

## Dahveed Goes to Chephirah

Ahiam looked up as I entered our room with the papyrus from the throne room..

“I just received a message from the hassar. I’m to go to Chephirah on an inquiry for King Shaul. He wants a report today.”

“Is this an official inquiry?” he asked, getting off his stool.

“I don’t know. The guard said Balak told him to give the papyrus to General Dahveed and that I was to find out why these Gibeonites hadn’t reported for work and to bring the report back as soon as possible.”

Giving me a measuring look, the Habiru tossed Jonathan’s girdle on our small table.

“Then you’re being sent on behalf of King Shaul in your official capacity as general at the very least. More likely you’re a king’s representative. You’ll need a good robe to go with it,” he said.

“I’ll be ready in a minute.” He pulled out his best robe and girdle.

“I’m leaving immediately, but there’s no reason for you to go.”

“If you’re an official representative, there is. You can’t go unattended. I’ll send for your mule.”

“Why would I need that?” I asked, opening the clothes chest.

“You don’t plan to arrive at Chephirah looking like a returning militia man, do you?”

“I can get there faster on my own two feet, and the king wants answers now. Surely there’s someplace where we can change before going into town.” I pulled out the red robe, which went best with the hassar’s girdle, and made a bundle to carry on my back.

Ahiam stared at me as if he was trying not to yell. “As you wish, geber,” he said finally.

Privately, I sighed in relief. I did *not* wish to parade myself around like a sar.

Ahiam disappeared out the door as I finished my preparations, rewinding my sling around my right wrist. Checking that I had a couple stones in my shepherd’s bag, I took the water skin and walked out. A large entourage filled the courtyard, and Ahiam and I slipped away in the confusion.

Chephirah was nearly eight miles away. After crossing the deep ravine at the bottom of the fortress hill and filling the waterskin from one of the town cisterns on the north side, I set a steady jog on the Habiru trail northwest to Gibeon, with Chephirah beyond.

We sighted the town in just over an hour. I kept an eye on the road above as we jogged along the lower trail through the oak trees. A skinny man on a donkey saw us and hurried on his way. Stopping by a stream on the last slope before the town, I gave myself a quick rinse and dressed in the robe and girdle, knotting my shepherd’s bag to the girdle like a pouch since I liked it easy to hand. Ahiam helped bind back my hair. He’d brought my gold headband and slipped it on my head before I could protest. He washed and changed while I hid our kilts in a three-foot-high bunch of lentisk bushes, the abundant red flowers hugging the stems effectively masking our clothing beneath.

As we approached the gate, I noted a stir in the people, and it irritated me. I didn’t want a big ado raised. Two sentries drifted closer, and a mother hurried a child back into the market.

“You had best identify yourself right away,” Ahiam said softly as we approached.

“Let’s just see if we can find the overseer, and I’ll tell him,” I temporized.

“You are not a messenger or servant, Dahveed, but an official representative,” Ahiam reminded me.

I didn’t respond. Trying to ignore all the eyes watching, I strode through the archway and

caught the eye of an elder sitting on a stone bench in the alcove.

“Shalom, geber,” I said. “Would you kindly direct us to the Gibeonite overseer’s house?”

“Shalom, adon,” he replied slowly. “May I ask what your business is with our overseer?”

“I shall discuss that with him,” I said, keeping my tone casual. “Where might we find him?”

“Straight across the market and down the street by the perfumer’s shop,” he replied, pointing.

“You are kind, geber,” I said, and started forward. I stepped into the square, and suddenly Ahiam and I were surrounded by four sentries.

“They’re the ones!” a high-pitched, nasal voice said to one side. The tone grated on my zammar’s ear, making me grit my teeth. “They’re nothing but Habiru. I saw them on a trail, and when they came to the road, they were dressed richly, as you see. Ask them where they got those clothes, that’s what I want to know! That girdle, that’s an adon’s garment at the least, maybe even a sar’s. Who did they kill for it?”

The sentry nearest me stared at the girdle. “That *is* the hassar’s!” he gasped.

I straightened up. “It is,” I agreed coldly, “and I wear it as his representative.”

