not present our champion more and more of us will die."

"He won't be screaming that tomorrow," Elhanan said calmly.

Yoav said suddenly, "I was going to offer myself as champion, if Shama'el had not summoned you."

Elhanan understood enough of the honorable nature of Yoav to understand that was a confession of guilt, as if Elhanan was being sent to die in his place. He laid a gentle hand on Yoav's arm, and smiled.

"Go in peace, Yoav, son of Zeryura," Elhanan said, with genuine warmth.

"May the Desert God deliver you tomorrow," Yoav said huskily.

"May He deliver us all," Elhanan replied.

Shama'el the seer awoke Elhanan before dawn, for Elhanan, despite what was to come, was still a young man, and so he had fallen into such a deep sleep that Shama'el had to shake him.

"Did you dream?" was the first question Shama'el asked. Elhanan had not before shown any gift of dreaming true dreams, but it was not unheard of among the Nephilim. The Shashu still spoke of how one of the great Nephilim, Yosef, had dreamed true dreams and even interpreted dreams for great kings.

"Yes," the young man said, yawning, "I dreamt of dates. And my mother's bread."

Shama'el, despite everything, laughed. "You need to eat more, Elhanan, my son."

"I shall eat after I kill Galyut," Elhanan said, pretending confidence.

"King Dawit will feast you, for sure," Shama'el agreed.

The young man, sitting up, shook his head, "I long for my mother's bread. And dates. And the sour goat cheese Mother Chana used to make," the young man sighed wistfully.

Shama'el smiled at the memory of his own mother bustling about the kitchen as she fed this remarkable young man when she was still among the living, but he only said, lightly, "You will need to get more elevated tastes if you are to become a favorite of the king."

"A farmer's son cannot become a favorite of the king," Elhanan said, shrugging.

"A farmer's son, Nephilim, and champion too," Shama'el corrected him.

Elhanan frowned doubtfully, but then arose from his blanket to pray with the old Seer, the way he had done for years when they lived together.

It was still very dark, so Shama'el could see little except the outline of the young man's head as he knelt beside him, and a glint of silvery hair, but as the young man knelt to pray Shama'el could see the glint of bluish light that gently glowed about him.

It had been so long that they had prayed together that Shama'el had almost forgotten the way the young man would shimmer when he began to pray to the Desert God, and as Elhanan cleared his mind, he became brighter and brighter, and clearer and clearer white, until the old man had to close the flap of the tent lest Elhanan frighten the troops and even, despite the distance of the enemy camp, reveal where he was.

When the young man was done praying, the bright light had gone dimmer, and merely surrounded the young man with a bluish glow, like the heart of a candle flame.

Elhanan, finally noticing the old seer looking at him, grimaced, embarrassed, "You see why I do not often pray in my village."

"They know what you are," the old man commented neutrally.

"But to know what you are—and then *see* it, are two very different things," the young man replied. His expression was still one of embarrassment but there also seemed some loneliness in it as well.

The old man was not sentimental, but all the same he felt for the young man. The old man was not Nephilim, although considering his prophetic gifts; Shama'el likely had a trace of that blood of that ancient race. But, more importantly, he had been trained in the many secrets of the Shashu Seers by his own Master, Eli, as one of the sacred duties of that office was to train any Nephilim that were born to their people. And one thing his own Master Eli had made clear to him was how truly set apart the Nephilim were from the great mass of humankind, either to be the enemy of ordinary men, or their heroes.

This young man, who he had trained since he could barely toddle, was a *good* man, not the enemy of mankind, but called now to be their hero and perhaps, if the stories of Galyut were true, their sacrifice.

But instead of speaking his thoughts, Shama'el only said, "You must clear your mind, Elhanan. Today will be very dangerous."

“I know,” Elhanan snorted, “a mountain is going to try and kill me.”

“No—“the old man snapped, but realizing his error, corrected himself, “Yes. But you are in greater danger still, from yourself.”

Elhanan chanted tiredly, obviously from memory, “The power of the Watchers is infinite. The flesh of man is weak. The flesh of man will *burn*—“the young man shook his head, “Did you not say that a pure heart will help protect me?”

“*Help,*” the old man emphasized.

“I have used my—abilities,” the young man confessed, with a shy smile. “Back home. When no one was looking. To find water for a new well. To rescue my father’s prize ox that had fallen into a pit.”

“Farmer’s son,” the old man said, sourly, but with a trace of affection, “But that was only the tiniest fraction of a fraction of your ancestors’ power. You have been trained enough that you were able to control it. But if you fight one of your own—I do not know what will happen. You may not be able to control your gifts. You *could* burn. You may die.”

“As long as Galyut dies with me,” Elhanan said indifferently.

“Not just Galyut. You could destroy us all. Peleshet. Shashu,” the old man said. It seemed so ridiculous to Elhanan that he would have laughed, were it not for the expression on Shama’el’s face.

“Like Shimshon and his thousands. When he was enraged, he destroyed an entire city. And himself,” Shama’el added.

“I am not Shimshon,” Elhanan replied automatically, but then, after a hesitation, he added, “But if you believe that I could do such things, I should have been strangled at birth.”

Shama’el shook his head, “It is as the Desert God wills, my son. And your pure heart will help protect you, but you must remain clear in your purpose today. You must not give into anger, or hate.”

“So I must love my enemy, then?” Elhanan asked doubtfully.

“If not love, at least respect. In some ways, my son, as you are both Nephilim, he is more your brother than your own people,” the old man said unexpectedly.

Elhanan’s eyes widened in surprise, and he shook his head slowly, “I do not understand. I kill my own brother—for *my* people, who *are* my people, but

who are not like me.” Elhanan laughed bitterly, “At the last moment, my Master, you choose to give me doubts.”

“Absolute certainty is the enemy of truth, and often the enemy of morality,” the old man said cryptically “Have you not realized the Nephilim, if they chose to be, would be the greatest enemy of ordinary men? Shimshon killed thousands. He did it in righteous cause, but Nephilim are also men. They can choose the wrong. What if Shimshon had chosen to kill for evil purpose? If that happens, if some of your kind do not stand with ordinary men, how can men survive? Today, Galyut kills hundreds. Perhaps tomorrow, he kills *thousands*. Perhaps the day after that, he decides to begin to rid the earth of humankind.”

“Impossible!” blurted Elhanan, but there was fear in his eyes.

The old man sighed, and spoke, not angrily, but wearily, “Our ancestor Nahah was spared when the waters covered the earth. But what you do not know, is that when the waters covered the earth, it was to drown evil Nephilim who sought to destroy humankind.”

Elhanan started, and said uncomfortably, ““I have never heard such a story. I was taught it was to destroy wicked men.”

“That part of the history is not often revealed to the uninitiated,” the old man replied, “particularly because, after all the evil Nephilim had been destroyed, and the waters receded again, and Nahah and his family had resettled the earth, Nahah’s wife gave birth to a child. A *beautiful* child, whose face shone like the sun when he laughed. Even as the Nephilim were destroyed, they still remained with us.”

“I do not understand,” Elhanan said truthfully.

Elhanan expected Shama’el to say some rote thing about how it was the will of the Desert God, but he did not. He opened the flap of the tent, and Elhanan could see the faintest lightening of the sky to the east, the promise of perhaps the last day he would ever see.

Shama’el picked up his staff, and said only, “Walk with me.”

The young man did as he was bid. Even though it was a war camp, it was mostly silent, save for a solitary dog that gnawed at a bone by one of the banked fires of the camp. He was scrawny, with floppy ears and grimy yellowish-brown fur that stuck up, giving him a rakish appearance, but with liquid brown eyes. As Elhanan passed, the dog wagged his tail and waited for Elhanan to pet him, which the young man did absently before walking past.

“What weapon will you use?” Shama’el asked.

“Not a metal sword, certainly,” Elhanan tried not to laugh, remembering King Dawit’s absurd gifts.

“Reach out your mind,” Shama’el insisted, “What *element*?”

Elhanan became quiet and still, the blue glow around him getting stronger and around the edges glinting with gold. The dog by the fire seemed curious, and walked closer, wagging his tail again.

Elhanan’s mind plunged down beneath the earth, the sandy soil around scrubby Gath, and touched far beneath—it was almost as if he could *taste* it, the cold mineral taste.

He shook his head, “Not water.”

The dog unconcernedly pushed through Elhanan’s remarkable glow, rubbing himself around Elhanan’s long legs.

“Not fur,” Elhanan said, in the same dreamy voice, and then, shook his head, laughing. He bent down and scratched the head of the determined dog.

“*Concentrate*,” Shama’el demanded.

It was as if Elhanan was shifting and dancing, his body lighter than air, as he rippled in the heat. He was fixated on the banked fire, and how it shimmered even in the low wind. His glow sparked red and orange, the dog let out a yelp and pulled away as if he had been burned. He gave Elhanan a resentful look.

“Sorry,” Elhanan murmured, regretfully. His eyes glowed red for a moment, as if they were coals, and then in the next instant, returned to their brown color.

“Not fire,” Elhanan pronounced.

