

Giants in the Earth

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"Have you ever had one of those days where you just can't get a psalm started?" King David sat back on the royal throne of all Israel and drummed his fingers on the gently curving cedar armrests. "The opening line's the hardest part. I've got everything else down pat: rhyme scheme, subject matter, nifty metaphors that do *not* involve sheep, for a change. Sheep! Don't get me started. You grow up as a simple shepherd boy—what the hell else *is* there to do in this country?—and right away you can't write a psalm without everyone picking it apart, looking for hidden references to sheep, sheep, sheep, 'til the cows come home. To say nothing of those so-called 'jokes' the men used to tell about me back in my army days. Soldiers, *feh!* As if *they* never—"

"Your Majesty was saying something about an opening line?" Tirzah asked amiably. As concubine *du jour* she had certain assigned tasks, not the least of which was keeping King David's conversation on track. When a man spends the better part of his youth on the lam from a crazy king like Saul and the rest of his salad days amassing a comfortably *haimish* empire, his body may cease wandering but his mind often does not.

"Oh, right, right, a catchy first line, yes, hmm . . ." The ring-encrusted royal fingers, each adorned with a precious stone the size of the rock that slew Goliath, went back to drumming on the armrest. "Listen, my subjects, and you shall hear . . . When that Goliath with his spears and arrows/The men of Israel had piercéd to the marrow . . . Whose sling this is, I think I know . . . There once was a giant from Gath . . ."

"Perhaps Your Majesty should work on a different psalm?" Tirzah suggested, popping a grape into her mouth. "I've found that when I reach a point where there doesn't seem to be any solution to the problem at hand, it helps to switch projects entirely."

The king gave her a smarmy smile. "You're a concubine, my dear," he said. "What problems do you face that can't be solved by a new necklace or an extra dollop of myrrh?"

Tirzah opened her mouth to answer, then thought better of it and stopped her gob with a handful of dates. It didn't do for a woman to backtalk the king. She understood that, as a concubine, she had only two career paths: Cling to the king's good side like moss to a stone or spend your days locked up among the women.

Not that there was anything *wrong* with being locked up among the women, but as JHVH was her witness, it was *boring*. The ladies of the royal household seemed able to talk about nothing save clothing, cosmetics, candy, kids, and the king's elusive favor. Those who'd managed to get a colt off the royal stud formed an exclusive clique whose favorite pastimes were sneering at their less fertile colleagues and zealous jockeying/backstabbing in order to get their child in line for the throne.

As much as Tirzah despised the snotty Womb Supremacists, she knew that her only hope for advancement lay thataway, and the more she hung out with David, the better her odds of hitting the royal jism jackpot. All of which was why she swallowed her pride along with a mouthful of chewed-up dates, smiled ever-so-sweetly, and replied:

"Yes, O my beloved king. How silly of me. Your life is much more important than mine, of course. *Me*

daring to suggest anything to *you*? Tsk. What *was* I thinking? Can you ever forgive your po' li'l featherheaded Tirzy-wirzy who wuvs 'oo so vewy, vewy much that she just can't wait to get you alone and perform the Babylonian Basket Trick for your intense, unbelievable pleasure?"

"Wuzzah?" Despite Tirzah's almost-never-fail employment of that tempting combination, fulsome baby talk and promised perversity, the king wasn't buying. He'd chided his concubine and gone straight back to wrestling with the uncooperative psalm.

Tirzah frowned and double-checked her breasts. Yes, still firm, still golden as a pair of melons, still exuding rare floral essences imported from Egypt at great expense. When it came down to cases, she had no doubts about her physical attractions; but when the match was Concubine vs. Blank Parchment, best two falls out of three, she was stymied. What was it about the composition of a psalm that managed to gobble up the king's full attention?

"Yes, dear," she muttered under her breath. "You just go back to composing that psalm all about how you slew Goliath, big whoop. I'll be right here when you finally want me. Where else do I have to be?"

"Gath . . . wrath . . . bath . . . Sheba . . . huh?" said the king, blinking as he looked up at her from his labors.

"Nothing," said Tirzah wearily. "I was just thinking about how much I love you. Wildly. Madly. Passion without bounds." Her voice was only a little flatter than her taut young belly, but the king wasn't really paying any attention and she was past caring. "Yea, verily, I would do anything to prove my love for you, yep, sure, you name it, just—"

"Of course you would; it's in your job description. Why the blazes do you have to gabble about it, woman?" King David demanded. He might have said more, but at that moment the calm of a summer's afternoon in the royal court was broken by the abrupt entrance of the king's majordomo. He was an overly excitable Moabite whom the king had hired as lip service to valuing diversity somewhere in the palace besides the royal harem.