“He’s lying! Any representatives the hassar sent would arrive in an appropriate manner, not sneak into town like thieves,” the nasal voice accused.

Ahiam’s face was perfectly blank, but I felt myself flush. This was not going well. Perhaps I should have listened to Ahiam.

“The king’s business required haste,” I said, as calmly as I could, turning my head to locate the source of that whining voice. “We are here on business for King Shaul.”

“Lies! Lies! What are you waiting for? They’re filthy Habiru, come to steal, most likely.” The skinny little man fairly danced on his feet.

A shiver went down my spine as Yahweh’s gift touched me. The situation had just turned dangerous, and the gift swelled rapidly as the silence continued. The edges of the market faded in my sight, but I was perfectly aware of the exact location of each sentry and where their hands were placed in relation to their weapons.

I drew in a deep breath, covertly brushing the sling against my thigh to slip the loops to the first joints on my fingers. “I will only ask one more time,” I spoke, beginning to find it hard to operate my tongue. “Where is the overseer?”

Ahiam was ready, two quick hand signals telling me which sentry he would go for first. The one in back of me was the keenest, the danger from him raising the hair on my neck, and I was hampered by a long adon’s robe!

“Take them,” the skinny man urged. “They get bolder all the time. We don’t need Habiru here!”

The corner of my eye caught a brief nod from the elder I had spoken to. The dust turned to a blazing yellow, and my ear caught the displacement of it as the sentry behind me stepped forward. I heard the cloth of his shirt slide up his arm as he raised it.

A small boy had just stepped in front of the skinny man by the wall. I crouched suddenly, reaching into my shepherd’s bag as I spun around to pull the sentry’s knees out from under him with my other arm as he stumbled over my back.

Ahiam launched himself at the sentry between him and the market.

By the time my man had landed flat on his chest, I’d pulled my hand from the pouch, brushing the pan of the sling over it in the process and dropped a stone into it as it hung beneath

my fingers. I looked straight at the boy in front of our accuser.

“Down!” I yelled, whipping my arm to unwind the sling. He dropped instantly, and I brought the stone around one more time, my knee landing on the sentry’s back just before I let fly. It whumped through the air to land solidly on the upper thigh of the skinny geber who screamed as he fell.

I hadn’t even followed the flight of that stone, but had seized another from the pouch, dropping it into the pan as I stared at the second sentry near me, who had managed to get his sword half out of its sheath. I held my belt knife in my left hand, having already slit the bottom of my robe to give me room to move.

The sling swung back and forth under my arm in the incredulous silence, and the sentry under Ahiam’s sword hardly dared to breathe. “The Dahveed has arrived on business for the king. Is there anyone else who would like to interfere?” my retainer asked.

“General Dahveed!”

The sentry I stared at dropped to his knees. The fourth sentry, who had frozen in place when my stone whistled past, quickly followed suit.

“It *is* the Dahveed!” the little boy cried in delight, jumping up.

I turned my head stiffly. The sound of his voice did much to pull me out of Yahweh’s gift, but I still couldn’t speak. I fought to remember how while I listened to every shift in the crowd and smelled the hot dust and fear.

Eying me, Ahiam backed away from the sentry under his sword. “Now, where is the overseer for the Gibeonites?”

“He’s right here, geber,” the little boy replied, pointing to our skinny accuser. “But I don’t think he’s awake.”

I shook my head slightly. That man might not wake up for some time, and knowing how hard I’d slung that stone, he’d be lucky to walk again. No, this encounter was not going well at all, and I didn’t even want to consider what Jonathan would think of it all. I sucked in a deep breath, relaxing as Yahweh’s gift let me go.

“Dahveed?” Ahiam asked.

I found my voice. “See if he had an assistant.”

“Perhaps I can help, adoni,” a diffident, deep voice offered.

I turned toward the sound, my chest aching for air and thirst raging as I dealt with the aftermath of the gift.

A large man stepped from the crowd and bowed. “I have some contact with the Gibeonites here. I will give what help I can to the hassar’s representatives.”

In a few more moments, I drew in enough air and flexed my muscles a little, wondering if I could stand yet. I took a couple more moments to determine what intrigued me about the man’s tone. I studied him, trying to place the faint changes.

“How are you called, geber?” I asked.