“Reach *out*,” Shama’el ordered.

Elhanan reached upward, into the space above the flames, and then, in a moment, it was as if his consciousness had rushed up into the sky, he was a cold wind above the ice-capped mountains, and then, higher still—he was far above the earth, in the place above the sky, in the silent void where the stars lived.

“Too high,” he muttered, coming back down into his body. “Not air.”

The dog, still whining resentfully, edged closer again, as if determined to force Elhanan to pet him, and poked Elhanan with his wet nose.

“Someone likes you,” Shama’el said, not a complement, as Elhanan rubbed behind the dog’s floppy ears.

Elhanan did not answer, for after a moment, it seemed as if he had gone out again, Shama’el could feel Elhanan’s consciousness everywhere about him, it made the hair on the back of his arms rise up, and prickle along his spine. If he had not been so familiar with it, he would have shuddered.

“Earth,” Elhanan said, finally, no louder than a whisper, “It must be—*earth.*”

The whining dog was pawing at the dusty ground, it seemed as if what he was pawing at suddenly caught Elhanan’s attention, for he reached down and delicately lifted up what the dog had been pawing.

With a smile, he showed it to his master. Shama’el blinked. It was a—pebble?

“Earth,” Elhanan pronounced, before putting it in a small pouch at his side.

“And that is to do what, exactly?” Shama’el asked, irritably.

“I have a sling,” Elhanan said, matter-of-factly, “I use it to chase wolves from the sheep.”

“Farmer’s son,” Shama’el said sourly.

“Farmer’s son,” Elhanan agreed, with a smile.

The dog whined again and wagged his tail.

The early dawn had become morning, and the fighting men had roused, many of them rinsing themselves in the nearby stream, or eating small meals they had cooked over fires.

As Elhanan walked past, many of the men gave a small cheer, as the rumor of his appearance had been buzzing in the camp. Elhanan, embarrassed, gave a small wave of his hand whenever this occurred, but spent most of the time reaching down and patting the stray dog at his side.

Much to Shama’el’s chagrin, the stray dog had attached himself to Elhanan and could not be dislodged.

“You have a tag-along,” Shama’el said grumpily, as the scrawny dog walked beside Elhanan, wagging his tail.

“He comforts me,” Elhanan said, “I shall call him Hutspa.”

“*Nerve?*” Shama’el said, laughing despite himself, “But once you name him, he is yours.”

“Perhaps he will need a new master before long,” Elhanan said, not gloomily but matter-of-factly. He went on, in the same practical tone, “How shall we go about this? Do I walk up to Gath, and challenge him now? It will save our fighters having to go out into the field.”

“Yoav suggested that you go out with the fighters, so that you could get your sense of the man first,” Shama’el replied.

“You mean, watch other men get killed, so that I can figure out his strategy?” Elhanan shook his head. “I cannot watch that in good conscience. No man will fight this Galyut today, other than myself.”

“Hutspa,” Shama’el muttered, under his breath, but at Elhanan’s look he added, “I was talking to the *dog*.”

“Of course you were,” Elhanan said, smiling, “I see he has grown on you.”

Beside some of the tents the men were assembling. Some were among the Thirty, King Dawit’s most elite warriors, and were buckling up their bronze armor plates, or sharpening their long swords. Only among the whole troops they did not cheer at Elhanan’s approach, only muttered to each other and regarded Elhanan with suspicious eyes.

“I see they are not very friendly,” Elhanan remarked, “Perhaps they scorn me because I am only a villager.”

Shama’el shook his head, “No, they fear you.”

“Fear?” Elhanan echoed.

“They fear losing the king’s favor,” Shama’el commented.

“I am no one’s favorite,” Elhanan commented, indicating his plain clothes and his callused hands.

“That can change,” commented Shama’el.

“Can you imagine me in the palace at Shalim?” Elhanan retorted, trying not to laugh, “I will dirty their fancy rugs with my feet. I only want to go back to my father’s farm.”

Some of the other fighters were simple men, farmers and merchants who had been called up from their villages, and unlike the Thirty and the elite warriors, they had not sharp swords but spears and bows and arrows, some of them made from crude bronze, but others from flint or even fire-hardened wood. Recognizing their own, they made a lusty cheer at Elhanan’s approach, and called to him, not in the formal Shashu language, but the dialects spoken in many of the outside villages.

“Spear him right through like an ox!” shouted one.

Another called out, “Bless us, Nephilim!” At this, several joined in requesting that Elhanan bless them, kneeling at his feet, but he shook his head.

“I am only a man. The Desert God will bless you,” Elhanan said.

“Nicely done,” Shama’el commented, under his breath.

A very young man, no more than a boy, pointed at Hustpa with wide eyes. He spoke in the dialect of the south, so it was hard for Elhanan to immediately understand what he was saying.

“Is that a spirit dog, O mighty one? Will he devour your enemies?” the boy’s eyes were wide at the sight of the scrawny dog.

Due to the dialect, Elhanan did not immediately understand him, and he was not entirely sure, even after he understood what words the young man was saying, what he actually meant. When it finally processed, Elhanan did his best to answer without showing his amusement.

“It is only a dog, but one with a great heart,” Elhanan answered kindly.

The young man had an expression half in disbelief, and half in disappointment. One of the older men—he spoke in the same southern dialect, so he was likely from the same village—at this guffawed and called out, “Your dog will have Peleshet bones to gnaw on tonight!”

Elhanan nodded but he did not entirely share the old man’s confidence.

Towards the very outskirts of the camp, Yoav son of Zeruya was tying up his chariot. Unlike many generals, he always led the fighters, so as to give them heart, but he also said—perhaps only half in jest—if he had not done so his mother, the warrior Zeruya, would have despised him. Some of his trusted

companions had readied their chariots, and still other chariots were being prepared by slaves for the Thirty.

“You have a good horse,” Elhanan commented, regarding Yoav’s pale horse, not covetously but in the manner of a man of the earth commenting on livestock. He then went on, looking at the line of chariots “Are they much help in a siege?”

Yoav grinned at Elhanan’s shrewd comment, “Not much, although the Thirty wouldn’t deign to walk out to the enemy. Right now I use them to hold the line when the fighting gets too thick, or, to be frank, coordinate our retreats.”

Elhanan nodded, but then asked, “How about using them to drive siege-engines, rather than chariots?”

“I think I need to worry about my position,” Yoav said good-naturedly, “Perhaps King Dawit seeks a new general soon.”

“Hardly,” Elhanan retorted, “unless he needs a general to dig him a well.”

“With Galyut driving our forces back, I can’t get our forces close enough to break through the walls. He would kill all our men—and our horses too—if I brought them too close,” Yoav said, then added, “I watched *–him–* punch a horse in the head that he could reach. He crushed its skull, killing it instantly.”

Shama’el shot the blunt Yoav a stern look from under his black eyebrows, and Yoav realized a moment too late that he had said something that might disturb Elhanan.

“Elhanan—“Yoav said awkwardly.

“It is good, then, we Shashu villagers have very hard heads,” Elhanan quipped. He then went on, crisply, “I will leave the camp now, and head out to the walls.” He looked at the distance where the high white walls of Gath shimmered in the morning light. “It is a long walk.”

“You do not need to walk,” Yoav said, indicating his chariot, “It would be my honor to be your charioteer.”

“I cannot allow that,” Elhanan replied, despite being touched, “it is not fitting.”

“Ridiculous,” Shama’el snorted.

“Will you take a cart?” Yoav asked, “I can have one brought.”

“It is best I go quietly as possible,” Elhanan replied, “I will walk.”

Shama’el snorted again, but Elhanan studiously avoided looking at his Master.

“Alone?” Yoav asked.

“Not *alone*,” Elhanan replied, “I will bring Hutspa.”

Apparently Hutspa could sense Elhanan was talking about him, because at his name he gave a happy bark and wagged his tail.

“You are bringing a *dog*?” Yoav asked incredulously.

“Yes. He helped me find my stone, anyway,” Elhanan answered cryptically. He squinted up at the sun, as it had risen into the sky, “I should get going.”

“You can’t go now. The fighters must ready to do battle,” Yoav protested.

Elhanan shook his head, “They should not attack until after I have challenged Galyut. If I win, perhaps we win this war. If I lose, then perhaps King Dawit will wish to call a truce. But in either case, they should save their strength to fight the Peleshet.”

“The Peleshet foot-soldiers will attack you, kill you—” Yoav insisted.

“I don’t think so,” Elhanan said quietly. Yoav realized, with a cold shudder down his legs, that the young man was not boasting, but making a plain statement that he could not be killed by the massive army camped beneath Gath’s walls.

Elhanan then looked at his Master, and added, gently, “If I win, I will return to you. If I do not return, please let my mother and father know.”

“Yes,” Shama’el agreed, “I will.” He reached out his hand and clasped the young man’s hand for a moment, and then perhaps shamed by his soft emotions, barked, “Concentrate.”

Elhanan replied, “Yes.” There was much love and affection in that single word, so much so Shama’el was forced to look away.