"Majesty! Majesty!" he cried, scuttling into the throne room, wringing his hands. "Oh, the unspeakable horror! Oh, the devastation! Oh, that ever this should come to pass!" He threw himself facedown at the king's feet, gurgling prophecies of generic doom.

"What is it?" the king demanded, toeing the Moabite firmly. "And it had better be good. The last unspeakable horror you reported was a wild donkey that got loose in the marketplace and ate three cabbages. When it ate a fourth you escalated the event to a full-fledged devastation. I hope you're not wasting my time with another four-cabbage disaster, because tomorrow is the anniversary of my battle with the Philistine champion, Goliath of Gath, and if I don't finish this psalm about how I slew him, I'll—"

"But you *didn't* slay him, Majesty!" The trembling Moabite raised his eyes to the king's dire countenance. "He's back. Goliath of Gath is back, he's waiting outside the gates of Jerusalem, and he says he's not leaving until he's got your head on the end of his spear!"

* * *

A table had been fetched and King David's council had been summoned into the throne room with such haste that no one had thought to dismiss the concubine. Thus Tirzah found herself wandering around the periphery of the strategic huddle, nibbling a fistful of almonds, and peering over the shoulders of David's most trusted advisors as they discussed the situation in hushed, intense tones.

"But it *can't* be Goliath!" King David protested. "I *killed* him! I killed him *good*. First I whapped him

with a rock—POW!—right between the eyes, and when he hit the dirt I took his own sword and I cut his head off. They don't come much deader than that."

"As Your Majesty says," one of David's generals replied soothingly. The royal council was made up of nothing but generals, the Mighty Men of Israel, with a case-by-case visit from the occasional prophet-without-portfolio. "And yet, evidence to the contrary is even now standing without our city gates, single-handedly blocking traffic and interfering with peaceful commerce."

"What I don't understand—" said the king. "What I honestly do *not* understand at all, no matter how hard I try, is *why* in the name of the Unnameable you, my so-called generals, haven't just sent out the army to deal with the, er, impediment to peaceful commerce. Giant or no giant, there's only one of him."

The generals looked sheepish enough to give David bad flashbacks to his boyhood. At length, one of them broke the uneasy silence.

"True, Majesty, that would be the sensible thing to do. But before we could dispatch so much as a patrol of spearmen to confront the giant, he issued . . . the *challenge*."

"The challenge?" David echoed. "What challenge?" He was leaning his fists on the conference table and Tirzah noted how very white his knuckles were turning, coupled with the fine beading of perspiration on his brow. He was also breathing a bit raggedly, all of which indicators led her to believe that he knew damn well *what* challenge.

"The challenge to single combat," General Eliezar said. "The same challenge he gave to King Saul's troops the first time you killed him. The time you *thought* you'd killed him." He was the youngest man on the king's council and as such did not have the brains of a kitten when it came to survival off the battlefield. He simply did not know any better than to assume that when the king asked a question, he wanted an honest answer. His colleagues exchanged looks that were equal parts pity and thankfulness that Eliezar was there, about to take the royal slingstone for the team. Better him than them.

"I . . . *did* . . . kill . . . him." The words only just managed to escape the king's mouth through tightly gritted teeth. "Not for the *first* time; for the *only* time! I cut off his bloody *head*! Don't you know *history*?"

"I know there's more being written every day," Eliezar replied, as obliviously cheerful as ever.

"Good. Then go write some," David snapped. "Get your scrawny butt the hell down to the barracks, pull together a troop of men, and take down that giant!"

"Majesty?" Eliezar raised one eyebrow in bewilderment at his sovereign's orders. "Goliath's challenge wasn't leveled against the army. What he said was—"

"*How many times must I repeat myself?*" King David's bellow shook cedar dust from the throne room rafters. "That is not Goliath! Goliath is *dead*."

"Not according to him. He says he's Goliath, he's got Goliath's armor, and his appearance has attracted a whole bunch of veterans from King Saul's army, all testifying that they recognize him as Goliath. He says he's not leaving until you come out and face him in hand-to-hand combat to the death. No backup troops, just you and your armor-bearer, if you need one. He says you'd *better* wear armor, because he can put a spear through a twenty-five-year-old plane tree at one hundred paces."