“Minelek, adoni.”

Philistine. He must have been in town for years to lose his accent to the extent he had.

The sentry under me hadn’t even twitched. I stood, taking the stone from the sling pan and returning it to my pouch. After winding the sling around my wrist again, I nudged the sentry with my toe, knowing I dared not let his actions go without some comment since I represented Jonathan, not myself. “Have you been on your face long enough to think of other ways you could have handled this situation?”

“Yes, adoni,” he replied fervently.

“Excellent. Because of a circumstance earlier today, I will let this offense toward the hassar end here.”

At the mention of the hassar, the man started to shake. “Yes, adoni.”

I looked at Ahiam. “Let’s go.”

Minelek hurried to direct us, and the crowd parted instantly. I hardly noticed, still upset over the way things had exploded on me.

Minelek brought us to a well-kept compound close to the market. On the roof of the house, he offered a seat and provided fruit and wine. I nearly emptied the water from my water skin before sipping the wine.

After a decent interval during which we learned that our host was a merchant who had lived here for 26 years, I broached the subject of my errand.

“Geber, King Shaul has charged me with learning why these people did not report to the tabernacle for their required service,” I said, handing him the papyrus.

He unrolled it and read the names, then flipped it over with a puzzled look, inspecting it carefully.

“Where did you get this, adoni?” he asked.

“It came to me from the throne room.”

“That’s strange,” he said. “I wrote this report myself, but it’s only half here. The explanation for the absences is not here.”

I frowned. “Yes, that is odd. Just as odd as having a Philistine merchant sending Gibeonite reports to the king.”

Our host looked down uncomfortably. “I hope I have not offended,” he said. “The overseer is sometimes, uh, very busy, and some small details can escape his notice. The Gibeonites ask me on occasion to make certain nothing is inadvertently neglected.”

“And what small details were inadvertently neglected which required this report?” I asked a bit caustically.

Minelek flushed. “The first three names listed are dead, adoni. Since I wrote, one more has died and another may not live much longer.”

“If the current overseer considers death a small detail, perhaps we should find out what he does record,” I said. “Can you direct us to his house, geber?”

“I will take you there, adoni.”

“What caused the deaths?” I asked as we walked out the compound gate.

“A fever, adoni.” Minelek’s face tightened. “When several of the Gibeonites became ill, the overseer confined them to their houses and barred anyone going to them. This prevented them from obtaining any help from healers. The fever is quite severe, but with appropriate treatment, it is not usually fatal. A healer in my employ is providing for them now.”

“Then speaking as the king’s representative, I can say that you have done well.”

We wound our way through most of the town before stopping at a high gate. Minelek knocked on it.

“Who is there?” the gatekeeper asked.

“The representative of King Shaul come to speak to the Gibeonite overseer,” the merchant replied.

“I know your voice, Minelek,” the gatekeeper replied. “My master was attacked by ruffians at the gate, and the healer is with him now. Besides, you know he will not listen any

more to your petitions from the Gibeonites.”

Not daring to look at Ahiam or me, the Philistine knocked again.

“Geber, please open the gate at once. The king’s representatives should not be kept waiting in the streets.”

A little square window in the gate opened, and a man with fat jowls peered out suspiciously. “No announcement was made to my master to expect a representative.” He eyed me briefly. “This man cannot be a representative of the king. He isn’t properly attired or escorted. I will listen to no more of your tricks, Minelek!”

I flushed again. It appeared I had made a colossal mistake in the manner of my arrival. Now I had to make up for it as best I could. “I wear the girdle of the hassar,” I said coldly, before he could close the window. “Open this gate at once, or my man will come over the wall and open it over your body.”

He stared, growing a little worried. At last, he grudgingly unbarred the gate.

I stalked across the courtyard, paying no attention to the muffled protests of the gatekeeper, as he puffed along with Ahiam, his bulging stomach shaking with every step. A armed guard stepped in front of us, then hesitated in surprise.

“General Dahveed?” he asked, bowing slightly.

“Yes. Bring the scribe your geber uses for matters concerning the Gibeonites.”

“Right away, General.”