“Farewell,” Elhanan said, to Shama’el and Yoav, and with that simple word, he gave a small wave and then turned to walk towards Gath, Hutspa padding happily beside him.

“Does he have a chance?” Yoav demanded of the seer, as he watched Elhanan and the pesky dog get smaller and smaller.

“There is always a chance,” Shama’el replied unhelpfully.

“What is this about a stone?” Yoav asked, suddenly remembering the strange comment that Elhanan had made about the dog and finding a stone. By his tone Shama’el could tell that Yoav was hoping it was a magical rock of some kind.

“He’s fighting Galyut with a sling,” Shama’el answered neutrally.

“A sling?” Yoav asked, frowning.

“A sling,” Shama’el repeated, “and he needed a stone for it.”

“I see,” Yoav said, although he did not.

Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim had never been to a great city. His village was several miles away from a small and beautiful city, Bet-Lahim, which was a jewel in the Judean Mountains, and Elhanan often thought that no city on earth could be better.

He had never been to the great city of Shalim, which King Dawit had taken from the Yabusu through strength and cunning and was now building into a great capital for his kingdom. The great city was not far from Bet-Lahim, but Elhanan’s father and mother never gone there, despite the begging done by his eldest sister Yoshebel, who had yearned to see the wonders there. Elhanan had known, without being told, that his mother and father had not wanted to bring *him* there, considering what he was, due to the fact that they did not want attention brought to him more than there already was. And although he had not particularly wanted to see the great capital, he had felt sad for Yoshebel, who was just a pretty girl who deserved some pleasant distraction, and would have had it if her brother had not been a Nephilim.

Gath was a great city, a greater city, it be told, than the city of Shalim, as it was an ancient city and the Peleshet were a great people. Even from a great distance Elhanan could see the high walls built of great stones, which was yet more impressive as it rose up over the valley of Elah, which was green with terebinth trees.

Even more impressive were the fighting men encamped at the base of the walls. Unlike the hardscrabble Shashu, with their rough fighting men conscripted from the villages and towns, the Peleshet army, even from a distance, was obviously well-trained and well-provided for, each man had

dyed red leather armor, and their arms and legs glinted with bronze greaves and cuffs.

They had set up camp in regulated lines, their tents set up in neat formation, and above it all flew the flag of their greatest deity, the horse-god Wanax. The rearing stallion, just like the armor, was bright red, on a black ground and seemed to dance with the whipping of the flag in the wind.

Elhanan, being only a Shashu, and a villager at that, was fascinated by the display. He did not know much of other peoples, and certainly not of pagans who worshiped strange gods and had strange ways. He had heard from Shama'el that the Peleshet ate pigs and even dogs, perhaps Hutspa sensed this as he stayed even closer to Elhanan's legs and whined a little.

Elhanan patted the dog absently, not knowing what he should do next. He saw all the fighting men, who seemed all equally impressive from this distance, but he wondered which one was Galyut.

Elhanan smiled ruefully, as he felt a little foolish in this errand, not knowing who he was to kill. He had the image of himself approaching each soldier and asking them if they knew Galyut, as if he was looking for a mutual acquaintance.

Although, if we are both Nephilim, I am sure I would recognize him. Shama'el had called Galyut his "brother" and Elhanan would recognize his brother, he supposed, even dressed in strange red armor and being an eater of pigs and dogs.

He was soon saved the awkwardness as coming out of the trees were a small band of fighting men, apparently they were guarding the outskirts of the camp encamped at the walls, and had spotted him, which was not hard to do considering his height and his silvery hair.

"Paue!" shouted one, who was obviously their leader, as he was the eldest, and his long black hair was bound with a golden band about his head, and the other three men deferred to him in their posture.

Elhanan knew enough of their language from dealing with traders who had come frequently through Bet-Laim, to know that the leader had shouted at him, *Stop*.

"Kairete!" he called back in that same language, attempting politeness. *Hello.*

The leader was not one for politeness, or had recognized Elhanan as Shashu, for he approached Elhanan and, without warning, struck Elhanan in the face, shouting, “Podapus ei?”

Elhanan staggered backwards for a moment, his lip cut and spurting blood, which caused the men around the leader to snicker.

Hutspa thrust his scrawny body between Elhanan and the leader, his haunches raised and showing his teeth as he gave a low growl.

“Ei Galyut?” shouted Elhanan hoarsely. *Where Galyut?*

“Promachis?” the leader shouted and then laughed as if he had said something very amusing, and all the men joined in.

Elhanan did not understand the word, but he intuited that the leader had deduced he was the Shashu champion, and found the idea hilarious.

“Nai,” Elhanan replied. *Yes.*

The leader had apparently thought this was a mockery of his people, and he drew his short bronze sword, as if he was going to dispatch this foolish Shashu peasant and be done with it.

Seeing the move, Hutspa, growling even louder, threw himself at the leader, seizing his arm between his teeth.

The leader screamed, as the scrawny dog clamped his jaws down on his arm. He started slapping the dog’s head with the pommel of his sword, but Hutspa did not even flinch.

The other men, forgetting about Elhanan for a moment, pulled their swords, to skewer the mangy mutt who had dared to attack their leader.

“Paue!” shouted Elhanan, and his voice was like thunder.

The sound rooted the men to the spot, as it was terrifying. When they turned to hear the source of it, they saw, in awe, the blue glow that had appeared around Elhanan. Before their eyes he became transformed, completely indescribable in words, as he beautiful and terrible all at once, and in his chest there was a spiral flame.

“Daimon!” one screeched, falling to his knees. Another man started backing up, making a sign with his hand—over and over again—Elhanan supposed it was a sign against evil. The third among them only screamed, fleeing into the trees.

The leader was still attempting to shake off Hutspa, who was growling and still clamped on his arm, apparently down to the bone as he was screaming, now even louder when he saw how Elhanan had been transformed. Terrified by this unexpected development, he had fallen backwards, Hutspa still biting him and tearing at his arm.

“Hutspa,” Elhanan said, gently, bidding the dog to come to him.

“Daimon...daimon...” the man who had fallen to his knees was repeating, while his partner continued to back away, gesturing over and over his magical sign until he disappeared into the shade of the trees.

Regretfully, Hutspa let go of the leader’s arm, and with blood still on his muzzle, he padded back beside Elhanan.

“Apage!” Elhanan demanded. *Go away.*

The leader scrambled to his feet, ignoring his bloodied and torn arm, and ran away also.

The last man, who had fallen into supplication of prayer, had not moved, rooted to the spot in awe at seeing a god.

Elhanan shook his head. In another moment the indescribable being had disappeared, and he had shrunk back to being a mere Shashu peasant in plain clothes, his long silvery hair messily coming out of its braid and his mouth still bleeding where he had been struck.

“I’m not a god,” Elhanan told the man, in Shashu. The man did not move, still in awe even that Elhanan was himself again, as if it was some trick of the capricious gods.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I just didn’t want you to hurt Hutspa...” Elhanan went on, still in his language as he didn’t know enough Peleshet, but he hoped that his intent was in his expression. He could have, he supposed, simply use thought to connect with this man’s mind, so that language was not necessary, but the man was already terrified, perhaps it was better, Elhanan thought, to continue with his limited Peleshet.

The man did not respond, still struck dumb, so Elhanan tiredly asked “Ei Galyut?”

The man blubbered, “En Poley.” *In the city.*

“Thank you,” Elhanan said in Shashu, and then remembered the word in Pelseshet, “Epaino.”

Elhanan then turned away to continue walking towards Gath, Hutspha beside him.

Elhanan had no doubts that the Peleshet now knew he was on his way, nor did he doubt they knew what mission he was now on, but he wondered about his reception.

It would be easier if Galyut just came out and met me, Elhanan thought, but perhaps that was the straightforward way of a Shashu peasant, and these clever Peleshet likely would make things far more complicated.

Before he had gotten very far into the forest of terebinth trees, a light chariot drove up along the path. To Elhanan's surprise, there was no fighting man inside, there was a young charioteer, who was unarmed and carrying the reins, an older man who was apparently of great importance, but without armor, and behind him stood a young boy who was shading the older man's head with a sunshade, most likely a slave.

The older man was a man of obvious wealth. He was dressed in a simple cloth pinned at the shoulders and fastened around his waist with a belt, but the pins were of gold encrusted with dazzling gems, and the belt itself was glistening with gold thread. His black hair was lined with grey and tied back from his head by a linen cloth, which was also embroidered with gold thread, a line of horses that seemed to dance in the light.

"Greetings," called the man, in Shashu.

"Hello," Elhanan said, in Peleshet, attempting politeness by speaking back in the man's language.

"I speak Shashu," the man replied, in clear but accented Shashu.

"I am glad," Elhanan confessed, "you have the advantage of me, I do not speak much Peleshet."

"And you are?" the man asked. It was an abrupt question, but not seemingly hostile.

"Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim," Elhanan replied.

"King Dawit's champion," the man prompted, "here to kill our champion, Galyut."

"Yes," Elhanan said simply, as that was his nature, and the man's directness appealed to him.