"Is that all?" The king's voice had gone very low and growly. It was a warning sign the young general did not seem to recognize or heed.

"Yes. Wait, no: He also says that after all these years you've probably gotten fat." Eliezar smiled

radiantly, duty done. He was woefully unaware that the rest of the council were edging away from him as he spoke. Older and wiser, they had no intention of becoming collateral damage when King David finally lost his temper and flattened the lad.

To their surprise, instead of a royal explosion, King David's reaction was merely to sigh deeply and pinch the bridge of his nose. "Bugger," he said. "If he's drawn a crowd of Saul's old army buddies, I'll have to fight him, whoever he is. People are watching. I'll bet drachmas to dromedaries that a whole mob of our foreign trade community is out there too, waiting to see what I'll do. If I don't fight it'll be a *shonda* for the *goyim*."

"A what?" Like many on the council, Eliezar had a hard time understanding his king when David lapsed into the local dialect of his youth.

"Just fetch my armor, dummy. And will someone please clear away that concubine?"

* * *

All the good seats for the big rematch were taken. Tirzah tried to squirm her way through the press of women hogging the few windows that had a decent view of the road where the giant awaited King David's appearance, but was firmly rebuffed.

"We outrank you." Leah sniffed disdainfully. She was a skinny creature, relic of David's brief flirtation with the philosophy that Less is More. He'd tired of her bony embraces, but not before she bore him a son. "We are the royal mothers."

"I'll say you are," Tirzah grumbled.

"What was that?" Hulda asked sharply. She'd been a concubine-of-last-resort until she'd lucked out and birthed a baby boy.

"I said that for all you know, *I'll* be a royal mother some day, too, so maybe you should be nicer to me." Tirzah wagged her hips at the women. "I found an old Babylonian bedroom manual last week and it's got plenty of sure-fire tricks to guarantee—"

"Ha!" Hulda was one of those annoying know-it-alls who was likewise a say-it-all. "If our lord David loses this battle—which he won't, unthinkable, JHVH forbid, *p'too-p'too-p'too*, I never so much as suggested the possibility—you'll be nothing. It takes two to make a royal baby. Or didn't your Babylonian smut book mention that?"

Tirzah stared, horrified. The truth of Hulda's words was inescapable. If David fell to Goliath's spear, her life was over too. What happened to concubines when their master died? Those with children of the royal blood would be looked after by the next king, if only so he might keep tabs on potential rivals. Those who were still virgins due to bureaucratic oversights might find employment elsewhere. For those like Tirzah, neither maiden nor mother, the game was over.

Oh no! she thought wildly. What will become of me? Being a concubine is all I know how to do! That and watching sheep, but I will see myself chopped up and served over cous-cous before I go back to doing that again.

Memory conjured up the image of her mother on the day Tirzah announced that she was turning in her shepherd girl's rod, staff, sling, and lambing kit in order to audition for the king's harem. "I want to smell of myrrh, not manure," she explained. "Is that such a bad ambition?"

"Fine," Mother said in a way that made it obvious how very far from fine it all was. "Go. Be a concubine. See if I care. Break a mother's heart. All I'm saying is that you could do better. This is an honor, to share the bed of a man old enough to be your father without even he gives you an engagement

ring? And why should he? Why buy the sheep when you're getting the sex for free? But don't listen to *me*. Go. Make from this filth a successful life. When I think of what I sacrificed for you—"

She'd gone on in the same vein right up until the minute Tirzah left, which was not a moment too soon. She'd been on the point of seeing whether she could turn her old sling into a suicide weapon rather than listen to one more word from Mother. She could have done it. Tirzah's skill with the shepherd's weapon of choice was a local legend, which was why none of the local boys ever proposed marriage. They were all put off by the thought of having a wife who was a better shot than they were.

The wise men of Israel and many other lands have often compared the arrival of a revelation to being struck by a thunderbolt. In doing so they overlook the fact that a thunderbolt only does a finite amount of damage, whereas great ideas have the potential to wipe out whole kingdoms. Tirzah's personal thunderbolt struck right in the midst of her not-so-nostalgic musings over her past life and future prospects.

"My sling!" she exclaimed, with the look of someone who has just seen a dull door swing open to reveal a cave full of treasures beyond price. She rushed off to her chamber before any of the other wives could blink.