Dismissing the gatekeeper with a wave of my hand, I watched the soldier escort a nervous scribe our way. He had a scraggly beard and long-fingered hands that shook so much he could hardly hold the papyrus I handed him.

“Let’s see. I know these names,” he said, fingering his beard. “I just can’t bring them to mind at the moment. Perhaps I should check the records.” He shuffled through a stack of papyrus half of which were devoid of any markings whatsoever.

“Now where did I see them?” he hedged, reaching for some more reports, each one beginning with exactly the same name. He noted my blank stare, and a superior smile crossed his face briefly.

“We are honored that the hassar would send someone as important as General Dahveed to us,” he paused, looking at my sliced robe and continuing his useless shuffling of papyri. “It is not often we get someone as widely traveled as you, and acquainted with the south.”

The faint sneer in his tone and his stalling roused that curiosity habit I’d gotten from Ethan. Something wasn’t right here.

“These are all reports to the king?” I asked, my eyes wide as I took in the stack. So far every single one looked exactly the same.

“Yes,” the scribe said, his smile twitching again. “We must keep such accurate records, you know, and that requires a great deal of work and writing.”

“So I see,” I said, looking impressed. “How many scribes does your geber use?”

“Oh, I have two who work under me. No doubt you have more at the court.” he added kindly.

“The hassar and the king have several,” I avoided his comment.

“I know I have those names somewhere,” he murmured. “The under-scribes don’t always put things away properly.” He watched my eyes as he flashed more papyri by. “The hassar provided you with a scribe?” he glanced at Ahiam.

I managed to flush just a little. “The king was anxious to hear our report and we came

away in a hurry.”

Certain now that neither Ahiam nor I could read, the man relaxed and pulled out a papyrus with a sale of olive oil on it. “Here we are,” he said. “Odd, but I don’t have any explanation for their absence.”

“Perhaps you could send a messenger,” Minelek suggested.

“An excellent idea.” I brightened up while the scribe glared at the Philistine merchant. “Guard?” I called.

He appeared in the door. “Yes, adoni?”

I plucked the hassar’s papyrus from the desk. “Please ask these people to come here.”

The man looked at Minelek, who bowed and took the papyrus from me, reading the names off. The soldier’s eyes opened wide and he gave Minelek a blank stare which the Philistine returned blandly.

“Well, don’t stand there, off you go. Don’t keep the king’s man waiting,” the scribe said, shooing at the soldier with his hands.

“Do your best,” Minelek said with a barely discernable wink.

“Yes, adoni.” The guard left.

“While we wait, why don’t I see if I can locate more information,” the scribe said. “You know, if they can’t be found, perhaps they have run away. That could be serious business, perhaps even dangerous for the king. Let me call for some food and wine for you to refresh yourselves while I look further.”

“An excellent idea,” I parroted again. “Bring lots of wine.”

Ahiam somehow managed to keep a straight face as the scribe bustled past us and out the door.

As soon as he was out of sight, I flipped through the first stack of papyrus. Each one was an identical list of names for service at the tabernacle dated months in the future.

“The man doesn’t want to be behind in his work,” I commented. “Where did he go, Ahiam?”

“Another room on the other side of the compound, geber.”

“Mark it well. We should probably visit there before we leave. Minelek, what is in that stack beside you?” I asked.

Amused, the merchant leafed through it. “Harvest reports,” he said. “But this looks out-of-place.”

He handed me a wax tablet. I knew enough cuneiform to make it out as a list of names with payments of some kind.

“Do you recognize the names?” I asked.

“They are Gibeonites here in town.”

“These are payments of some kind?”

“I wouldn’t call them payments,” the merchant said, his voice suddenly angry.

“Perhaps you should explain, Minelek.”

The merchant studied me. “If the scribe is attracted to someone’s daughter, for instance, he will make himself very disagreeable unless a certain payment is made, or the daughter is allowed to visit, or sometimes both.”

My face hardened. “Between geber and scribe, things seem to be a mess. What are these for, I wonder?” I fingered the first reports thoughtfully as Minelek waited in silence. “Would it be accurate to say the overseer takes the king’s payment for his position, and effectively does

nothing, leaving everything to the scribe?”

“Yes, adoni,” the merchant said bluntly.