“The fighting men who were guarding the perimeter returned, half-mad, with a strange story,” the man said, seemingly apropos of nothing, “of a peasant Shashu with a flea-bitten dog—who was not a man, but something else.”

Elhanan did not answer this, but only replied, “And I assume you are the Peleshet king?”

The man barked a laugh, “Hardly. I am the high priest of our god, Wanax. I am called Phicol son of Mitinni.”

Elhanan was surprised such a great lord was a priest and not a prince. He did not know much about such things, but the High Priest of the Desert God lived in a wind-swept tent. Perhaps it was different as the Desert God had been a wanderer? Elhanan squinted at the headdress the priest wore. If Wanax was a horse-god, why would he want his priests to dress like kings?

But knowing that he was ignorant of many things Elhanan did not judge, even if he did not entirely understand.

“Phicol son of Mittini,” Elhanan said politely, “if you know why I am here, why do you come to meet me with your chariot and your charioteer rather than a legion of armed men?”

“Simple, Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim,” the man replied blandly, “because I suspect a legion of armed men could not defeat you. The only one among us who can defeat you is Galyut.”

“Then why not send him out to meet me?” Elhanan asked, “And have the contest over?”

“Because I am—*curious*,” Phicol said unexpectedly. “And my king, Enkhelyawon, is curious as well.” The man laughed again, “You Shashu are a strange people, and you send to us a strange champion.”

Refusing to take offense, as he sensed the man did not mean it so, Elhanan asked, “Is your Galyut much like me?”

“Not at all,” the man commented, refusing to elaborate further. He then asked unexpectedly, “Are you son of a god?”

“Would the son of a god be walking barefoot on the road with his dog?” Elhanan asked humorously.

“I don’t know,” the man replied seriously.

“I am a man,” Elhanan replied.

“I have heard strange stories of your Desert God—there are no images of him, and he does not partake of the flesh. He desires no women, and has no sons,” Phicol stated, as if challenging Elhanan about the veracity of such stories.

“This is true,” Elhanan answered.

“Perhaps you are the son of some other god, then, of Dagon, or even of our Wanax—” Phicol said.

Elhanan shook his head, “I am only a man,” he repeated. He looked at the resplendent clothes which glimmered on the priest. “I doubt your Wanax would have a son who was a Shashu peasant.”

The man laughed at this, but then added, “The ways of the gods are strange, and beyond man’s understanding. Perhaps your Desert God most of all.”

Elhanan had kept his patience with this philosophical discussion but Hutsa was nosing his leg and the sun—growing ever higher—was beating down on his head,

“This is interesting, Phicol, son of Mittini,” Elhanan answered, “but if you know my errand, also you know I should be going.”

“The day is long, and perhaps you will not live past it,” the man said, not a threat but matter of factly.

“Still, I must go,” Elhanan replied.

“I have come to bring you to the city, where you will meet Galyut, and challenge him to single combat. My king, Enkhelyawon, wishes this to be so.” Phicol said, less an offer than an order.

It was not entirely unwelcome to Elhanan, who realized that it was still a fairly long way to Gath, and Hutsa was panting in the heat, but still he hesitated, as the offer was not something he had anticipated.

“My king is curious about you, Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim, or whoever son you are,” the priest added, “he does not wish to kill you, and he doubts he *can* kill you. He wishes only to meet you.”

“I will come then,” Elhanan answered, with a smile, “on condition that I can bring my dog in your chariot.”

“Very well then, bring the dog,” the priest said, his face struggling not to show his amusement.

Elhanan climbed into the chariot, a grateful Hutspa beside him. The young slave made to angle his sunshade so it covered over Elhanan as well, but Elhanan made a small shake of his head and indicated he should cover it over Hutspa, whose pink tongue lolled out in the heat.

Phicol, seeing this, smiled again, “Strange people, strange champion.”

The well-matched horses took off down the road, sparing Elhanan the need to answer. Hutspa had stuck his head over the side of the chariot, obviously refreshed by the cool breeze generated by the ride, which seemed to amuse the pagan priest still further, despite the fact that Hutspa had stuck out his drooling tongue. Elhanan found himself liking the priest, despite the fact that he was a priest of a pagan god and their people were enemies.

As they passed through the great mass of fighting men encamped at the walls, Elhanan watched their eyes follow him, and he half-expected an arrow to come whizzing through the air and strike him, but none came; he could not tell if it was they feared hurting the high priest of Wanax who rode with him, or because they had already heard of what he was. He did notice that many of them put their hands up and made signs against evil as the chariot rolled by.

Gath had been impressive from a distance, but it was even more impressive up close. The great walls were made of large well-fitted stones, carefully mortared together, and rising over forty feet high and several feet wide, as there were a series of gates through which the chariot had to pass.

One of the inner gates had two lions, each over twenty feet high and each with a raised paw in greeting. Their eyes were lined with green stone and they were painted a shimmering bronze, if they were not so large it would have seemed they were breathing, so realistically were they made.

Even more impressive than the gate was the large throng of people inside the gate. The Peleshet were a handsome people, tall and fair, and even the poor among them were well-clothed. Many of the clothes were also brightly colored, greens and reds and blues that dazzled the eyes. Elhanan thought it odd, however, that most of the crowd was men, with only a small scattering of women, and the few women seemed closely accompanied by male guardians as they walked. Elhanan’s mother and sisters were prone to haggle with traders and sharing gossip at the well when they went to the village, they certainly would not have tolerated being stuck in the house all day or followed by a man—even Elhanan’s father—as they walked about the marketplace.

The crowd, although large and noisy, showed deference to their priest, and at the sight of his chariot they quickly parted. The priest raised his hand in blessing, and many in the crowd cheered as they passed. If they noted the Shashu peasant and the dog riding along in the chariot—they made no comment of it.

The city had was obviously very old, but great care had been made to make it large, and airy, and the roads inside were well paved and wide enough for carriages, carts, and more chariots to ride side by side, and there was even drainage ditches that ran along the side of the route to drain mud and filth from the horses.

The buildings along the path were, at least from the outside, just as impressive, several stories high and whitewashed so that they glimmered in the sun, and with large windows, as the great wall that surrounded the city—and the impressive army—were all the protection the citizens needed.

There was also, towards the center of the city, a large temple with a great high arched roof of red slate, in front of which was a large fire pit, tended by slaves.

In front of it were two statues, one of a giant man, brightly colored, wearing the strange headdress of a fish, which even Elhanan recognized as their god, Dagon. The statue was so gaudy with multicolored paints that it seemed to shimmer in the daylight and it hurt Elhanan's eyes to look at it.

But the other statue across from it was beautifully made, a white horse with human eyes, cleverly designed with blue and green and gray mosaic glass to look like it was emerging from the sea.

Despite the fact that it was a pagan thing, Elhanan could not help but admire it, and he assumed it was of their horse god, Wanax.

"Both gods of the sea," Elhanan commented, to no one in particular.

"We Peleshet are seafaring people, that is how we came to this land, so we honor the sea," replied Phicol, assuming that Elhanan desired an answer. "And perhaps Dagon and Wanax are the same god with different names, who are we to know?"

This philosophical question, thrown in with a shrug, confused Elhanan as little, as it seemed to him that it should have been an important thing to the Peleshet which god was which, but perhaps these Peleshet were not particularly attached to their gods, or perhaps it was that this Dagon or Wanax were not jealous in the same way that the Desert God was.

Up ahead, on what was another elevated portion of land, was a dwelling place that rivaled the great temple, a large building crafted from white stone and with large pillars supporting the arched roof. Before this building, unlike the temple, was not a fire, but a reflecting pool, and around it were cool green gardens. This above everything displayed to Elhanan the great wealth of the Peleshet, for the trees—including fragrant orange trees—demanded constant watering and the tending of slaves. Elhanan doubted that even King Dawit had such a fine palace and green gardens.

Without being told, Elhanan knew this must be the palace of the king of the Peleshet, Enkhelyawon, who had desired so greatly to meet him.

The king's slaves must have gotten word to expect his arrival, for when Elhanan stepped from the chariot, there were already several slaves there to attend to his needs, despite the fact that he was obvious a Shashu farmer.

"My lord," one slave said, bowing, as he handed over a bowl so Elhanan could wash his fingers from the dirt. Elhanan followed Phicol's lead, and dipped his fingers into the small bowl of clean water but he had trouble not laughing outright, for he was obviously not a lord, and he needed more than a finger-bowl if he was to get clean before meeting the king, between honest sweat, dried blood on his mouth, and the sand of the desert.

He also had to struggle not to laugh watching the slaves deal with Hutspa. Hutspa had quite recovered his strength, and was drooling and barking and wagging his tail in greeting. The head slave, who despite being a slave was of elevated status, perhaps as he directly served the king, regarded Hutspa with obvious distaste.

"Your hound, my lord?" the slave asked, in heavily accented Shashu, but his meaning was clear. He seemed to struggle with what to do with a scrawny and likely flea-bitten dog, particularly without a collar or a rope, until Elhanan interjected.