A quick dive into the small cedarwood chest at the foot of her bed produced Old Wolfbane, as she'd dubbed the faithful weapon that had protected her flock from many a famished predator. The tatty tunic and headcloth she'd worn when she first showed up at the royal palace were there as well, along with her road-scuffed sandals. It said much for Tirzah's beauty, that when she'd arrived thus clad at the palace gates, the harem administrators had seen her employment potential despite such poor packaging.

It was the work of a moment to change clothes, the work of another to grab her sling and dash away in search of the king. She encountered no hindrance to her flight: King David ran a free-range harem. The guards were there to keep other men out, not to keep the women in. Why would they want to leave? They were fed, clothed, and cosseted, and if some smartypants decided she'd have a lover and pass off his child as the king's, well, thwarting such schemes was how the Royal Harem Records-Keeper earned his daily flatbread.

Tirzah found the king in his inmost apartments, fighting to squeeze into his old armor. The armor was winning. It had been years since David had led men into battle. Peace brought prosperity to the land, paunchiness to the ruler thereof. He was in a foul mood.

"All I can say is that after putting me through so much trouble, that jerk out there had *better* be Goliath! If he's not, I'll *kill* him!"

The king's two armor-bearers exchanged a look. Neither one was about to point out the lack of logic in what His Majesty had just said. David might not fit into his armor, but he could still swing a nasty sword.

"Majesty, a word!" Tirzah cried.

The king turned to face what looked like just another grubby shepherd from the highlands. "Who are you, who let you in here, what do you want, and get out," he said.

Tirzah threw herself facedown on the carpet. "Mighty king, I bring news for your ears alone, words that will destroy the giant at your gates." She did not dare look up until David gave her leave to do so, but she could gauge what was going on when she heard the snap of fingers followed by the sound of two pairs of retreating feet.

"All right, Tirzah," said the king. "You can get up now; they're gone."

She raised her head and stared at him, amazed. "You recognized me?"

"Finally. When I'm not trying to write psalms, I *do* pay attention to you girls." The king wandered over to the wooden stand where his armor-bearers had replaced his helmet, breastplate, and shield before leaving the room. "So, what's on your mind? And why are you dressed like that? Nice sling, by the way." "Speaking of slings—" Tirzah began, and went on to tell the king her plan. When she was done, he was rendered so stunned that he had to lean against the armor stand for support.

"You're crazy," he gasped. "Insane. You'd never pull it off. I can't allow it. I forbid it."

"Why, Majesty?" she asked. Could it be he loved her?

"Because when you lose and the giant pulls your helmet off—if he doesn't pull your head off with it—everyone will see who you really are. How would that make *me* look? 'King David's such a coward, he has to send a girl to fight his battles for him!' That's just the *start* of what people will say." He slapped the royal shield to emphasize his point.

Tirzah's face hardened. She whipped out Old Wolfbane and dropped something large and hard into the sling. Though she'd had no opportunities to find a proper rock en route to the king's quarters there were plenty of other bits of detritus littering the palace halls. *Whizzz-ZING!* went Old Wolfbane and *whizzz-CLANG!* went the peach pit some sloppy guardsman had dropped on his lunch break.

It hit the king's shield dead center, lodging itself half an inch deep right between two of David's fingers. His Majesty gaped at the still-vibrating pit, then looked at Tirzah. "Congratulations," he rasped. "You got the job."

* * *

King David's armor covered a multitude of sins. No one who saw the small figure that came clanking out of the palace and down to the city gate dreamed that beneath that breastplate were a pair of really impressive breasts, nor that the helmet (with special false beard attachment) concealed a woman's face. Luckily the concubine and her king were more or less of a height. Luckier still, David had never really lost his high tenor voice, a range which overlapped nicely with Tirzah's deep, rich alto.

Tirzah's heart was beating wildly, but not with fear. If truth be told, she found the whole situation incredibly exciting. At her belt she carried her faithful sling and a pouch of stones, specially selected for their perfect balance of killing mass and aerodynamic capabilities. She knew she had the skill to bring the giant down with one shot, and as for the beheading that must follow . . . Well, she'd chop those vertebrae when she came to them.

The Philistine stepped forward at her approach, a spear the size of a weaver's beam in hand. Sunlight glittered on a lavish though ill-tailored set of armor. Just such a helmet had saved Agamemnon's skull at Troy, its heavy nasal and side pieces reducing Goliath's face to a pair of eyes peering through tiny slits and a mass of wild black beard foaming out the bottom.

"At last!" the giant roared, pounding spear against shield. "Come, O king! Come and meet your death!"

