

Jonathan Quells Abner After Dahveed is Assigned to the Second Unit.

Michal dressed with care, and Immi came to set the headband on her hair and make certain it was combed out well. She had the dark blue general's mantle with her.

"Do you know why Jonathan is going to see Abner?" Immi asked.

"I don't know for certain."

"I don't think I've ever seen your brother this angry," her mother said slowly. "I was afraid for Dahveed when he left this afternoon with the mantle, but when he returned with Dahveed, he looked even worse. And then the mantle is delivered to me for mending. Michal, what happened in the throne room? I had my hands full with Merab."

The sahrah looked away. "The demon tried to kill Dahveed," she finally said, telling her mother as much as she remembered of those terrifying minutes, and then what had happened afterwards in the anteroom.

"And the king's response is to demote Dahveed and place him under Abner's hand? What is he thinking?"

"I think Abbi is afraid," Michal said, remembering how her father had acted.

"Well, when Jonathan confronts Abner, try to keep him from killing the man. I haven't told Abner what I think of him yet."

She dumped the mantle on the bedroll and marched out of the room, Michal staring after her.

She was still bemused when she found Jonathan waiting by the private gate.

"What is it?" he asked, seeing the expression on her face.

"Did you know that Immi has a temper?" she asked, as they left.

"I've suspected it a time or two! Why?"

Michal told Jonathan what Immi had said to her.

Jonathan chuckled dryly as they walked down the road on the west side of the hill. "Our esteemed cousin is going to find that if he touches Dahveed, he'll open up a hornet's nest he won't be able to avoid. And since Immi had precious little use for Abner already, he'd better stay out of her way now! What's this?" he ended unexpectedly, pulling Michal into the shadows by a compound wall.

Commander Libni stepped out of Abner's gate, his face briefly visible in the torch light.

"What's he doing there at this hour?" Michal asked.

"Excellent question, little sister."

They waited as the commander walked toward them, the expression on his square face bleak and hard.

"Your thoughts seem distasteful to you, Libni," the hassar commented, stepping forward as the commander passed them.

Libni whirled, startled, his hand pulling his sword half out of the sheath. "Who is there?"

"Jonathan Hassar, Commander, and I very much wonder what the general said to you that has upset you so."

"Why would the general have said anything to me?" Libni asked, trying to sound casual.

"Because you just came from his gate, and I can't imagine you were there talking to the servants. The professional forces are the backbone of our army, and when I see an expression such as yours as you are coming from the general's house, I inquire."

Michal didn't move, wondering why her brother seemed so tense, until she realized that

Jonathan was unarmed, and the commander held a weapon. Remembering the last confrontation between Jonathan and Abner and knowing how close Libni was to Abner, she wondered just how far Abner would go in this honor battle, and how far Libni would go in his loyalty to the general.

Jonathan moved farther into the street, putting more of the commander's back to her as the man faced him. She looked around and saw a fist-sized rock on the ground two feet away, and she had her cloak. If the commander attacked Jonathan, she could throw her cloak over his head and then hit with the rock.

"I have a duty to obey my general," Libni said. "What sort of soldier would I be if I only obeyed when I liked the orders?"

"A very poor one, certainly," Jonathan replied pleasantly. "But armies have chains of command and a soldier's duty is owed to the highest authority commanding him."

The commander dropped his gaze, and the sword sank back into the sheath where Libni clutched nervously at the hilt. "General Abner gave me orders concerning the Dahveed, Hassar." He went on to explain what had been said to him.

"So you were to make it as hard as you could for Dahveed to do his job without openly opposing him?" Jonathan asked when the recital was done.

"Yes, Hassar, but only for a month or so."

"Then what?"

"Then leave him alone."

"Since by that time his honor would be damaged beyond repair. What do you think, Commander?"

"It is not my place to think about orders, Hassar."

"It is when the hassar tells you to."

Libni studied the street, the walls, the fringes on Jonathan's robe, everything but Jonathan's face. His hand worked on the sword hilt, and he twitched his kilt nervously with the other.

Jonathan stood relaxed with arms folded, but not letting the commander off the hook in the slightest.

"I—I don't think the orders are—are necessarily the best, adoni," Libni said at last, sweat beading on his face, pale in comparison to his dark hair.

"So if a higher authority contradicted those orders you would refuse to carry them out?"

"I would do whatever you said in any case, adoni," Libni replied, breathing easier.

"Good. Disregard anything General Abner said to you about the Dahveed. He is to be treated just as you would any other fellow commander."

"Yes, Hassar," Libni said, bowing.