"I will keep him with me," Elhanan volunteered, much to the slave's relief. Perhaps, Elhanan reflected, this slave only dealt with dogs on their way to the kitchens to be prepared as meals, all the more reason to keep Hutspa beside him. He then added, embarrassed by the address, "and I am not a lord. My name is Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim."

"Yes, my lord," the slave said, infuriatingly. "Please, come this way."

When Elhanan entered the palace, there was a feeling of relief, for the interior had been designed to be inured from the heat, with thick walls that

kept out the unrelenting sun. Elhanan sighed, feeling the sweatiness of his plain homespun clothes and his long braided hair.

“You will join us for a meal, my lord?” the slave asked. Oddly, as he was a slave, again it was less a request than an order.

“I am here to meet your king, Enkhelyawon,” Elhanan said politely, “and to fight your champion, Galyut. Nothing more.”

The slave raised his eyebrows superciliously, and then went on, as if Elhanan were dense, “The king wishes that you join him for a meal.” He made no comment about Galyut, but his eyes scanned Elhanan critically, as if sizing him up.

“I will go to your king,” Elhanan offered politely.

The room that Elhanan and the priest were led into was a palace in itself, with high roofs glimmering with gold and hung with fine tapestries. Even though it was day, as it was dark inside the thick walled palace, there were extravagant oil torches which burned brightly and illuminated the gold thread in the tapestries and rugs, and the gilding on the fine benches on which the diners reclined.

At the very center of the room was a large table, already set with bowls of wine and plates of bread, ripe fruit, and meat, looking at it, Elhanan felt a pang of hunger, as he had fasted since last night in preparation to be the king’s champion.

Around the room was an assortment of men, who were obviously lords, who were reclining on their elbow on the gilded couches around the table. It seemed strange to Elhanan that once again, no women were present, and it was also strange that the men, extremely well-groomed to sit at the king’s table, were half-dressed in light white linens around the lower portion of their bodies, and their upper bodies were well-oiled, like wrestlers. Elhanan, having grown up with a gaggle of siblings and on a farm, was pragmatic about nudity, but it seemed strange to be dressed that way to dine with a king.

He knew without being told which one was Enkhelyawon, even though he was not dressed differently from the others, other than a white band of linen about his head, for he reclined at the head of the table and the other men seemed to defer to him.

The Peleshet man was a handsome man, past the first flush of youth but he had kept himself in fighting trim, which was obvious as he was as half-dressed as the others. His hair was long, and curling, and of a beautiful red-

gold that rivaled gold-shot amber. It was hard to see the color of his eyes in the torchlight, but they were light rather than dark, and hinted of green.

The same eyes regarded Elhanan with a mixture of curiosity and—amusement?

To Elhanan's relief, the king spoke in accented but perfect Shashu.

"Greetings, champion of the Shashu king," the Peleshet king drawled. He picked up a green white grape from the table and placed it in his mouth.

Elhanan did not know the custom of how to greet a king among the Peleshet, and moreover, he was an enemy king, so he did not bow, but only said, politely, "Greetings, Peleshet King."

"Don't just stand there," the King commanded, "sit, and eat." He added, after a moment, regarding Hutspa with something close to distaste, added, "your dog, too."

One of the lords who sat at one of the benches said something in rapid Peleshet, to which some of the other lords laughed, the king was not amused, and snapped back something in reply, which made the men laugh harder.

"They said your dog will give them fleas," the king said, by way of explanation, "I told them they already have fleas. Sit. And *eat*."

"I have said I will fast until I have fought your champion," Elhanan said politely, "but I will sit with you." Elhanan did not recline on the empty bench at the foot of Enkhelyawon's table, but sat up, and after a moment, Hutspa crawled up on it as well, resting his head in his lap.

"You will fight my champion on an empty stomach? Strange." The king commented, but not taking offense, "You will have wine, then?"

Elhanan shook his head, "My regrets, but I cannot drink wine. I am a Nazirite. My oath forbids me drinking wine."

"Your Shimshon was a Nazirite, and he drank wine," the King commented unexpectedly, "He killed many of our warriors after he threw a drinking party."

"Shimshon was an exception, in many ways," Elhanan replied honestly, "to follow his example would be insensible, if not impossible."

"Do you follow his example?" the King asked suddenly, "Shimshon was a great enemy of my people. Are *you* the enemy of my people, champion of the Shashu king?"

“I would prefer to be no one’s enemy,” Elhanan commented honestly.

“Wise answer,” the king commented, less approvingly than as a statement of fact. “You will have water then?”

“Yes,” Elhanan said gratefully. The king snapped his fingers and a slave came forward to pour water in Elhanan’s empty bowl, Elhanan drank its contents, it was refilled and Elhanan drank that up as well, and a third bowl after it was offered.

Meanwhile, Hutspa was whining at the food placed on the table, looking hopefully between the repast and Elhanan.

“I would have food for my dog,” Elhanan asked politely.

The corners of the king’s mouth turned up in amusement, “Certainly.”

Elhanan placed on the floor a slice of bread and a strip of meat—Elhanan had reassured himself the meat was from cattle—on the floor, to which Hutspa tore into it gratefully. Still hungry, Hutspa put his head in Elhanan’s lap and begged for more, to which Elhanan gave him another strip of meat.

“You will have entertainment then, at least?” the King asked.

“I have come to fight Galyut,” Elhanan said flatly.

The king made a dismissive wave with his hand, “There is plenty of time, champion of the Shashu king, to fight Galyut, and even to die. The gods have already decided what will happen, so if you will not eat, at least let you be pleased.”

From a side door came several young women, with flutes and tambourines, who came out and sang a Peleshet song that Elhanan did not understand in their high voices. Elhanan was made uncomfortable by this display, for the women were also barely dressed, their hair tumbling down about their shoulders and their bodies hazy in diaphanous linen.

“You are not pleased?” the King asked, after the song was over. The women had distributed themselves among the couches, and two particularly lovely ones—one fair and one dark—had sat themselves at the feet of the king.

“I am pleased to meet your wives,” Elhanan said politely. Their gauzy clothes—seemed more designed to hold up glittery pins than to conceal anything—was more embarrassing to him than simple nudity would have been.

The king gave a great laugh, took a large swig from his wine bowl, and then laughed again.

“No proper Peleshet woman would eat with men!” he exclaimed, “Our wives and daughters are kept safe in the women’s quarters.” He reached over and pinched the buttock of one of the flute-players who being pulled down on another man’s couch.

“These women are slaves,” the king finished, “you can sleep with one, if you would like. You can sleep with more than one. Or all of them. I am a generous host.”

Elhanan was at a loss at what to say to this, more so when the king went on, “If you prefer boys, we have those too. Buttocks as round as juicy plums.” He laughed again, perhaps more so as he sensed Elhanan’s discomfiture.

Elhanan patted Hutspa’s head, struggling to contain his disgust. Slavery was common among the Shashu, and many slave women were taken as concubines, but only to one husband, not used like common whores. Elhanan did not even want to think of the use of little boys.

“Your people—you cut your organ to honor your god?” the king asked, curiously, “I have heard this is so, but I have never seen it.”

“Yes,” Elhanan replied tightly.

“It must still function well, as you Shashu have so many children,” the king commented, “although why your god would desire that, I do not know. Do you have any children, champion of the Shashu king?”

“No,” Elhanan replied, “I am not married.”

“You can have many children, and not be married,” the king said archly, giving him a significant look, “You need only have a woman, and I am surprised you have not had many women, considering what you are. Perhaps you prefer boys?”

“The day is getting later,” Elhanan commented, politely, “I am ready now to fight your champion.”

The king slammed his hand down on the table, more shocking as he had lost his ironic and mocking affect.

“You are the son of a god, and a fool!” he snapped.

“I am neither, Peleshet king,” Elhanan replied calmly.

“You choose to fight, and possibly die, for your people. You could be their king. Why are you the champion of that harp-plucking weakling who waits in safety in Shalim, instead of sitting on the throne yourself?” the king said, strangely angry.

Elhanan shook his head. He was gently petting Hutspa’s head, who had placed it between his knees.

“That is not the will of the Desert God,” Elhanan said softly.

“I have seen Galyut. He is stronger than a thousand men. If you are anything close to his strength, then how can you presume it is your god’s will that you obey the Shashu king?” the king demanded.

“It is good, Peleshet King, that your Galyut does not share your logic, or he would desire to sit on your throne himself,” Elhanan retorted. Several of the lords who understood enough Shashu gasped at the comment, for it hinted at threat, but the King himself took no offense, perhaps sensing there was no malice behind it.

“Galyut does not want to be king,” the King said confidently, and then added, cryptically, with a small laugh, “Galyut wants—what he wants.”

“And what I want is to fight your champion, Peleshet King,” Elhanan replied calmly, “But I thank you for the water.”

The king got up so suddenly that Elhanan flinched, thinking that he was about to be struck, but the expression on the king’s face was more avid than angry.

“Listen to me,” the King hissed, “I have fifty daughters, each more beautiful than the other. But my eldest, Poulxeria, surpasses all others. Her mother was a princess of Egypt with cow’s eyes and who was reckoned a pearl of her people. She was married to me for less than a year and died in childbirth, giving up her life and all her beauty to her daughter.