"The Lord judge between thee and me who shall live and who shall die!" Tirzah shouted back, loading her sling and gauging her shot. She felt silly spouting such highflown words, but she thought it was something David would say.

The giant made the first move, drawing back one mighty arm, ready to fling the huge spear with all the force of that towering body. For an instant as she stood there, staring with a mix of admiration and alarm at those smooth, muscular arms, that warrior's grace, Tirzah was abruptly aware of the possibility that she might not get out of this combat alive.

The realization froze her where she stood, making her a painfully easy target as the spear took flight, accompanied by the Philistine's great war cry. That thunderous sound proved a blessing in disguise, for it snapped Tirzah out of her perilous trance just as it shook the walls of Jerusalem. But it wasn't the mere volume of that shout which did the trick. As King David would say about psalm-making, *It's not just the music, it's the words.*

The word in this case being: "Whoopsie!"

Whoopsie indeed, for the giant's too-loose mail shirt belled out just enough to divert the spear's course. It flew wild, landing a good ten feet off-target. The Israelites cheered, some for their "king," some for the visible evidence of the Lord's favor, some just to taunt the Philistine.

"Hey, Goliath, you throw like a *girl!*" one wit in the crowd hollered.

"She sure does," Tirzah murmured. The giant's "Whoopsie!" was a sorcerer's eye-opening spell. Now she saw that the Philistine's beard was as bad a fake as her own. To this evidence she added "Goliath's" hairless limbs, the decidedly soprano timbre of her voice in that unguarded moment when the spear misfired, and the fact that no male warrior would cry "Whoopsie" where the more traditional "\$*?\$#%!" would suffice.

Tirzah wasn't the only one to add two and two. Dawn figuratively broke over Jerusalem.

"That's a woman under all that armor!" someone cried.

"Aye, not Goliath at all!" one of Saul's veterans piped up. He had been the first to swear, loudly and vehemently, that the giant at the gates *was* Goliath, but now that memory somehow eluded him. "I said it from the start. Goliath was much taller, six cubits and a span. She's barely five cubits! But no one ever listens to me."

Meanwhile, curses echoed from within the brazen helmet. "Stupid armor! Stupid beard! Stupid, cheapskate brother! 'Oh, it'll fit you just fine, Asherat!' he says. 'No need to take it to the smithy for a refitting,' he says. 'Just think how good it'll look in the chronicles if you kill David while wearing Dad's old suit of armor,' he says. What a salt-head!"

She reached up and doffed the brass helmet, fake beard and all. Masses of curly blue-black hair tumbled down her back. Eyes the color of the stormy Middle Sea flashed hatred at the mocking Israelites. Drawing herself up to her full height—which really *was* six cubits and a span, no matter what the blabbermouth veteran claimed—the false Goliath glowered at the phony David and declared: "My name is Asherat of Gath. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

"Bull dung!" shouted one of King David's generals from the safe vantage of the city walls. "You're no Philistine champion; you're a *girl*. The nerve of you, daring to challenge a man to single combat! Well, little missy, we'll soon teach you your proper pla—"

There was a resounding jangle and thud as the ill-fitting armor hit the ground, followed by the sound of a second spear whipping through the air. It lodged itself halfway up the haft in the city battlements just below the mouthy general.

"The next one won't be a warning," said Asherat.

The general peered down over the wall. Gauging where Asherat's spear would have struck him had there been no intervening battlement, the still-vibrating shaft was just this side of obscene. His face turned very red, but he waited until he scampered back into the city before bawling orders for his troops to mass up and sally forth against that unnatural female.

Meanwhile, outside the walls, chaos ruled. Some folks dashed back into the city, more terrified now that they knew the giant warrior was female. Others came streaming out, eager to have a good view of the bloody business when the troops took on Asherat of Gath one-on-fourscore in a fine display of manly courage.

Tirzah looked from the city to the lone woman against whom the full might of the garrison was even then being marshaled. Asherat was out of spears, but had taken up her sword and was bravely awaiting a battle she could never win.

"Son of a *bitch*," said Tirzah, clenching her fists so hard that Old Wolfbane's thongs cut the skin. The unfairness of it all got under her skin like ringworm. Something had to be done. She marched forward to confront the giant.

Asherat hefted her sword, ready for combat, only to behold a wondrous thing. Instead of drawing a blade or swinging that deadly sling, the person she and everyone else still believed to be David stopped a few paces away from her, turned towards Jerusalem, and decreed: "By order of the king, let no man raise any weapon against this woman, upon pain of death! She has my royal protection and is free to go from this place unharmed!"