"I'm glad we understand each other. I will also forget where your hand has been during this entire conversation."

Libni looked down and jerked his hand away from the sword hilt as if it was on fire, his face draining of color.

"Shall we go, Michal?" Jonathan continued, holding out his hand to her.

"Certainly, Jonathan," she replied, stepping from the shadows. She got one glimpse of Libni's stricken face as Jonathan turned her, and they continued down the street.

"If nothing else happens, this night has been worth it," Jonathan said, smiling grimly.

"I've been wanting to strip Libni from Abner for a long time. Never had the chance until now."

"Unless Abner's hold on him is stronger than you think."

“That might have been true last year, but thanks to Abner’s own stubbornness and the way Dahveed shared out honor and rewards last war season, the general’s hold was much weakened. If Dahveed keeps to his place as commander and shows his respect for the king’s wishes, there won’t be a commander in the army who will support Abner against him.”

“But won’t that undermine Abner’s authority?”

“It will limit it, again something which I’ve wanted to do for some time. The army should be loyal to the king, and obey the general because the king has placed him over them. Two years ago, the army was loyal to the general and obeyed the king because the general told them to.”

They stopped outside Abner’s courtyard gate. “But Abner is devoted to Abbi,” Michal said.

“Yes, but what would happen in a battle if Abner was killed, and the loyalty of the troops was not given to the king?”

“The soldiers might desert,” she said slowly.

“And that would probably mean the king’s death,” Jonathan said.

Michal studied the latch on the gate. “That’s another reason you’re so obvious about your loyalty to Abbi, isn’t it?” she asked. “The people’s devotion to you must also center on the king.”

Her brother laid his finger on her lips. “Yes, Michal, but it is not wise to speak so plainly. Abbi is the anointed ruler for Israel, and all must respect that.”

Jonathan opened the gate, and they went through. Her brother hardly gave the servant time to announce them before he entered the upper room of Abner’s house. Michal stepped in behind him and moved to one side where she could see both men. Abner curtly nodded to the servant, who went out, not quite closing the door. Michal pushed it firmly shut, satisfied with the gasp she heard and the sudden movement as the servant jerked away whatever body part had nearly been shut in the door.

“What do you want?” Abner asked testily from his three-legged chair. “Don’t I get any peace in my own house?”

“Why would a visit from family be upsetting, cousin?” Jonathan replied. “Perhaps all I want is to catch up on the news.”

“Don’t waste our time, Hassar. You’re here about the zammar.”

“I am. I thought I might explain the differences you’ll find when you take charge of the army tomorrow. The king owes both his kingdom and his life to the zammar. The fact that the zammar is now out of favor doesn’t change the honor debt.”

Michal preserved a straight face, keeping her eyes away from the general, who looked more than amazed.

“If one of our house were to treat Dahveed with less than the respect he deserves, and so bring dishonor to the king’s name, I will act.”

“I will do as the king commands me, Hassar,” Abner said, holding Jonathan’s gaze, but sweat beaded his neck.

“In this case, you will do as I command, Abner,” Jonathan said quietly.

“You would speak treason before a witness?” the general gasped.

Her brother’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead. “Treason? In what way? The king has transferred all routine business into my hands. I wear his signet. Did a single person in the throne room bat an eyelash when I took the throne this afternoon instead of King Shaul? Did you

when I gave you that mantle?”

Abner shifted uneasily in his chair. “He has not given you the kingdom,” he protested.

“Which part of it has he withheld? If the king had to chose between you or me, who do you think would live? What is the driving purpose of the king’s life, Abner? To preserve the throne for you, or for me? And if I went to the king tonight and asked for your life, would I get it?”

Michal stayed very quiet. Once again the man who brought her here had left behind the safe, comforting brother she loved and become the ruthless, implacable Hassar.

General Abner hardly knew what to do. The sweat streamed down his face as he looked into Jonathan’s eyes. “What have I done that you would do this to me?”

“The same thing you did last time, Abner. I thought I made it plain that touching the zammar touched the king and myself.”

Abner’s face turned a dull red.

“Only he is more than just the zammar now. He is the Dahveed. And while the king has placed him under your hand, you will treat him with the respect which is his due. Anything less will bring retribution from me. For by Yahweh’s life, as my father’s throne is mine, *so is he!*”

Michal stared at her brother as those unbelievable words came from his lips. How could he turn the truth itself inside out so ruthlessly? Trembling, she looked at Abner.

The general stiffly bowed his head. “As you wish, Hassar,” he said through his teeth.