My Poulxeria has the white limbs of a willow tree and hair of fawn shot with gold, and her white hands are doves. She is my precious treasure, and my lords have fought among themselves as to who should marry her.”

“I will give her to you,” the king said, unexpectedly, “I will marry her to you and you will be a prince of the Peleshet people.”

Elhanan was so shocked it was hard for him not to laugh; he was not sure what sort of trick this was. The high priest, one of the few in the room who spoke Shashu, had caught his breath; it seemed he believed this bizarre

offer was genuine. A few of the lords had sense of his words, and grumbled between themselves angrily, they also seemed to take this seriously.

The king stood up, and his eyes blazed, his expression one of visionary delight.

“Think of it!” the king crowed, “I will also finally convince Galyut to wed one of my daughters, but you will marry the eldest. You will make the Peleshet people undefeatable for all time! We will rule the whole of this land.”

Not waiting for Elhanan’s response, the king went on, “And when you have children, what children they would be for the Peleshet! You will have my daughter, and a thousand concubines, so that our people will grow strong with the power in your blood! We shall be the greatest people on earth!”

The king turned on Elhanan, demanding, “Only give up this foolish contest. Do not fight Galyut, fight at his side. He is more your brother than the Shashu!”

This last statement, an echo of what Shama’el had said, struck Elhanan more than any other. The King could not know this, but the promise of finally being *understood* by someone else filled Elhanan with profound yearning.

“Galyut *is* my brother,” Elhanan said haltingly.

Thinking he had won the argument, the king crowed in delight, “It is so! Give up this foolishness! Why should you be their champion, when you could be a prince among us? You will be honored by our people as a son of a god, and your line will never pass from the earth!”

Elhanan patted Hutspa’s head one more time before standing up. He only said, “I thank you for your hospitality, Peleshet King, but I will fight your champion now.”

The king’s nostrils flared angrily. It was obvious he was not used to being denied, and certainly not by a Shashu peasant.

“You refuse!” he spat, his face crimson with rage, “You *refuse!*”

“My people have a saying, Peleshet king, that you cannot make festival clothes from sackcloth,” Elhanan’s face twitched with a smile, “I would make a terrible prince. Nor am I Peleshet. I am Shashu. And although I am sure your daughter is lovely, my parents have promised me to a girl from my village.”

“You would refuse to marry *my* daughter to marry the daughter of a farmer?” the king snarled incredulously.

“Her father is a weaver, not a farmer,” Elhanan said mildly.

This answer, and the sense that he was perhaps being mocked, made the king even more enraged than before.

“You will fight Galyut, and you will die!” the King screeched, his face now purple, “you *will* die, and I will hang your head by your silver braid at our gates and your bones will be picked over by vultures. Your scrawny dog is not even worth butchering, so I will throw him to my lions for their amusement! And soon I will defeat your worthless King Dawit, and your petty people will be struck from the earth and forgotten within a generation!”

“That may be so, Peleshet King,” Elhanan conceded calmly. “We shall see very soon if it comes to pass.”

“Get him out of here—” the King spat, refusing to look at him further, and pointing towards the door. He then screamed at the high priest, Phicol, “You too. You bring him here, you take him out. *Out!* Bring him to Galyut!”

The high priest followed Elhanan to the door. Elhanan was not sorry to leave, but he was regretful that the high priest, who seemed at least a direct man, had fallen so low now in the King’s favor.

“I am sorry,” Elhanan apologized, once they had passed through the door and into a great hallway.

“You are sorry for what, Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim?” the high priest could not hide his surprise at the unexpected apology.

“I am sorry I have made you lose your king’s favor,” Elhanan explained.

“Kings are full of whims,” the priest said philosophically, “I am sure your King Dawit is, as well.”

“I do not know,” Elhanan answered.

The high priest raised his eyebrows, “You perhaps die today for a man you do not know?”

“I fight today because I am Shashu. And because my Master Shama’el asked me too,” Elhanan stated simply.

The high priest did not comment on what he might have considered foolish reasons to risk his life but said only, “You Shashu are a stubborn people. Not many men would have refused the King’s request. Perhaps only a Shashu would have. I think I must learn more of your peculiar Desert God who makes men so stubborn and so strange.”

“Let it be so. But as a strange Shashu, I have a request,” Elhanan stated.

“What would you ask of me?” Phicol asked warily.

“I ask if I am defeated by Galyut, you take Hutspa and set him free. You needn’t care for him, as he seems to be able to care for himself, but please set him free outside the city,” Elhanan asked.

Phicol son of Mitinni laughed, “That is not the request I expected. But the king threatened to throw him to the lions, and he is not often denied.” He looked Hutspa, who was keeping close to Elhanan and watching the priest’s every move—it was obvious the dog was seeking to protect the Shashu champion.

“Still,” the priest added thoughtfully, “your scrawny dog seems to have a lion’s heart, if the stories of the fighting men are true. Perhaps some god has made an error and he was truly meant to be a lion. I doubt the lions would want to eat one so much like one of their own. Against my better judgment perhaps, I will do as you ask, strange Shashu champion, and if the king asks I will tell him I have claimed him to eat him myself, as a priest’s portion.”

“Thank you,” Elhanan said. To Phicol’s surprise, Elhanan put out his hand, and clasped the priest’s forearm, which after a moment Phicol returned the clasp, a little awkwardly as it was a Shashu gesture.

“I will bring you to Galyut now,” the priest said gently, for it seemed he liked Elhanan despite himself.

Elhanan said nothing, but only nodded.

Elhanan found himself squinting against the sun as they passed out of the palace. Elhanan could tell, with his farmer’s eye, that it was not yet noon, but it seemed as if an eternity had passed since Shama’el had woke him up from sleep.

“You will fight in front of the great temple,” the priest commented, almost apologetically, “in front of the statues of Dagon and Wanax, as is our tradition.”

“That does not matter, as my god has no image,” Elhanan replied, “perhaps that means he can be everywhere, and see everything.”

“Perhaps,” the priest replied thoughtfully, taking the reins of the chariot and indicating Elhanan should get in beside him.

The king had sent criers throughout the city, for Elhanan could hear them calling out throughout the city in loud Peleshet. He did not fully

understand what they were saying, but he understood enough to understand they were saying Galyut was to slaughter the Shashu champion.

And many of the Peleshet responded to this, for the crowd in the city had grown considerably larger, the press so difficult that the priest's chariot had trouble making it back down the streets, but when the Peleshet saw the silvery hair of Elhanan they knew who and what he was so they gave way, shouting hoarse cheers of delight over the coming bloodshed. Some of them taunted him in sing-song Peleshet, and some even gestured at him, one man made a gesture of cutting his own throat, presumably a promise of what was to come.

Hutspa seemed to sense the hostility from the crowd and was baring his teeth and making a low growl at the people as they passed.

"I am ashamed of my people," Phicol said, in a low voice, which carried despite the chants of the crowd.

"Be at peace, Phicol son of Mitinni. It means nothing," Elhanan replied truthfully.

"It is still shameful. They do this because they fear you," Phicol said unexpectedly.

"I have no doubt they favor their people's champion," commented Elhanan.

"No," Phicol said thoughtfully, looking at the crowd's menacing faces, "they hate Galyut too, for what he is. Perhaps they wish you to destroy each other."

Elhanan said nothing, because he did not doubt there was some truth to what the priest said. He remembered suddenly what Shama'el had said about how, in the time of Nahah, the great water had come, to drown all the Nephilim who threatened to destroy humankind.

Up close, the great statues of Dagon and Wanax seemed even more impressive, as they rose thirty feet up into the air. Dagon's eyes were blank, but the stone-inlaid eyes of Wanax regarded Elhanan with almost human sympathy.

In between the two statues was a great fire-pit, and a paved area, with smooth stones laid together with mortar. In front of the fire pit was a great irregular stone, darkly stained.

“Sacrifices,” the priest answered Elhanan’s unspoken question. “Of animals. Of men, too, when there were contests here.”

Elhanan regarded the evil stone with particular disgust. He was willing to die today, but not as a sacrifice to the Peleshet gods.

If I am losing, I will make sure he kills me before he can drag me to that rock, Elhanan thought.

His thoughts were cut off by Phicol, “You must get out here, and wait for Galyut.”

Elhanan nodded. Now that the time had come he felt no fear, only a strange curiosity.

He stepped out of the chariot, Hutspa close behind him. The crowd that encircled the flat area was shouting something about “Kunikos,” which Elhanan understood that they were screaming about having a dog in the sacred area, but they dared not approach Hutspa, with his sharp teeth and despite their taunts, they had not forgotten what Elhanan was, for even though the crowd tightly encircled the flat area they did not come any closer.

Elhanan slowly turned about the circle, looking for his brother. His eyes alighted on many in the crowd, but he did not recognize anyone to be Nephilim.

I AM HERE! shrieked in Elhanan’s mind, so loudly he almost fell to his knees.

There was a sound of a hollow drum, and the mournful wail of the horn.

“Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT!” chanted the crowd, like the beat of a deranged heart.

I AM HERE! I AM HERE! shrieked in Elhanan’s mind.

“Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT!” came the chant.

Elhanan was so overwhelmed he could not think for a moment, the screech still vibrating in his bones.

“Where are you, my brother?” Elhanan finally spoke in Shashu.

DO NOT SPEAK! the voice howled, *BETWEEN US ONLY SHOULD BE THE DIRECTNESS OF THOUGHT.*

Where are you, my brother? Elhanan demanded in his mind.

The crowd parted, and Elhanan could finally see the man who Shama'el had commanded him to kill.

What surprised Elhanan more than anything was how *small* the Peleshet champion was. The way Galyut had been spoken about he had presumed that the Peleshet warrior would have been a giant, so fearsome and intimidating he had been described.

But Galyut was shorter than average height, and slender, although his arms and legs were lean with graceful muscle that must have been as hard as iron bands. He was not heavily armored, his armor was only of dyed red leather and although he had a sword at his side, and a spear in his hand, they were obviously both light weapons.

His hair was not silvery-blond, but so black it reflected back blue, and tied back with a red sinew. Silvery hair was a frequent mark of the Nephilim, but not universal, and there were often other physical signs or unusual physical traits, and it was obvious that Galyut was a Nephilim as his eyes were beautiful, but strange, purple-blue and remarkably large, and with strong black brows that swept over those eyes, like bird's wings.

Even without those remarkable eyes, Elhanan would have recognized him, for around him his energy was tremendously bright, and glowing blue-white hot, unlike the light around most men.

Elhanan watched a red film ripple over the blue, and Galyut's light for a moment was as violet as his eyes.

SHASHU CHAMPION! Galyut shrieked, in his mind, *I WILL KILL YOU!*

Suddenly the energy rippled again, and it was as if over Galyut was a dark and ominous storm cloud. Was Elhanan imagining it, or had Galyut suddenly grown tremendously large?

Without warning, the energy around Galyut suddenly *lunged*—there was no other word for it—at Elhanan, and at the last moment Elhanan, with reflexes impossible for a normal man, lunged out of the way, to howls of the crowd.

I WILL SACRIFICE YOU TO OUR GODS Galyut screamed in frustration, *I WILL EAT YOUR HEART.*

It was shocking how tremendously quick the Peleshet champion was. Elhanan could not track him with his eyes, it was only with his internal vision

that he was able to see the Peleshet champion encircle him and come at him from behind, and it was only at the very last instant he was able once again to dodge out of the way of Galyut.

STOP YOUR DANCE, YOU COWARD! Galyut howled, FIGHT!

Galyut, faster than a human thought, threw his spear, which was glistening with silvery flame.

The aim was true, and would have pierced Elhanan straight through, but the sword met, not flesh, but the energy that Elhanan projected from his body. Elhanan defended himself with such force that the spear instantly shattered into thousands of pieces of bright metal and burning wood, which flew through the air like a multitude of stars.

I DO NOT NEED A WEAPON TO KILL YOU! Galyut promised. As if to prove his point, he shoved Elhanan with a blast of energy so powerful and so unexpected that Elhanan was thrown into the air, and only by using his own dexterity was Elhanan not thrown to the ground with a crushing blow; instead, Elhanan somersaulted backwards and managed to barely land without stumbling.

YOU ARE SLOW, SHASHU CHAMPION! mocked Galyut, *SLOW AS A TURTLE! I WILL CRUSH YOUR HEAD IN WITH A ROCK!*

Again, to show the truth of his words, a giant rock appeared out of nothing above his head, and swung above Elhanan in ominous arcs.

The rock was dropped full force on top of Elhanan, and it took all of Elhanan's might to use his energy to suspend it in the air, before tossing it aside, and it fell to the paved surface with a terrible crash, cracking many of the paving stones in two, to the groans of disappointment to the crowd.

ARE YOU NOT FRIGHTENED, SHASHU? Galyut mocked.

Elhanan did not respond, but he *was* frightened. The *bara*, the ability to create things from other things, the way Galyut had created a rock from the air—was tremendously difficult and Elhanan himself still struggled to do it even with small objects.

And Galyut had done it *effortlessly*.

"Shemurah!" Elhanan shouted, one of the protective names of the Desert God, and the word was like the crack of thunder. The Peleshet watched, amazed, as Elhanan was illuminated with a burst of light like a thousand suns.

“Aggggh!” screamed Galyut, for the Shashu invocation had gone through his body with a blast of intense agony. He seemed to stagger for a moment, and tottered for a few steps, but then steadied himself.

“*Aleph-Lamed!*” Elhanan shouted, even louder, and the very ground shook under their feet like an ominous earthquake.

The Peleshet made the sign against evil and shouted for their god, Wanax, who apparently was their god against earthquakes.

Galyut, however, was not taken by surprise by this second invocation.

I WILL KILL YOU NOW, shrieked Galyut. He now grew in size so he was a mountain of a man, greater than ten feet tall, and his shadow blotted out the sun, and his appearance was terrifying, beyond all description, because his face was no longer a man’s but of some childhood nightmare, to look into it was death and despair.

Galyut shrieked again, and the sound was like hundreds of braying hounds, brass gongs, and the pound of thunder, even the Peleshet wept in terror and moaned openly for their gods to have mercy.

Galyut lifted out his hand and Elhanan flew through the air, slamming into the great evil rock which lay between the two great statues of the Peleshet gods.

Elhanan was dazed with the fall, blood dripping from his nose. His mind was confused, as he was stunned by the impact against the great stone.

I HAVE WON! crowed Galyut in his mind, *OUR GODS, HAVE WON!*

In his hand was now his short sword, now gleaming with an evil greenish light.

Again rose the sound of the chant of the people, now mixed with great groans of fear.

Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT!

Hutspa had come up to Elhanan, and was licking his face, whimpering and hitting him with his paws, desperately trying to rouse him.

“Hutspa...” Elhanan murmured gratefully, burying his face in his dirty fur for a second.

STUPID DOG! Galyut snarled, lifting up his hand again, and tossing Hutpsa aside, who howled when he hit the ground.

GREAT DAGON AND WANAX, ACCEPT THIS OFFERING FROM YOUR SON! Galyut intoned, approaching the evil rock with his sword lifted.

As Galyut raised his arm, suddenly there was a tremendous howl, not of triumph, but of *pain*.

Hutspa, dragging his broken leg behind him, had somehow managed to leap into the air and had sunk his fangs deeply into the arm of the Peleshet champion.

Galyut yelled, as he had also been caught off guard. With a terrible shout, and a thrust of his power, Hutspa was torn from his arm and again went crashing to the ground.

Elhanan staggered to his feet, his ribs were broken, and jabbing him with every breath, he had to hold his broken ribs in one hand and he was so dazed he had to lean for a moment against the rock to steady himself.

“Ehyeh asher Ehyeh.” Elhanan breathed, the greatest of all the protective names of the Desert God.

The word was a whisper, but it sang in the air like the ring of metal on stone. Galyut screamed, dropping the sword, and in an instant, he had shrunk down back to himself.

Elhanan, with the quick motion of a farmer’s son accustomed to fight off wolves from the sheep, pulled his single stone from his belt, and dropped it into the well-worn leather sling.

“You foolish peasant—” snarled Galyut at the sight of the sling. He spoke in Peleshet, but his expression of contempt of a farmer’s weapon was so obvious Elhanan understood his meaning.

“Yes,” Elhanan said quietly, and swung.

The stone was small, but Elhanan had aimed with a farmer’s accuracy and a Nephilim’s power.

The stone hit the forehead of the Peleshet champion, causing him to stumble backwards and onto the ground. His sword flew from his hand, clattering to the ground, the evil green light flickering a moment and went dim.

The Peleshet champion lay on the ground, his very black hair red with blood. His forehead had been crushed in, and Elhanan could see the grayish jellyish mass of brain behind it.

Galyut spoke in his mind, *Kill me and rejoice*, he ordered.

I do not want to kill you, my brother, Elhanan replied honestly. He had enough experience with the slaughter of animals to know that Galyut was basically dead anyway.

Elhanan knelt down on the ground beside the shattered head of the Peleshet champion. The remarkable purple-blue eyes were already growing dim.

Galyut reached out blindly, his hands feeling along the ground, until he clasped his sword in his hand, which reignited with a sputtering greenish light. For a moment Elhanan thought that Galyut was going to try to attack him again, but then he realized that the Peleshet champion was unexpectedly offering it to him.

Keep my sword, Galyut thought in his mind, *perhaps, perhaps that will bring you better luck than did me—*

Elhanan placed his hands over the hands of the Peleshet champion, still clutching his sword, the weak green flame now joined by a bright blue one along the blade, but neither champion noticed.

You will not die alone, my brother, Elhanan promised, although Galyut's consciousness now seemed beyond his words.

There was a sudden rush of thoughts, not his own, into Elhanan's mind.