“And the scribe takes advantage of his power?”

“Yes, adoni.”

At that moment, the man returned, the guard trailing along behind.

“Adon, I have bad news. We can’t seem to locate the people you have sent for.”

“Why not?” I said.

“They are dead, adoni,” the soldier said.

I turned to the scribe, my eyebrows raised.

He bowed. “Dead? Of course, dead. I knew I had seen those names. Just let me get the report on that.” As he hurried off, a servant arrived with food and wine, which we all ignored.

After a considerable wait, I looked at Ahiam. “Go find our host. He seems to have deserted us.”

Two hours later, we had determined that not only was the scribe missing, but according to the records we found, he had effectively robbed his geber of anything of value as well.

“This will take weeks to completely unravel,” Minelek said, rubbing his eyes. “I can say for certain that the overseer has next to nothing aside from this house and one olive orchard. Everything else, including the king’s payments, seems to have drifted into the scribe’s hands.”

I glanced at the rapidly lowering sun. “I must go,” I decided. “The overseer has been punished enough for his neglect of his duties. What was the scribe’s name?”

“Ibsam of Zebulun, adoni.”

“Find out just how much this Ibsam has stolen and send a report to the hassar. Ahiam, get word out on the trails. The scribe probably headed north. I’ll have to talk this over with the hassar, Minelek, but in the meantime, you may perform the duties of overseer. I suspect you would anyway.”

He bowed his head. “As you wish, adoni.”

“Let’s go, Ahiam.”

“I will accompany you to the gate,” the merchant said. “The elders will need to know of the removal of the former overseer.”

As we returned, a delegation of elders approached, led by the one I’d spoken to when we arrived. I glanced worriedly at the sun. “I don’t have time for this,” I muttered to Ahiam, wanting only to report the mess I’d found and forget about the rest of the day as quickly as possible.

“It might be best for you to take time, geber,” he said neutrally.

I checked my impatience just in time, remembering that this mess existed because I hadn’t listened to Ahiam this morning. Irritation with myself filled my mind. The frightened looks of the elders emphasized how much trouble had come to them because of my decisions.

“We have come to beg the king’s representative to forgive his servants,” the first elder said after they had all bowed. “When the overseer told what he’d seen, we didn’t know what to believe.” He stopped as my jaw clenched in anger, having no way of knowing the anger was not directed at him. “Please, adoni, tell us what is required to restore honor to the hassar and you.”

“You have to do something,” Ahiam said, very low.

Like what? I wondered. Why should these people pay for my stubbornness? Unable to think of anything which fit the situation, I let the silence drag on, and the elders grew more and more frightened.

“We will pay blood if that is required,” the spokesman finally quavered.

“Perhaps a fine,” Ahiam murmured

“Blood is not required,” I said. “A gold earring from each of you will satisfy honor on all accounts.”

The man reached up and took the earring from his ear, and Ahiam collected the jewelry. Three of the elders had to send for their share, and while we waited, I formally announced that Minelek of Chephirah was taking over the duties of overseer until a new appointment could be made.

Once we had the payment in hand, we left. I didn’t even take time to change, but the sun slipped completely away soon after we took to the hills. On the dark trek back to Gibeah, I had plenty of time to meditated on all the mistakes I’d managed to pack into one day.

Ethan had sent Ahiam to me to help guide me in matters such as proper behavior, and, because I was too stubborn to listen, four soldiers had been disgraced in Chephirah, a dozen town elders had to pay a fine they did not deserve, and a man would probably never walk again. And that was just the beginning. I didn’t want to think of what the hassar would do when he found out what had happened.

As we crossed the plateau just west of Gibeah, I stopped to catch my breath. Ahiam stood beside me. “Forgive me, Ahiam,” I said. “I should have listened. You could have died because of me.”

My retainer shrugged. “You have my pardon, Dahveed. Ethan warned me you like to learn the hard way, so I took the risk knowingly.”

As we passed the tamarisk tree at the turn off to the Gibeah fortress, Shagay stepped from the shadows. “Are you on your way to the hassar, Dahveed?”

“Yes.”

“Be careful,” Shagay said slowly. “The envoy’s visit did not go that well, and the hassar is angry.”