"Puny worm, I do not seek your charity!" the giant roared down at Tirzah. "Let them come! I will show them how a daughter of the great Goliath dies!"

Tirzah rolled her eyes. She hated stubborn people. "O sweet maiden," she declared, enunciating and projecting every word so that there could be no subsequent doubt among the remaining witnesses as to what she was going to say. "It is not charity that moves me to such speech, but love. Your belly is a heap of wheat, your neck a tower, your breasts are twin does that feed upon the lilies, and you have a very nice personality. Though our peoples be enemies, I would we two were friends. Very *good* friends if you get my drift and I think you do, nudge-nudge, wink-wink. Behold, your bravery has changed my very heart!" Whereat Tirzah sidled just a bit closer to Asherat and pulled the neck of her armor and undertunic out just far enough to give the giant a good, long, indubitable view of what lay beneath.

"Yow!" the Philistine exclaimed. "Those are some big lilies!" While the spectators engaged in a brisk round of *WHAT the Gehennah did she mean by THAT?* comprehension crashed into Asherat's skull with the impact of a pretty big rock. "Uh, what I mean to say is—is— Take me now, you Jewish prince!" She flung her arms wide and fell to her knees before Tirzah. The cheers of the Israelites effectively drowned out the whisper which followed: "I don't know who you really are, lady, but if you can get me out of this mess with a whole skin, you're definitely my new best friend."

In response, Tirzah threw herself dramatically into the giant's embrace, the better to murmur privily in her ear, "Skin, *shmin*. With any luck, we'll both escape with a grubstake big enough to choke Leviathan!"

"I don't need grub; I need new armor," Asherat hissed back. "I was with the Egyptian army until one of my so-called buddies, Hathi the Long-striding, got too chummy. When I gave him the brush-off he wrecked my armor on purpose, while I slept. They call him Hathi the Truncated now. No armor, no job. That's why I went home, hoping my brother would loan me money for a new set. I forgot what a tightfist he is. It was his bright idea for me to challenge David. If I won, I'd reveal myself and the Israelites would pay through the nose to hush up the fact that a woman beat their king and I could buy my own armor. If I lost . . . Well, if I lost, I wouldn't be his problem any more."

"Asherat, you're no one's problem; you're my solution," Tirzah murmured. She pulled herself free of the staged embrace and once more addressed the gawking citizens of Jerusalem. "By my royal command, let

a suitable bride-gift of golden ornaments be brought forth from the royal treasury as befits the stature of this woman! Also, much silver. And a picnic lunch. We're going to take a little walk over towards the Mount of Olives to, er, get to know one another better. And anyone who feels like playing Peeping Tobias on us, well, do the words 'pain of death with extreme prejudice' mean anything to you people?" Apparently so, for it was a good eight hours later, by the palace's imported clepsydra, before the Moabite majordomo informed King David that he was engaged to a giant besides being short several pieces of really good gold jewelry, much silver, a set of armor, a picnic lunch, and one concubine. Fortunately for the concubine in question, David was still too busy trying to finish that pesky psalm to pay heed to his flustered servant. By the time he actually came to care about his losses, Tirzah and Asherat were well and truly out of his royal reach.

"So the Egyptian army hires *women*?" Tirzah asked when they finally paused for lunch.

"Uh-huh. The Hatshepsut Brigade." The giant munched a piece of hummus-laden pita. "We were supposed to be a battlefield diversion, so the regular troops could attack while the enemy was laughing at a bunch of silly girls with swords. Except our slingers never gave anyone the chance to laugh and the rest of us finished the job before the 'real' soldiers got there."

"Slingers?"

"First strike capability slingers are the backbone of the Hatshepsut Brigade. You any good with that thing?" Asherat nodded at Old Wolfbane. "I could put in a word with my sergeant, get you onboard. Good pay, looting privileges, full medical and dental benefits, with a minor out-of-pocket supplement for elective trepanning. Interested?"

Tirzah thought it over. She would be needing a new job eventually; there wasn't much of a market for used concubines and most of the loot they'd gotten from David's treasury would have to pay for a new set of armor.

Two new sets of armor.

Free medical, free dental, a career that depended on her wits instead of her womb, and no sheep? What *wasn't* to like?

"Mom always did say I could do better," she mused. She doodled a sketch of David's face in the dirt, spat an olive pit dead center into the king's brow, and smiled.

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