A high house by the sea, whitewashed so it gleamed against the sky and with many steps and little corners. His mama had sad eyes but she would sing to him until he fell asleep, his little hand curled in hers. He liked the sound of the ocean and the call of the gulls to each other, and above all her low voice.

The day was not so good, Mama had to see many men, who had harsh voices and smelled like drink. Some of them made her body covered with bruises and she often walked hobbled over when they had hurt her, but she would smile bravely and pretend she had no pain when she could see his eyes on her. He could already see images in his mind of things even hidden behind walls, so he saw over and over how she was wounded by them and how the men did disgusting things to her even if she thought he did not see, and it made him cry as he did not understand.

Many men came to the house and some of them thought to do things to little boys, too, they were drunk or indiscriminate and they would fondle the little boy with the beautiful eyes when his mama was busy with another one of

them, and mama's keeper—the man who slapped the women when they were not busy enough—said the little boy was theirs too to use but they had to pay for it.

The little boy could see into their pumping red hearts and their electrified nerves that *sang* and crackled with energy, and he knew he could have *killed* them just by wanting to but the keeper had told him with cold eyes that if he resisted or even screamed when the men penetrated him his mother would be beaten so the little boy let them do what they wanted over and over even though it hurt and he threw the sweets the men sometimes gave him afterwards back into their faces.

He was already five so he would be a man soon and take his Mama away but then her belly was big and she told Galyut he would have a little brother or sister, which he didn't quite understand. And when it was time Mama screamed and screamed as the baby didn't come until eventually she was quiet and still, so very still but pretty too. He had crept into her room where she was laying down and she was quiet and he had touched one of her brown curls but her eyes didn't open. And he could see inside her but it was as if she was *emptied out*, there was nothing there and she was dead.

And then he had screamed and screamed and screamed and the house had SPLIT yes it had been shaken to its foundations and he was glad so glad and the roof started caving in, then the women were screaming too and even the keeper who had hurt his mother, he had looked at him and wished him dead for all the times Mama had been hurt and he grabbed hold of his red beating heart in his mind and squished it like it was an overripe fruit and he had died too on the ground.

From the broken house by the sea the women had all run away but the priests of the gods had come and bowed before him, saying that he must have been the son of a god, and they honored him, although behind their eyes they feared him and he could see that too, he could see all the ugliness that was in their minds, they were as disgusting as the men who had used his mother but they were more cunning about it. They talked about purity but went to the sacred whores and hurt them the same way his mother had been hurt. They taught him to use his powers speaking of the glory of the Peleshet but he knew at night they prayed for his death.

Death, always death, because that was the one thing he was good at, he would ride in a chariot in the city and the people would chant his name, although he could see in their minds too, and they all feared him and wished

him dead, so he wished them all dead, and he would pick them off one by one in infinite ways, because he could never return to the high whitewashed house by the sea and have his mother sing to him. He was the son of one god or another, and he could have been king if he had wanted, but he did not want to be king, he only wanted to kill them all and wipe them from the earth because perhaps then if he was truly alone, he would not feel his loneliness...

One more gasping breath...and then Elhanan could see that despite all Galyut's energy was still beautiful, it pulsed with infinite colors and shimmered so brightly Elhanan had to squint his eyes, it seemed to Elhanan that there were rents in the energy, where the color was veined blue-black with pain and rage, but even as he watched those dark places swirled with other colors and dissolved into them, but in the next moment, the bundle of energy was gone, to what place Elhanan did not know.

Elhanan gently closed the eyes of the corpse. He would have put coins over his eyes, if he had had any, as was the custom of the Shashu.

It had become silent, no drums and no horns and sounded, and it seemed the crowd had fled in fear.

Phicol, the high priest of Wanax finally approached him. To the priest's surprise Elhanan's eyes were wet.

"You cry for your enemy?" the high priest asked.

"I cry for my brother," Elhanan said simply. "You will bury him?"

"He will be buried with great honor," the high priest promised.

Elhanan held out the Peleshet champion's sword. In his hand it glowed silvery-blue, no longer greenish, and it seemed to fit into his hand, but all the same he offered it to the high priest.

"Shall I return this?" Elhanan asked.

"He had no family," the priest said.

"It is not fitting for the son of a farmer," replied Elhanan, shaking his head, "but he asked me to take it." He struggled slowly to his feet again, blood seeping through his rough tunic.

"You are grievously hurt," the priest said, concerned, and then said, carefully, "I did not think you could be hurt."

"I am a man," Elhanan said wearily. He felt sad and infinitely old. "I must see to Hutsa."

The dog lay on the ground, panting heavily as the blood seeped from his jaws and onto the stone pavement. Mixed with frothy saliva, it was a seething pink.

On seeing Elhanan, the dog whimpered, moving his front paws. It was obvious that his spine had been crushed, as his limp hind legs did not move. One hind leg was broken, its bone protruding at an ugly angle.

“Hutspa, my brave heart,” Elhanan murmured. He knelt beside the dog, all his injuries forgotten.

Hutspa feebly licked Elhanan’s hand.

“I am not to change the will of the Desert God,” Elhanan said solemnly, “I am not to change the hour of death for any created being...” He sighed, then added “or so, my Master Shama’el taught me.”

Elhanan closed his eyes for a single moment, and then rested his hand against the head of the loyal dog. After a moment, his rear paws started moving, and before the priest’s astonished eyes the dog had stood up, and barking happily, ran around in circles before leaping upon Elhanan, who smiled despite grimacing from his broken ribs.

Looking at the priest’s surprised face, Elhanan replied to his expression, “My Master isn’t always right.” He then added, with a crooked smile, “And, more importantly, he *isn’t* here.”

Patting the enthusiastic dog, Elhanan added, “So much suffering and death today. I could not bear to see him die.”

“And your wounds?” the priest asked, looking at the tunic stained with blood.

“I heal much faster than most men,” commented Elhanan shyly, as if embarrassed, “but it is a long walk from here, through many enemies...” he closed his eyes for a moment, and then to the priest’s further astonishment, Elhanan stood up easily, obviously in no pain.

“Are you sure you are a man?” breathed the priest. He looked as if he wished to prostrate himself before Elhanan.

Elhanan shook his head, “Yes. And only a peasant one at that.”

Surprised, Phicol made a startled laugh, “You are a strange man, Elhanan son of Jair-Oregim.”

“My entire people are strange, Phicol son of Mitinni, or so you have told me,” Elhanan said, with a smile.

“Your Shashu people are scattered tribes, but I cannot help but think that perhaps your people will be a great people someday, so stubborn and so dedicated to your peculiar god are you,” the priest commented, “I would not be surprised if your people are remembered, even after the great Peleshet are forgotten.”

Now it was Elhanan’s turn to laugh, “I doubt it, but it shall all be as the Desert God wills.”

“Where will you go now?” the priest asked.

“I will return to the Shashu, and tell them Galyut is dead. Now that their champion is dead, perhaps the Peleshet will agree to end this war,” Elhanan said, matter-of-factly. He looked around the abandoned square, from which the Peleshet had fled. “I must go soon. Everyone but you has left, but before long they may regroup and try to kill or capture me.”

“They would be foolish to do so, but men are often foolish,” the priest commented sagely, “Do you need to ride out of the city? I or one of my servants can drive you in a cart.”

“It is too dangerous for you to assist your peoples’ enemy. I cannot allow it,” Elhanan replied, “and I think I will be fine on my own.”

The priest laughed again, “I believe *that*. But when you return, what has the king promised as a reward for killing the Peleshet champion?”

“I have no idea,” Elhanan replied archly, “You’d think I would have asked *first*, wouldn’t you? But I don’t care, as long as I can go back to my father’s farm. Oh, yes, and if for *once* my Master Shama’el would tell me he’s pleased with me.”

“Don’t tell him about the dog,” enjoined the priest, so solemnly that it took Elhanan a moment to realize he was joking. Elhanan barked out a surprised laugh.

“You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if your king tries to take credit for slaying Galyut himself,” the high priest said thoughtfully, “it’s one of the quirks of kings. They hate to be upstaged. And if you throw enough gold around at traveling harpists, you’d be surprised how quickly the truth gets lost.”

“Storytellers never get the story right anyway,” Elhanan said, shrugging.

The priest put out his hand to clasp Elhanan’s forearm, the way Elhanan had done for him before, and Elhanan was obviously touched by the Shashu gesture as his eyes watered a little.

“Go in peace, Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim,” Phicol said quietly, “I hope we meet again, and not as enemies.”

“I hope so too,” Elhanan replied, with a smile, “Go in peace.”

Then Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim whistled for his dog, and the two of them, farmer’s son and brave dog, turned away to make the long walk back home.

“And there was again a battle in Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaareoregim, a Bethlehemite, slew the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the staff of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam.”

— *2 Samuel 21:19, King James Version*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina La Croix is originally from New York City, where she studied ancient languages and philosophy. She is both an assistant professor of psychiatry and physical medicine and rehabilitation at a US medical school, where she currently teaches neuroscience. More importantly, she is a mother of three children, and two cats. She is also painter, a fencer, a (published) poet, and a writer of nerdy short stories.